The boy who blocked his own shot

by all_the_kings_ham

Summary

It was such a simple plan.
How did it go so wrong so fast?

Notes

so at the end of my last story, when I said I had plans for a few new stories... what I really meant was that I have a some chapters of a new story sitting here written but I haven't allowed myself to post them because I don't want to be that crazy person who has 3 or 5 stories going at one time.

I feel like this story is a little more ... obvious(?) as to where and how it's going to go, but I've been enjoying writing it so far, so... yeah.

Hope you like it too.

here you go.
You wanted a solution

As days went, today was particularly awful. Mind you, Sam had had worse days, significantly worse- like eight months back when his best friend Jess had announced she was getting engaged. Seeing as he had had a crush on her since they met in first semester at Stanford, her relationship status hadn’t been easy news to take.

Dean’s little ‘comforts’ afterwards hadn’t been any easier.

Sam had never told his big brother about the awkward crush, but that hadn’t seemed to matter, Dean just knew. Dean always knew. And for months after Jess moved out to Montana (of all the god forsaken places anyone could decide to live) his big brother was still trying to fix what wasn’t broken to begin with.

Sam was over Jess, but Dean had seen something in Sam months ago that he thought he could repair.

And Dean was relentless.

So the brotherly-instigated bad days continued to come to Sam with pointed regularity.

Days like today.

Today was a stunning example of why Sam dreaded spending time with Dean outside of the house. At home his brother was just the same loving jackass that he had always been. But get him out in public where there were girls of any minor levels of attractiveness and he found them suddenly playing the ‘have you met Sam?’ game- where without warning Dean would turn to the nearest female, ask ‘have you met Sam’ and then quickly walk away, leaving his kid brother to flounder through an awkward conversation with a woman he had never met.

He hated that game.

He had threatened Dean with bodily harm last time they played.

And as such Dean had found a newer, better way to torment him.

He looked around the crowded restaurant again, glancing back towards the doors. Twenty minutes of sitting at the table by himself, six ‘I’m running late’ texts from his brother, and Sam was ready to leave. He could be at home studying for his finals instead of being stood up like some lonely prom date.

The three of them were supposed to meet when everyone got off work and school respectively. Dean, and a friend from his from work- and Sam didn’t mind the guy who came in every few weeks to balance the books at the auto shop his brother worked at. Cas seemed like a nice enough guy, even if he was a bit strange. He was kind of sweet in a weird, close talking, intense eye contact kind of way… he made Dean laugh if nothing else. But the man took way too long checking and double checking his columns of numbers, and Sam was grateful he hadn’t ordered anything yet because it would have gotten cold while he waited for them.

The waitress, Shelly or Shirley or something like that, came back with her wide, white smile.

“Can I get you a refill?” She pointed at his lemonade. It would be his third refill.
“Can I get a beer actually?” Sam tried a smile, and hoped it didn’t look as fake as hers.

“Certainly, hon. I’ll be right back.”

And she wasn’t lying, Sam was fairly certain that she was gone less than a minute before she returned to his table, except instead of a beer she had a blonde.

“Right here, hon. We’ve been waiting for you.” Apparently the name wasn’t special just for Sam and Shelly/Shirley smiled at the new guy. “Can I get you something to drink until everyone else shows up, maybe a beer?”

The guy glanced at Sam, pale grey blue eyes, before turning back to the waitress, offering a tiny, unenthused smile that was easily overshadowed by hers. “Yeah, sounds good.”

“Great. I’ll be right back.” And just like that she left again.

“Hi?” Sam was half out of his seat, not sure what to do with the guy who was neither his brother or the dark haired accountant.

The man pulled out the chair opposite from Sam, sitting down like he owned the place. “Winchester, right?”

“… yeah. I’m Sam. I, uh, I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Sam? You’re the one who’s not the mechanic.” He sort of nodded to himself, like he was sorting things out. “I’m Nick.” And held out a hand for Sam to shake. There was the hint of a tattoo on his wrist, blue black ink peeking out from his jacket sleeve.

“Hi… Nick.” Sam took the offered hand, it was cold to the touch.

They sat there for a strange moment, looking each other over like there would be a quiz later. The guy was older than Sam by a few years at least, gentle eyes, sarcastic turn to the corners of his lips, short, messy blonde hair, black tshirt under a leather jacket. He looked like a pleasant mix between the kind of guy who still goes out of his way to open doors for girls and the one who gets really loud and aggressive when he drinks too much.

It was those damn lawyer classed that taught Sam to over analyze and break down every new person he met. It was a new habit that he found uncomfortably intimate for his tastes.

He let go before the handshake could get too awkward.

Nick slumped in his seat, looking perfectly at ease, but he had the upper hand after all. He knew who Sam was.

“I’m sorry. I still don’t-”

“I’m Castiel’s older brother.”

“Oh.” Sam blinked. “Oh!” And he laughed, feeling like the existence of this sudden new company almost made sense. “Dean didn’t tell me anyone else was coming. They aren’t here yet.”

Nick gave a nice, honest smile, even if it looked tired. “Cas sent me a text saying that they’d be late and to go ahead and order.” He fished a phone from his pocket and set it down beside Sam’s near the catsup bottle.

The waitress returned and placed two brown bottles between them, and seemed thrilled that they
were ready to order. Sam had the distinct impression that she didn’t like them holding up the table for so long. It was dinner time on a Saturday and there were people waiting to be seated. A table for four could be put to much better use than one guy ordering lemonades for almost half an hour.

She left them to place the order of a cheese burger and a large Greek salad with the kitchen and Sam remembered how uncomfortable it was to be in forced social situations with complete strangers.

“Castiel never mentioned he had a brother.” Ah, awkward small talk, his old nemesis.

Nick laughed, startled and a little too loud, getting them looks from the table next to them. “He’s got three brothers actually and I look forward to telling the other two that we weren’t worth mentioning.”

“Oh…” Sam hoped he hadn’t just gotten Castiel in trouble, but Nick was still chuckling like this was a great joke so the younger Winchester figured that it would be ok. “So what number is Castiel in the, um… Novak line up?” He had to struggle to remember the guy’s last name- he’d only heard it once and that had been months ago.

“He’s the youngest.”

“And you?”

“Second oldest.” Nick hadn’t even taken a sip of his beer but he had started peeling away the label. Long curls of paper littering the table. He looked up from his little mess, eyes still as pale as storm clouds. “Did you really order just a salad?”

Sam, who had been going to say something, found himself frowning in silence.

“I’m not judging or anything. You just don’t look like the kind of guy who eats salads.”

The perfect response to that seemed to be a confused shrug, so that is what Sam offered. “What do I look like then?”

Nick blinked at him, his small smile faltering before coming back apologetic. “I have no idea.” He chuckled again, not much more than a low rumble, and he raised his beer in a bit of a salute. “I do know that I am god awful at small talk though, so here’s a preemptive apology until our brothers get their slow asses here to mediate.”

Sam found himself laughing. “I can drink to that.” And he clanked the neck of his bottle against Nick’s.

“To being uncomfortably stuck at a table with strangers.”

Sam repeated the toast with earnest before taking a drink, finding himself smiling openly now. Somehow the knowledge that they were both uncomfortable with their shared situation made it less uncomfortable.

“So, Sam?” Nick spoke with the rim of the bottle still pressed to his lower lip. “Are you a mechanic like your brother?”

“No.” Sam grinned at the idea. “I don’t have the patience for that kind of thing.”

“Then I’m going to go out on a limb and say that you’re attending the University.”

“You’re good at this.” Sam glanced at his well worn backpack sitting on the chair beside him,
knowing that the guess was fairly well educated. “How about you? Are you an accountant like your brother?”

Nick choked on his beer, laughing and covering his mouth with the back of a hand. “Good god, no. Do I look like an accountant?”

Sam looked again at the leather jacket and confusing edges of tattoos peeking now on both wrists. “You could be. I don’t know what the official accountant dress code is.”

“I think Cas is sort of the poster boy for number crunchers the world over.” He took another drink, still cradling the bottle against his mouth. “I own a tattoo parlor off of Thirtieth and J.”

“You own your own shop?” Sam was still young and occasionally wildly irresponsible, the idea of anyone owning their own business was a bit daunting.

Nick nodded, watching Sam for a long moment before speaking. “There are two kinds of people as far as I can tell, those who immediately start asking questions, about rates, what kind of work I do, those sorts of things- and then there are people who get that slightly uncomfortable look and politely ask things like ‘you own your own shop’.” He smiled around his bottle. “You don’t have any tattoos, do you?”

Sam chuckled at the assessment, apparently he was just that easy to read. “I don’t.”

Nick grinned with a flash of teeth. “If you ever want to fix that, you’re welcome to swing by.”

Sam felt his shoulders go up, sort of defensive and guarded. “Needles kind of freak me out.”

“Just don’t think of them as needles. They’re more like… pointy bits of metal.”

“Oh, well that’s completely different.” Sam chuckled again, not at all eased by the thought of changing what he called them.

“Worlds different.” Nick assured with a bit of twinkle in his sea glass blue eyes.

Sam shook his head and traded his beer for his phone. There was no new text from Dean, and Sam decided that he had been waiting long enough and he was now allowed to get annoyed with his brother.

-Cas’ brother is suprisingly normal

-we’ve ordered

-if you two don’t get here soon we’re going to eat without you

Dean replied almost immediately, Sam’s phone chiming to life.

-go ahead. Were still finishing up here :/

-what do you think of nick??

Sam frowned at his phone, because he thought that ‘normal’ was sufficient enough to describe the man, and from the few times that he had met Cas ‘normal’ was practically a complement by comparison.

-he’s nice.
Sam couldn’t think of anything better to say about the man sitting across from him, who had returned to peeling the last remnants of paper from his bottle.

-he’s got busy hands

He added after a second, not sure why it was necessary to tell Dean this part, but Sam was finding it hard to not watch the other man’s hands. Such distracting hands.

Dean was just as quick to reply, and Sam imagined his brother sitting beside his accountant friend, impatiently waiting, hovering over his phone as any means of distraction.

cas says hes good looking

And that made Sam laugh, startled by the oddness of his brother’s text.

Nick set his bottle back down, nudging Sam’s. “Have they left yet?”

“No, but apparently you brother thinks you’re good looking and my brother felt a need to tell me about it.”

Nick got this little half smile, one corner of his mouth hooking at an odd angle. “Only ‘good looking’? Last I checked I was better than just good looking.”

“Brothers don’t always know how to properly appreciate these things.” Sam nodded knowingly.

-he’s better than good looking

Sam passed the information along, wanting to clarify for Nick’s sake if nothing else. Personally, he thought that the man looked like he needed a few days worth of sleep and maybe a shave- but he wasn’t going to judge. The younger Winchester had spent the last week buried up to his eyes in law books and he was sure he didn’t look all that much better.

His phone sparked to life again, dinging three times with new messages from his brother.

cas showed me his pic

-knew he would be your type

-just didnt thnk it wuld be so easy

Sam frowned at his phone, not sure what to make of that, but from the corner of his eye he saw Nick’s phone light up. Instead of texting back his confusion he watched the blonde pick up his phone in turn.

Angry little lines tugged at the corners of his mouth and his eyes grew dark. He started to text something slowly with one finger, jabbing each letter like he meant it.

Sam’s phone lit up again, his brother’s words growing less and less sensible.

-knew u had it in u

-go get him

He slowly set the phone back down on the table top, feeling it best not to answer until he could figure out just what the hell Dean was talking about. Easy? What would be so easy?
“I… I’m not sure that they’re going to make it.” He said slowly, mulling over Dean’s texts as he spoke, like putting pieces of a puzzle side by side. Not quite together, but he was starting to see the picture that they could form.

“They sure the hell aren’t.” Nick all but growled and Sam looked up, startled at the change of tone. “See, now Gabriel pulls this kind of shit all the time, but I didn’t think he would rope Cas into it too. Thought the kid had more sense than help him.” He was more talking to himself than anyone else, his words in that same growling whisper as he slowly composed an apparently very aggressive text to who Sam could only guess was Castiel.

“What’s going on?” Sam wasn’t sure if wanted to know. He had a horrible feeling what the answer might be.

“Gabriel, brother number three, has this nasty habit of setting me up on these blind date blitz attacks- and you seem nice enough, but you aren’t my type- if you know what I mean.” His cold eyes flicked up to Sam’s face then back to his phone. “He just doesn’t know when to quit.”

“Blind date?” Sam said slowly, tasting the bitterness of the words. Dean’s text suddenly made sense and a quiet anger grew in Sam, boiling in his gut. “This is a date?”

Nick lowered his phone, the sharpness to his mouth easing slightly as he took in Sam’s distressed pitch. “Cas just congratulated me, said he knew I would like you, and to use protection. Our brothers aren’t coming. I doubt they ever planned to.”

“I- I’m not gay.” Sam winced at how loud his voice was and he tried not to look around to see if anyone nearby heard him. “No offence. I mean… but-”

“I’m not either.” Nick had narrowed his eyes, mouth a thin, irritated line.

Shelly brought them their food, a hesitant smile and no banter, seemingly picking up on the heavy hostility between the two men. “Just let me know if you need anything else.” She said quickly before scurrying off to another table.

The salad and burger sat between them untouched, alongside Nick’s phone with its unsent message.

Sam struggled with himself, with the whole suggestion of what was happening to him. “Why the hell would Dean think it was a good idea to set me up with … with you?”

“How would I know? I’ve never met him.” Nick grumbled, slumping, looking somewhat defeated. “But my guess is, if he’s anything like my brother, then we’re both here because he’s an ass.”

Any other time and Sam would have come to his brother’s defense. But not tonight. Tonight he agreed whole heartedly.

A shared sense of betrayal stirred between them, and there was some comradery to be found in that righteous anger.

“What did he think was going to happen?” Sam tried to make some kind of sense of what his brother had done. “That I would see you and just have a sudden awakening of fabulousness?”

Nick made a rough noise, almost like a laugh but a bit too hard. “Awakening of fabulousness?” He rubbed at his eyes. “Maybe. Or maybe he just misinterpreted your haircut.”

“Hey!” Sam bristled.
“Sorry, sorry.” The anger seemed to be leaving Nick as quick as a sigh. “Today’s just a crap day. I didn’t mean it.”

Sam’s hands were pressed flat on the table, knuckles white. “Your burger is getting cold.”

“Your salad is getting warm.” Nick said snidely, but there was a hint of humor in there somewhere that softened his reply.

They ate in relative silence, brooding together without wasted words.

The world had gone wrong tonight.

Their brothers not only thought that they were gay despite no indications to the affirmative, but thought that they would also be good for each other.

No one needed to give any more strength to the idea by saying it out loud.

“So,” Nick finally breathed, dragging one of his last fries through a little lake of salted catsup that he had made for himself. “How often does he do this kind of thing to you?”

“This?” Sam gestured at Nick, encompassing the whole of the man with an easy flick of his wrist. “This is a first for Dean. Normally he just buys drinks for girls in bars and blames it on me. Or when we go grocery shopping he’ll have me push the cart, jostle me into someone else’s, run off before they can turn around, and then they think I’m just clumsily trying to hit on them.”

“You… go grocery shopping with your brother?” Nick raised one pale eyebrow at that.

“I live with my brother.” Sam confessed in a tired way. “We’ve got a little house a few miles from campus.”

“How old are you?”

Sam felt that same bristle as before, and he knew he sounded weirdly defensive. “Twenty-two.”

“And you’re majoring in…?”

“Prelaw.” He answered quickly.

“Good.” Nick sounded oddly relieved. “I was worried you would say Environmental Science or something. I don’t think I could go through with this if you were some kind of vegetarian hippy.”

“I’m not a vegetarian.” He started to pick up his beer then hesitated. “Wait, go through with what? This isn’t a date.”

Nick was toying with his lower lip, looking oddly thoughtful. “What if it was?”

“What if it was what?”

“A date.”

“This isn’t a date.”

“But what if it was?” He repeated.

“You lost me.”
Nick raised a finger, opening his mouth like he was going to explain, and then stopped to tug at his lip again. He sighed sharply before starting over. “My brother, the little jackal, has been pulling this kind of shit for the past ten years or so. He insists that I would be oh so much happier if only I was dating someone, and apparently anyone will do at this point.”

“And…”

“And well, you’re someone, aren’t you?”

Sam looked at the man across from him like the complete stranger that he was. “I’m not any more gay now than I was when you sat down.”

“Ah, but your brother obviously don’t know that, does he? And apparently neither does mine.” Nick got this grin, slow and hungry like a wolf would smile at a lamb. “Now I’m not saying that we are, or that we do any thing... you know...but what if we let them think we were?”

Sam had no idea where Nick was trying to lead, but he knew he had no interest in following.

“What I’m offering is a business proposal. I’m sure you’ve gone over those in your fancy school.”

“What kind of business?” Sam didn’t know that he could feel even half as suspicious as he suddenly did.

“Would your brother stop shoving you at women if you were dating someone?”

“Yes, but I-”

“Mine would. If he thought I was dating someone then he would leave me the hell alone. I wouldn’t have to worry about him bringing weird women into my work or suddenly showing up at my house with strippers.”

“Castiel brings strippers to your house?” Sam could not reconcile the image of the small accountant anywhere near strippers.

“No.” And Nick laughed warm enough that it was obvious he struggled with the imagery as well. “No. I don’t think he would even know where to find one. It’s my other brother, Gabriel. And they aren’t always strippers. Sometimes they’re… well, they do a lot more for a lot less money.” He glanced sideways at the table to his left where a young set of parents were trying to wrangle their small son into eating something other than mozzarella sticks. “But if I was dating someone he might let up on it a bit.”

“That sounds like hell but I don’t…”

“But what, you like getting shoved at unsuspecting girls?” Nick was all dripping sarcasm and disbelief. “I’m not saying that we do date I’m just saying that we don’t tell them that we aren’t.”

Sam mulled the idea over for longer than he should have. The answer was no. It couldn’t be anything other than no. He couldn’t lie to Dean, say he was dating this man, just to have a few weeks of peace and quiet.

Peace and quiet.

“He would stop dragging me to bars… I would have time to study.” All sorts of horrible possibilities swam through him.

The wolf smile was back, and this time Sam minded a bit less being the lamb. “You would have
to stop going to bars with him all together if we were going to make it look convincing. You can come to my place, study to your heart’s content, any night of the week. Gabriel won’t come over if he thinks I’m with my… boyfriend.” He made a bit of a face. “Hn. I don’t like how that sounds.”

“Boyfriend.” Sam gave it a try and found it equally unpalatable.

But… he could study for finals. It was mid November now. He would only need to keep it up for a month, and then once tests were over…

“No.” He was certain. “They’ll figure it out. There’s no way we could keep it up.”

Nick looked a little crest fallen, toying with his empty bottle. He snagged a waitress and tipped the bottle in her direction. “Two more?” He glanced at Sam. “You want one too?” He turned back to the waitress before getting an answer. “Three beers, please.”

She kind of laughed and nodded before going off to fill the request.

Sam was quiet, feeling guilty for even considering lying to his brother on such a grand scale.

The waitress returned and set down three more bottles and their check. “You boys can pay whenever you want. No hurry.”

Nick drank, got halfway into the second bottle before looking up at Sam, his eyes suddenly alight. “I don’t know about you, but for a little freedom from good intentions I am willing lie about my feelings for you for as long as it takes.”

“I need some time to study, that’s all.” Sam was still caught between actually considering the proposition just to spite Dean- and absolute terror at what Nick was offering him. “I don’t want to be in an imaginary relationship for the rest of my life.”

“I’m not saying we drag it out until we’re ready for the retirement home. I’m saying that after a few weeks or months of being real sweet on each other that we break up gloriously. And not like a shake hands, stay friends kind of break up. Something loud and public and awful.”

Sam understood. If he went through a really bad break up, not just feeling a bit sad about a crush leaving- but a broken hearted, depressed kind of break up, especially when Dean would somehow blame himself for it- because Dean always blamed himself for things like that… well, he would leave Sam alone for a while. And Sam would have guilt trip fodder for years if he needed it. ‘Remember that time when you set me up with the love of my life and he broke my heart?’

He couldn’t do that to his brother. As tempting as it was.

His phone went off and Sam glanced at the messages as they came in quick succession.

-Im staying out late

-feel free to get your freak on

-u need it

-just text me when its safe to come home

Sam put his phone face down and looked up at Nick with grim determination. “I’m in.”

.:.
They worked out some rough details while Nick worked out the excess of beer. He finished his bottles as well as most of Sam’s while they outlined their plan of attack. It was agreed on that the best breakup possible would have to fall just before Valentine’s Day for maximum effect. That gave them roughly three months to build up a believable relationship.

That meant one to two ‘dates’ a week during which Sam could simply hide at the school library or go to Nick’s apartment which conveniently wasn’t too far from campus and he could study in peace while Nick could put in extra hours at work or simply nap. Apparently he really wanted to get some napping in if he knew his sleep wouldn’t be interrupted by his younger brother.

They shook on it.

Sam’s deal with the devil.

He was Nick’s (in title at least) for the next three months, and Nick was his.

His very own, very straight boyfriend.

And Sam realized that as low risk, low commitment as their arrangement was, it started in full force tonight.

Nick had managed three and a half beers, and despite the fact that he said he was good to drive himself home, the glaze in his eyes and his too easy smile said differently.

“Keys.” Sam held out a hand and demanded in no uncertain terms.

Nick rolled his eyes. “You’re my boyfriend, not my wife.”

“‘s not. And I’m driving you back to my place and making you coffee and we will spend quality new relationship time together until you’re sober enough to get your ass back to your own place.”

Nick looked at him, long and steady… or at least as stead as he could manage before finally holding out a set of keys. “You’re going to be the bossy kind of girlfriend, aren’t you?”

“Boyfriend.” Sam corrected, snatching the keys away before the offer was withdrawn.

“Same thing.”

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“Your boyfriend is telling you to give him the keys, because you’re drunk. You’re coming home with me.”

“With you?” Nick sounded surprised. “No. No, we agreed that you weren’t a tramp and all dates for the first few weeks would be in public places, then homes, then overnight. You can’t start breaking the rules first thing.”

“Tramp? I never said tramp, I said I didn’t want to look easy.” It was an important distinction.

“Same thing.”

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“Same thing.” And Nick put down a pair of twenties with their bill, paying for them both, and stood.

Sam got up and where as he was not surprised to discover that Nick was a good few inches shorter than him, it was obvious that the other man was not quite prepared.

His eyes grew a little wider and his smile vanished all together. “Good lord. How did you manage to get that big eating salads?” He seemed to have startled himself and had the grace to look slightly embarrassed at his words. “Sorry. The only thing Cas told me about you was that you’re the
brother of his mechanic friend and that you’re tall. I should have guessed that he really meant it.”

Sam looked down at the other man, wondering what mess he had gotten himself into.

Nick blinked into the awkward pause. “…I am drunk, aren’t I?”

Sam nudged Nick towards the doors. “Come on, show me to your car.”

As luck would have it, because everything else this evening had been going so well, it wasn’t a car. It was a motorcycle. A red and black Triumph, beautiful British engineering if Sam remembered the make correctly. Dean said that they couldn’t turn worth a damn and Sam wondered again how he always got himself into these kinds of situations.

The new couple argued over who should wear the single helmet. Nick said Sam should on account of he hadn’t had much practice riding other than on dirt bikes in the sand when he was a teenager. Sam said Nick should because he was more likely to fall off.

Sam won out of pure stubbornness, saying that they could stand there in the forty degree nighttime until Nick sobered up if he wanted to. It was his choice.

He drove slowly for safety’s sake, but it made the whole trip take about three times longer than it should. It was a hard pace to keep with the night as cold as it was, prolonging the weather. The chill factor from the wind made it colder than the dark side of the moon and Sam found himself oddly grateful of Nick’s arms around his waist.

It put the man’s head close enough to Sam’s that even with the helmet on he could hear the soft accusation of, “you drive like an old lady.”

All Sam could really do was roll his shoulder, knocking into Nick, hoping that the aggression could be understood.

They pulled safely into the empty driveway and Sam sighed in relief.

Nick loosed his grip, pulling off his helmet. “Aw, you have an old lady house too.”

The younger man looked at the freshly trimmed grass and the little white picket fence with its matching shutters and flower boxes.

“We bought it from a sweet little old grandma when we moved out here. She gave us a deal, said that Dean reminded her of her husband when they first got married.” He smiled and waited until Nick climbed off before unstraddling the bike, feeling a little weak in the legs. “We stripped the wall paper and pulled up the pink carpet, but we haven’t had much of a chance to deal with the exterior yet.”

“Pink carpets? Sorry I missed that.” Nick just smiled, tucking his helmet under an arm. “My keys?” He asked expectantly.

“Not until you’ve dried up.”

Nick sighed as if the weight of the world was bearing down on him. “Yes, dear.”

Sam put the keys safely in his pocket with a shake of his head and let them in the house.

He made a pot of coffee to share and got out one of his text books, not wanting tonight to be a total waste. Nick sat on the couch, graciously taking the offered mug and scooting over so Sam would have room beside him.
And very quickly, Sam realized that he had made one of the best deals of his life tonight.

Nick had been chatty at the restaurant, grinning and chuckling as they laid out the lies they would be sharing, but he grew quiet while they sat together on the couch. So quiet that every now and then Sam had to look over to make sure that the man hadn’t fallen asleep or something. Nick was just there, comfortably within arm’s reach, looking content with the world. Occasionally he would get up to refill his mug, or wander off to find the bathroom, but other than that he was a very peaceful studying companion. Who could want a better boyfriend?

“When’s your brother supposed to be back?” It had been quiet for so long that Sam startled, looking over at Nick, and then glancing at the clock. It was almost ten.

“Oh… I was supposed to text him when it was safe to come back.”

“Safe?” Nick gave him a knowing look before sipping loudly from his cup.

“Yeah…”

“The longer you wait the more ideas he’s going to get about what we’re doing... tramp.”

Sam didn’t feel a need to properly acknowledge that other than digging his phone out and showing Nick Dean’s last texts.

“Get your freak on?” Nick looked up from the phone, trying very hard to not smile at Sam.

“You’ve got a classy brother, don’t you?”

“He’s upsettingly classy.”

“I can tell.”

“You two will either hate each other or run away together.”

“I would never leave you for your brother, baby.”

Sam made a bad noise. “No. Just no. Dear is acceptable if you have to- but don’t call me baby.”

Nick chuckled in a decidedly sober way, soft and short and very self conscious.

“You know what? Dear isn’t ok either.”

“What am I supposed to call you?”

“Sam.”

“There is nothing romantic about Sam.” He dragged the name out, little smile lingering in his eyes as he handed back the phone. “Honey?”

“No.”

“Sweet cheeks?”

Sam laughed. “No.”

“Sammy?”

“No.”
“Darlin’?”

Sam sighed.

Nick grinned before looking away. “Alright, darlin’. I think I’m good to drive now. You can let your brother know it’s safe to come back and that your man-chastity is still in place.”

“My man-chastity?”

“For now.” And Nick winked at him.

Sam watched the other man stand and walk off to the kitchen, listening as the sink turned on. Nick rinsed out his mug and Sam had a sudden sinking feeling.

“We aren’t saying we kissed or anything tonight, right? It was just friends.” He wanted to make sure he could keep the story straight. They had decided not to write any of it down for the sake of not creating any incriminating evidence, but it meant that they would have to commit the schedule to vague memory.

The sink turned off. “…no. Nobody is kissing anyone.” Nick came back into the room, a slightly uncomfortable look on his face as he tugged at his lip. “This is going to get weird sometimes, isn’t it?”

“This is already weird.”

“I think it’ll be worth it.” He confessed softly, a hesitant tone entering in.

Sam thought about the hours of peace he would have from his big brother, of the possible freedom he would have forever after from blind dates and unexpected hookups or being shoved at random women anytime he lingered too close to one.

“I want an easy out clause added.” He said suddenly. “Either of us can instigate the breakup early if we need to. Done and over like it never happened.”

Nick seemed to consider before nodding slowly. “Yeah ok, mister lawyer. But I bought my ticket for this train and I plan to ride it to the end. It’s going to mean sleep and freedom and for that I will be as verbally gay as I need to to keep my brother off my back.”

“Verbally gay?”

“Oh, the things I will be telling my brother about your ass.”

What a horrible thing to say to someone you just met a few hours ago.

Sam found himself sitting with his head in his hands, those doomed words ringing in his ears. “This is never going to work.”

“We’ll be fine. You’ve just got to commit.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Commit to me, Sam.”

“Don’t say it like that.” He begged, dropping his hands and jumping slightly because at some point Nick had come to kneel in front of him.

“Sam, from the bottom of my bitter old heart- I am begging you. Let me have the honor of being
your fake gay boyfriend. It’s just three months. We can be awkward friends in private, and you
never have to do more than hold hands with me in public and only if absolutely necessary.”

Nick’s eyes were almost warm, pleading and deep as he gazed fixedly up from where he knelt at
Sam’s feet. He smelled like cheap beer, slightly burnt coffee, and quiet desperation.

“First date,” Sam said softly, “tonight we hit it off, not yet realizing our fabulousness, but thinking
we might be friends. We won’t call it a ‘date’, but we can get a little moony eyed when we talk
about each other and the brothers can get suspicious.” All laid out like they had planned at the
restaurant.

Nick smiled, little light of victory shining in him. “I can call you in a few days. We’ll make plans
to do overly manly things together.”

“All kinds of over compensation?”

“All over the place.” Nick promised. “And they’ll get suspicious, and in a few weeks when we’ve
come out of our closets they’ll tell us that they always knew.”

“I can’t believe I let myself get talked into this.”

“Talked into? We’re equal partners in this one and it’s going to be perfect. We will make them
regret ever daring to introduce us, darlin’ .”

Sam bore his teeth. “You’re going to stick with that one, aren’t you?”

“Until you give me a better one, yeah.”

It was like all the horrible deals that he had made with Dean when they were kids. When he knew
that it was going to end badly, but his brother’s blind optimism always won him over in the end.

“Ok.”

“Just ok?”

“What else do you want?”

“I don’t get a nickname?”

“No.” Sam said with a wide smile.

Nick laughed, comfortable and warm like they were already old friends. “You’ll get there.” He
stood and held a hand out to Sam.

It was like a peaceful kind of agreement had finally been reached. Nothing had really changed
from the original plan, but it set easier with him now. He slowly put his hand in Nick’s and earned
himself a weird look.

“My keys.” Nick gently slapped Sam’s hand away with a hint of a smile.

“Oh.” And Sam felt like an idiot, but tonight was weird enough on its own that the feeling really
wasn’t all that important by comparison. He handed over the set of keys and walked Nick to the
door.

Even after the bike vanished from sight, Sam could hear the roar of the engine for what felt like an
eternity.
He could do this. It was just three months of hanging out with a new… friend. Nothing more.

It would be so simple.

No complications.

No commitments.

No hard feelings.

No way he could have known that he would find himself in way over his head before the three months were up.

If he had had any inclination as to what would be set in motion that night, he never would have agreed to the whole awful plan in the first place.

It wasn’t worth it.

Three and a half months later Sam would look back to that night- standing on the porch and listening to Nick drive away- and he would think to himself, with the full and horrible knowledge that hindsight allowed, that it wasn’t worth it.
“So?” Dean asked with this knowing smile, so cocky over his morning cup of coffee.

“So what?” Sam asked right back, knowing full well what they weren’t talking about, avoiding looking at his brother in favor of cutting up a banana to add to his cereal.

“You date last night?”

“Yeah, thanks for that one, Dean.” Sam kept cutting. “You do know I’m not gay, right?”

“You never told me you weren’t.” Dean could get so defensive so fast.

“It’s kind of a safe assumption at this point.” Sam tossed his knife in the sink and sat down at the table beside his brother. They shared a stony look, Sam doing his best to be as indignant as possible.

“Your don’t like the girls I’ve been finding for you- I thought it would be good to try a different approach. Besides, he’s totally your type.”

Sam took a slow breath through his nose. “And what is my type, Dean?”

“Blonde?”

“Thanks for clearing that up.”

Dean sighed, setting down his mostly empty mug. “So you didn’t like him?”

“We’re going out this weekend.” Sam said carefully, “as friends.” He made sure to stress.

“Friends?” But Dean had this glint in his eyes like he knew he had somehow won.

“Yeah. We got to talking last night during our not-date and realized that we had a lot in common.”

Dean was grinning at him.

“Like how we both like women and we both hate our jackass brothers. So we’ve got that going for us.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, Sammy.” Dean got up, pushing at his kid brother’s head, messing up his hair and dancing away before he could get hit. “You love me. I find new friends for you. Now you don’t have to be so alone and pathetic all the time.”

Sam took a bite of cereal, doing his best to ignore his brother. “You’re going to be late for work.”

“You’re going to be late for class.” Dean countered. “Hurry up. I’ll give you a ride.”

Despite his ability to get under Sam’s skin like no other- he really did mean well.
“You want to play pool?” Sam repeated, looking sideways at his phone.

“Not necessarily.” Nick’s voice tumbled down the line, a bit of amusement coming through the background noise from wherever he was. “I’m asking if we can say we’re going out to play pool.”

He closed up his books, shoving them down into his backpack. “Do you need an alibi for tonight?”

Nick had this low, easy chuckle. “Gabriel wants to take me out for drinks to apologize for setting us up last weekend and I have a feeling it’s a trap… I may have already told him to go screw himself because you and me have plans to go out again tonight.”

“So we’re already playing pool tonight.” Sam pulled his bag over his shoulder and made for the stairs that would take him up out of the library’s basement where all the worst study rooms could be found.

“Sorry. I panicked.” Nick didn’t sound all that sorry.

“It’s alright. Taking a break might be good for me.”

“Have you been studying hard like the good student you are?”

The cold winter sun was stunning when Sam finally reached outside and he had to turn his face away for a moment. “I’ve been in the library so long the sun hurts my eyes.”

Nick laughed. “Poor kid.”

One thing Sam never liked, it was being called ‘kid’, but they could talk about that later. Right now he was looking up at the clock tower, thinking he had time to get some lunch before going to his Sociology class. “There’s a Hard Time billiards a few blocks from campus. I can meet you there around four?”

There was a moment of semi silence as Nick shuffled around, a muffled noise as he covered his phone to talk to someone else. “Sam? Yeah, I don’t have another appointment until late tonight. Meet you at four.”

“It’s a date.”

They both laughed a little uncomfortably at that, neither entirely sure if it was a joke or not.

As Sam put his phone away he realized that he was actually looking forward to seeing Nick again. It was a surprising feeling if nothing else. Somewhere behind the tired eyes and sarcastic words, Nick had friend potential.

There was a bit of a bounce in his weary steps and Sam thought that perhaps he might actually grow to like the other man.

But they were supposed to like each other. Right?

That was the whole plan after all… wasn’t it?

..:

Nick cheated at pool.

Not anything too overt, but he had this tendency to sneak up behind Sam and nudge his cue
whenever he was trying to take a shot.

“Damn it, Nick.” He said with force, turning to watch the shorter man walking easily around the table. “Knock it off. You’re as bad as Dean.”

“After our last discussion on brothers I take offence to that, sir.” Nick put a hand to his chest, looking wounded.

“You made me miss.” He pointed the blue chalked end of the cue across the table, threateningly.

“I would never.” Nick lined up his shot, easily sinking a green stripped ball. “Have you ever considered that you’re just bad at pool? You have missed every shot so far.”

Sam thumped the butt of his cue against the floor, slow and steady like a war drum.

“Would you like me to teach you how to play?”

“No thanks.” Sam didn’t feel a need to share the fact that growing up in Kansas in place of a TV there had been a worn pool table where him and his brother had spent the majority of every summer for years shooting pool to pass the long hours.

Nick looked up from where he was leaned over his shot, his teeth caught against his lower lip in a concerning semblance of a smile. “We can start over.”

Sam kept thumping his cue.

“I’ll behave this time.” An empty sounding promise if there ever was one.

But Sam started to rack up the balls again, setting the table for a new game.

“Looser buys drinks.” Nick declared.

He glanced up. “I haven’t even had dinner yet.”

“Beer is basically bread. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ve got a night class.”

“I think you’re just worried you’re going to lose.” Nick had this innocent little smile, taking the triangle from Sam and rolling it over the felt top, the balls clacking together softly. “Come on, darlin’. I’ll go easy on you.”

Sam had never been all that good as suppressing his competitive nature. Too long fighting against a big brother who had felt a need to try and put him in his place ever since Sam turned fifteen and found himself looking down at Dean. Maybe it just ran in the family.

Nick was watching him from lidded eyes and when he spoke it was a low, soft taunt, not meant to be heard by anyone else. “I bet a fiddle of gold against your soul ‘cus I think I’m better than you.”

That cocky little smile did something bad to Sam and he leaned back against the wall fighting the urge to say something he could only get away with saying to his brother, something he might regret. “Go ahead. I’ll let you break.” Carefully chosen words carefully bitten off.

“How generous of you.” Nick nodded in his direction, all mock gratitude. He broke and managed to sink two solids before missing a shot. He looked back at Sam with a smile and a shrug.

Sam walked around the table twice, making quiet calculations.
“I don’t have all night.” Nick sang softly.

Taking a slow breath Sam looked up from the table. “No cheating this time?”

Nick held his hands up in mock surrender, the smallest of smiles glinting in his eyes.

It took less than a minute for Sam to cleanly sink all the balls and when he looked up he had a hard time keeping a grin off his face.

“You… you’re a hustler.” Nick didn’t sound at all mad, quite the opposite.

“I am not.” Sam leaned a hip easily against the table, basking in the appreciative look he was getting. “And you owe me a drink.”

Nick inclined his head and handed over his cue. “Indeed I do.”

He came back with a beer and an orange juice and Sam laughed as he took the offering.

Nick lightly clanked his bottle against Sam’s glass before taking a swig. “Any other talents I should know about before I gloriously lose another bet to you?”

Sam thought about that, about the things that he had spent so much time on when he was young enough to form strong neural pathways. He liked to read and argue and honestly had never thought of himself as a man of any real skill. He shrugged. “I guess I’m good with a gun.”

“That sounds a lot more like a threat than a talent.”

Sam grinned and shrugged, enjoying his well earned orange juice.

“I’ll guess I’ll make a point not to make you mad, darlin’.” Nick decided aloud.

“You should be alright. We didn’t plan for the breakup to get that exciting.” Sam assured him as he set down his glass and racked up the balls again.

Nick watched him with a smile, dimpled slightly by the lip of his beer bottle, never quite letting it leave his mouth. “I’m thinking that as long as we stay just shy of physical violence it should be perfect.”

“No fisticuffs.” Sam agreed, taking the first shot.

Nick laughed, such a free and happy sound. “You did not just say fisticuffs to me.”

Sam wouldn’t meet his eye, worried that he would start laughing too and completely betray his well composed exterior.

“I have no idea what to do with someone like you.” Nick confessed warmly, and he couldn’t be drunk already, he wasn’t even one bottle in, so Sam took it as honest affection.

Sometimes you meet someone and you can tell that you’ll be friends.

They just feel right.

Nick felt right.

“Obviously you will date me,” Sam said with a slow, sarcastic drawl, “fall madly in love with me, and even after our horrible breakup we will remain secret pen pals, sending texts and meeting for
coffee in the middle of the night, never telling our brothers of secret relationship.” He sunk too
more balls, intentionally sending the cue ball into the corner pocket, scratching and letting Nick
have a turn.

Nick fished out the white ball and gave Sam an even look. “Well, that all goes without saying. I
mean tonight though. What am I doing with you tonight?”

“Tonight you are losing a few more games of pool to me, gracefully, before giving me a ride back
to campus.”

“As you command.” Nick set his bottle aside and placed the cue ball.

He winked at Sam before taking the shot and Sam had to look away, chuckling softly and
thinking to himself that this was the perfect break from studying tonight.

Even if only for an hour, and even if it’s only every once in a while, it’s important to look after
your mental health.

Remember that.

By the time they reached their third game, Nick had resumed his cheating, just as blatant and
shameless as before- occasionally going as far as to lean up beside Sam, close enough that their
knees or shoulders brushed together.

“Jesus, Nick.” Sam straightened, not even bothering to take his shot. He looked at the other man,
close enough to really stare him down, using his full height in a way that never worked on Dean
anymore. “Do you mind?”

Nick took a sip of his beer, passively calm expression. “Not at all. Please- continue.”

“You wanna back up a bit first?”

“Not at all.” He repeated with a smile that never left the corners of his eyes.

“This is cheating, you know.”

“You, Sam, are a bona fide pool hustler, and I will take whatever advantage I can get.”

Sam took the smallest little half step closer, their chests brushing. Nick never batted an eyelash.

“You gunna’ take that shot or what, darlin’?” He spoke so slow and careful, not at all bothered by
their newfound proximity.

Frustrated, Sam remembered that Nick had brothers too. Which meant that this sort of thing was
nothing new to him and that meant that much like with Dean, such tactics were wasted.

“Hey!” Someone hollered. “Queers! Go get a room.”

Sam immediately backed up, looking out at the neon tinged lighting of the pool hall. He couldn’t
tell who had yelled at them, but he had a feeling that it was someone in the little group of
laughing, polo shirt and khaki wearing guys at the bar.

There was a quiet, indignant anger growing in Sam. He glared at the group of guys until they, as a
unit, turned away, avoiding eye contact.

“Pricks.” He muttered and rechalked his cue, little smears of blue on his fingers.
“You know them?” Nick was still watching the five or so guys, young college kids with not enough sense to keep their homophobic ideas to themselves.

“Happily not.” He said sharply and leaned down to take his shot, deciding it best to ignore the asshats.

Now, Sam was about as straight as the next guy- but little things like what one guy chooses to stick in another guy, simply never concerned him. He had just always felt it best to stay with the ‘live and let live’ motto that his brother had taught him at a young age.

Maybe he was a bit of a hippy after all.

Nick stayed beside him, so still while Sam missed his shot. Slowly, ever so slow, the older man put a hand on his shoulder, long fingers steady. Sam looked up at him, a little unnerved to see the lack of expression.

“Yeah?”

Somewhere on the other side of the room one of the guys yelled “Fags!” and the others laughed.

Nick suddenly lit up, eyes fixed on those douchey guys- and he smiled. “Sam, do you mind waiting outside for me?”

“Why?” Sam straightened, not quite shrugging off Nick’s hand.

“I’m going to get myself kicked out in a second and I told you I would give you a ride back to school.” He let go of Sam and set down his bottle. “If you’re already outside waiting it will streamline the whole process.”

It took about five seconds for Sam’s brain to catch up, to process all those words and file them away as a line of verification for what sort of man Nick was. But by that time, the blonde was already on the far side of the bar, easily picking out the guy who had been yelling from the pack of generic jerks. With a quick, easy movement, like he had done it a million times, Nick grabbed the guy by the collar, dragged him free of his friends and slugged him square in the jaw.

Sam had never been in a bar brawl before, and even if this couldn’t really count as one (seeing at it was a pool hall, not a bar), but he was always interested in trying new things. Besides, he couldn’t in good conscious let Nick be the only one to have the satisfaction of punching one of those jerks.

Two against five wasn’t much of a fair fight, or it wouldn’t have been if one of the two weren’t a Winchester. It sort of swayed the odds in their favor.

And maybe that should have been listed as one of his assets. Having an ‘alpha male’ type for an older brother had taught Sam how to come out swinging.

Though as it turned out Nick didn’t seem to need the help. He was holding his own just fine- and all Sam’s help did was end the scuffle that much quicker.

They both got kicked out and Sam considered himself lucky that no one called the cops.

Nick was leaning against the back of the pool hall, blood on his teeth, grinning at Sam with wild eyes. “You’re going to have the prettiest black eye tomorrow.” He almost purred out the words, still running high on adrenaline.

Sam touched his face, wincing. “Bastard sucker punched me.”
“And you paid him back for it good, didn’t you?” Nick stretched his arms over his head, rolling his shoulders easy and languid like a big cat. “God, you were beautiful.”

“You should have left them alone.” Sam chided, choosing to ignore the… well it wasn’t exactly a complement, but whatever it was, he didn’t address it. “They were just being assholes.”

“Come on, Sam.” His vividly red grin was unsettling at best. “What kind of boyfriend would I be, letting someone talk to you like that?”

“I can handle myself.” He said quietly.

“I saw.” His manic smile softened, and he was calming down, or at least trying to for Sam’s benefit. “Is brawling a prereq for all lawyers or were you just made this way?”

“There were a few years where me and my brother didn’t get along so well. Dad called it growing pains, but it was more like eighteen stitches and four trips to the emergency room in the same year.” He wiped at his nose, little smear of blood on the back of his hand. “We grew out of it.”

“You look like you grew out of a lot of things.”

Sam wiped his nose again, shaking his head, not rising to the bait or whatever Nick’s words were meant to be now. “You should have left them alone.”

Nick ran a hand through his short hair, looking up at the grey sky, the color reflecting in his pale eyes. “Honestly, even if you weren’t there, if they had been talking to two other guys all together… I still would have decked the bastard. Someone’s got to keep them in their place.”

He couldn’t say whether or not Nick was right in his actions, so he decided not to say anything.

“Guys like those used to send my brother home with black eyes and split lips.” There was no smile at all now, and Nick was dusting himself off, fishing in his pockets, trying to find where he put his keys. “Once or twice a week for almost a year… Cas was a small kid back in high school, you know, a really easy target. And maybe you aren’t. Maybe you’re the god damned jolly green giant and you can give punches just as well as you can take them- but the next guy might not be.” He held up his keys with a triumphant little shake. “So, for the sake of the next guy, I had to punch the bastard in the fucking face.”

Sometimes you meet someone and you can tell that you’ll be friends.

They just feel right.

Sam’s mouth felt oddly cold and he realized it was because he was smiling a little too widely into the November wind.

Without anymore preamble, Nick swung a leg over his bike. “You still want a ride to school?”

Sam walked around the bike with long, easy strides, settling on almost comfortably behind the other man. “Can we swing by my house so I can get cleaned up first?”

Nick spit, red tinted onto the pavement. “I was a little drunk last time, so you’ll have to give me directions.”

Sam laughed, and his chest hurt. He could practically feel the bruises forming. Despite all that added to the fact that he still had to go to class in about an hour- it was a pretty good day.

At least that’s what he thought, up until he saw the Impala sitting in the driveway, beautiful black
beast guarding the house like a warning. Nick pulled up beside it, careful not to get to close, giving her a respectable amount of room. He killed the engine and pulled of his helmet.

“She’s beautiful.” He whispered in an awed sort of way.

“Don’t let Dean catch you looking at her like that.” Sam advised, climbing off, feeling just as weak in the knees as last time he had been on the bike. Maybe he just wasn’t built to be on a motorcycle.

“She’s your brother’s?” Nick glanced over at Sam before looking the car up and down in an almost indecent fashion. “Then he is a lucky man with good taste in cars.”

Sam gave a little taste of one of his better bitch-faces. “You promised you wouldn’t leave me for my brother.”

“But I made no such promises about leaving you for your brother’s car.” Nick said solemnly, propping out the kick stand before looking at Sam’s pout with the same unimpressed expression he had back at the bar. Apparently he was not an easy man to intimidate. Sam would have to work harder.

He started up the walk towards the welcome glow of the porch light. “You’d have to fight Dean for her, and the only thing he’s more possessive about than me is that car.”

“Good thing I’m willing to settle for you then, isn’t it.”

“Settle?” Sam glanced back, trying his best not to smile. “Lucky me.”

“Luck’s got nothing to do with it, darlin’. That car doesn’t have an ass like yours.”

Sam stopped halfway through unlocking the door to really just look at Nick. “I’m worried I might have gotten myself mixed up with the wrong kind of guy.”

“That’s a good thing to worry about.” He nodded in agreement.

Dean opened the door, apparently hearing the talking outside and getting tired of waiting for Sam to turn the handle.

“Hey, Sammy how- holly hell.” Dean’s face went from happy to angry in a second. “What happened to you?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” He pushed Dean’s hands away, oddly aware of Nick standing right beside him in full view of the man handling that his brother was suddenly subjecting him to.

“Is anything broken?” Worry mixing with the anger and it didn’t matter that they had a spectator, because the thing that Dean was best at was fussing over his kid brother.

“I’m fine.” He repeated more forcefully, grabbing Dean’s wrists. “This is Nick. He’s fine too.”

Dean’s mouth was a thin, tight lipped smile just for Nick. “If you’re the one who punched him I’m going to have to kill you, and I’ll just apologize to Cas later.”

Nick didn’t say anything at first- he was busy looking over Dean the same way he had looked over Sam for the first time a few nights back. All calculating and quiet, taking in every little detail.

“I thought you’d be taller.” He said finally.

Which was, for the record, the wrong thing to say.
Dean wasn’t short by any kind of measurement, but at the same time he had never really come to terms with being shorter than his little brother. It was a sensitive spot with him.

“We weren’t fighting with each other.” Sam said quickly, seeing the heat in his brother’s eyes. “We just got caught up in a fight down at the pool hall.” He let go of his brother once he was sure that Dean wasn’t about to do something bad in Nick’s direction.

“You’ve got class tonight.” Dean looked up at him, lecturing gently. Going from hot to cold and back in seconds.

“I know. I needed a clean shirt first.”

“Then come in and get one. Why’re you standing out here?” Dean got out of the way, letting them both in.

Sam didn’t want to leave Nick and Dean alone, not after Nick so expertly insulted his big brother, but he also didn’t want to be late for class.

Priorities sometimes got in the way of good sense.

The air in the living room was thick when he got back down stairs, the two men in his life still standing right where he left them beside the door.

“Come on, Nick.” He tugged on the man’s arm, pulling him along before glancing back at his brother. “I’ll see you after class?”

“Yeah, just give me a call when you get out.” Dean forged a small smile.

“I can walk.” He was already opening the door, not interested in the same argument they had almost every night before he left for class. The same argument that he lost every night before class.

“It’s too damn cold out. I’ll be there at ten-thirty.” His brother said with finality.

Sam rolled his eyes, but he meant thank you. They both knew it.

Nick followed close on Sam’s heels, a warm, friendly goodbye shot in Dean’s direction as they left. He knew how to rub people the wrong way when he wanted to. Apparently he had hidden talents too.

“Wasn’t there some part of the plan that involved making nice with my brother?” Sam whispered harshly. “You keep that up and he’s going to be happy when you’re gone.”

The blonde looked over at him as he climbed back on his bike. “I’ll make it up to him.” He said with confidence. “But I really did think he would be taller.”

“He’s like an inch shorter than you.” Sam clamored on behind him.

“And you’re like five inches taller than me- I just assumed he’d be a giant too.”

“I’m six-four.” Sometimes he hated being the tall one.

His arms fit comfortably around Nick’s waist and the other man stiffened slightly at the advanced contact.

“Fine, two inches taller.” He relaxed as Sam let go, putting hands on his waist instead. “But it feels like five. It’s going to make kissing you awkward.”
“We aren’t really going to kiss, Nick.” Sam said, but it was drowned out in the waking growl of the engine.

Nick drove him back to school, and he drove too fast, a little too reckless, almost laying the bike down as they rounded the last corner into one of the side parking lots. They came to a stop and the engine idled. Sam tried to catch his breath and was confused to discover that at some point his arms had found their way back around Nick’s waist.

“It- it doesn’t matter how tall I am, Nick.” He tried to pick up right where they had left off, having this strong feeling that it would do no good to lecture on proper driving speeds. “We aren’t going to actually be kissing at any point.”

Nick looked back over his shoulder, eyes shadowed by his helmet. Expression unreadable. “I know that. And I don’t give a good god damn how tall you are, but in a few days my brother will know you’re some kind of giant- and he’s going to love the fact that I’m shorter than you.”

“I’ve already met Castiel. He knows I’m tall. Apparently it’s my only defining characteristic.”

“No. Gabriel.”

“Why am I going to be meeting him?” From what little had had learned so far about brother number three- Sam had decided it best to avoid him as long as possible.

“He’s going to demand that you and your brother join us for Thanksgiving. And he’s very insistent when he wants something.”

Sam glanced at the time and started to climb off the bike, his legs were even worse this time.

“Why would we be invited to Thanksgiving?”

“Cas already invited your brother and hasn’t gotten a definitive answer yet, but in our family a lack of a ‘no’ is just a ‘yes’ waiting to happen.”

Which was a concerning family treatise if nothing else.

“Thanksgiving’s next week.” Why hadn’t Dean mentioned this to him?

“Which means that next week we will be making eyes at each other over turkey and stuffing while I do my best to ignore Gabriel. You can do it too. It’s not easy, but it’s well worth it. I promise.” The smile was there somewhere hidden in his voice.

“I-“

“Go. You’ll be late for class.” Nick gave him a little shove to get him going.

“I’ll call you.” Sam promised over his shoulder as he took off running.

He thought he heard the words ‘I hope so’ called after him, but he couldn’t be sure. Was almost positive it was just a trick of the wind.

Dean was waiting to pick him up after class got out, black car gleaming under the street lamps. Sam hadn’t even called him yet. His brother was just there.

The passenger door stuck and Sam’s cold numbed fingers struggled with the handle for long enough that Dean started laughing audibly from the cab.

Sam settled in alongside him, closing the door with more force than necessary.
“Hey, Sammy.” Dean cranked up the heater and turned down the stereo. “You learn all the good things tonight?”

“We were invited to Thanksgiving?” He hadn’t intended for it to be the first thing out of his mouth, but it had been pressing on his mind all night.

“What?” Dean’s smile went a little crooked in confusion.

“Nick, he said that Cas invited us to dinner. Are we going?”

Dean’s hands drummed along the steering wheel, nervous gesture for some unknown reason before he put the car in gear and crept from the parking lot, careful to not hit any of the students walking through the dark to their own cars.

“He asked the same night that we ditched you at the restaurant. I was sort of waiting to see how pissed off you were about the whole thing before giving him an answer.”

Normal Thanksgiving dinners, now that it was just the two of them, had been practically nonexistent. The last four years they had treated themselves to those little frozen turkey dinners that come in black plastic trays. It was a bit of a lackluster holiday at best.

“What are you going to tell him?”

“What do you want me to tell him?” Dean easily countered in a way that made it all Sam’s choice. It was a habit of his, neither good nor bad, but pointedly annoying.

Sam looked out the window, black night punctuated by poorly spaced street lamps. He thought about Nick, not about the motorcycle ride, and not about his laugh as warm and dark as a summer night. He thought about the fist fight. He thought about why Nick had seen fit to haul off and punch some weasely little jerk in the face. His reasoning laid out for Sam so casual and concise.

“I’d like to go.” He told his reflection in the window. “I think it’d be nice to have a real dinner.”

“Alright.” Dean said slowly, and Sam knew that his brother was trying to interpret the long silence that came before his answer. “I’ll call Cas in the morning. Tell him to count us in.”

“See if he wants us to bring a bottle of wine or a salad or something.” Sam glanced back at his brother in time to see his eyes light up.

“We’ll bring a pie.”

“A pie?” Sam smiled.

“Two pies.” Dean decided with a grin, all teeth and excitement. “Pumpkin and apple.”

Nothing got him going quite like the promise of dessert.

The regularity of it was almost comforting. Something that Sam could always count on.

“One pie from each of us, don’t I get to pick a flavor?”

“You going to do the baking?”

“No, are you?”

“Yes, and that means apple and pumpkin and you can shut up about it. No one likes that nasty
rhubarb crap except you.”

Sam never knew what to do when his brother got into the kitchen. It was always a bit of an adventure- a rare and exciting adventure.

Dean had been born with some kind of dark kitchen alchemy running through his blood. Maybe he had made a deal with a devil. Maybe it had just been the few extra years he had been allowed with their mom before she died, and she had taught him some tricks that he had never shared with his little brother. It didn’t really matter how he came by his powers, just that he had them and rarely felt the need to use them. Dean hadn’t made a pie for them in years.

He claimed that ones from the grocery store were just as good.

He was, of course lying and they both knew it.

All pies are not created equal.

Sam was suddenly just as thrilled by the prospect of Thanksgiving as his brother seemed to be.

Chapter End Notes

Pardon me for a moment while I ramble—
I used to play pool back when I first started college. There was a pool hall within walking distance from campus and you would be surprised how many nice, beardy old men are willing to pay young, wide eyed girls to have another hour to play. I would go in with enough money for about one game and end up staying for five. It was my favorite thing to do when I should have been studying. Sometimes I think that I project too much of myself into my stories. But I've always imagined Sam and Dean hustling pool for money between hunts. I don't even remember anymore if it's cannon or not. My mind is not always the most accurate of places.
I'll grow old, start acting my age

Chapter Notes

I've been sitting here, my brain mush from lack of sleep, struggling for something good and right and perfect to say to you guys.
All I've got is a thanks.
Just thanks.
So many of you came back for this second story, and there isn't even any kissing yet.
Thanks for being so welcoming to a new writer for this ship, and supportive and just... mmmph <3
This fandom is like a really loving and dysfunctional family.
Y'all are good to me.
I want to keep you.
Applications for snuggle buddies are currently being accepted.
Please be sure to include a recipe for cookies, a picture of Nick Cage, and the title of your favorite MST3K episode.

The heavy baseline of Zeps ‘Moby Dick’ could be felt through the floor boards, up through the bed posts. Sam closed his eyes and took a slow, long suffering breath through his nose. He had gone down stairs an hour ago to tell Dean to turn it down, that he was trying to study.

Dean’s response had been to tell his brother to pull the sick out of his ass and lay off the studying for one god damned night.

He was baking and needed his ‘muse’- because apparently Robert Plant, at upsetting volumes, was necessary for the creative process.

It was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, campus was closed, Sam didn’t have a better place to go where he could bury himself in law books. All he had was his room, which wasn’t far enough from that thrumming base.

He glanced sideways at his phone on the nightstand. It looked so much like a get out of jail card, and Sam wondered if it was wrong that he was even considering using it.

But that had been the lure of this game he was playing with Nick, wasn’t it?

Didn’t they have to spend time together to make the whole thing believable?

Hadn’t Nick offered his apartment for studying?

He dialed and the phone rang through five times, Sam almost gave up, feeling stupid sitting there on his bed, waiting… waiting.

“You’re on speaker phone, darlin’.” Nick’s voice was loud in his ear, if not particularly clear.
“Careful what you say.”

“Hi?” Sam asked hesitantly, not entirely sure who all he was talking to if he was on speaker.
“Say hi, guys.” Nick said and suddenly there was a ruckus roar of male voices. His warm chuckle ebbed back in. “The guys say hi.”

Sam held his phone back from his head, looking at it with some trepidation. “Yeah… you working tonight?”

“I am.”

“Campus is closed until next week and Dean is being an ass. Is there any way I can come study at your place?”

There should have been some hesitation in Nick’s answer, he should have taken some time to consider letting a relative stranger over to his apartment. There was none of that. “Of course. Swing by the shop, I’ll give you my keys.”

“T-thanks.” The word wasn’t big enough to encompass his gratitude. “I’ll be by in a bit.”

It was more like two bits. Dean had been unwilling to lend Sam the car, but at the same time he didn’t want Sam walking or waiting for the bus. They argued until the oven timer went off and Sam took the vaguely inappropriate action of stealing the keys and leaving while his brother was distracted by a pie. He would catch hell for it when he came home later- but right then it was freedom.

He found Nick’s shop right where it was supposed to be, comfortably nestled between a coffee place and an antique store. It was just a little hole in the wall, no sign out front, just the word ‘open’ written in red neon hanging in the window.

Sam parked, angling the boat of a car into a spot halfway down the street. He wasn’t ready to meet Nick’s coworkers, his friends. Granted, tomorrow he would be meeting the man’s family- but that was different somehow. You don’t pick your family; you do pick the people you hire to work for you. It was a different level of ‘personal. Not more. Just different.

The little bell at the top of the door rang and Sam was hit with a comfortable wall of heated air. The place smelled like antiseptic and incense, which was not as stomach churning as one might think. It mixed nicely with the angry bee noise of tattoo guns and classic rock.

A small girl behind an even smaller desk looked up at Sam when he came in. She had a short black mowhawk, red, red lipstick, and a friendly smile.

“Hey, handsome.” She leaned forward on the desk, thin arms folding beneath her chest as she looked up at Sam. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I’m here to see Nick.”

Somehow her smile got even wider. “You must be Sam. He said you were coming by… but he didn’t mention how cute you are.” She dug under the desk and handed over a set of keys. “The boss man said if you showed up while he was still with his seven o’clock, to go ahead and give you these.”

He took the keys, pulling off the one that wasn’t for the man’s motorcycle, handing the rest back. “Thanks.” He couldn’t help but smile at her. She was more the flavor of girl that Dean would typically go after, but just because Sam wasn’t planning to order didn’t meant he couldn’t look at the menu.

“I, uh, don’t actually know where he lives.” He confessed after an overly long bought of eye
contact.

She laughed. “I don’t either. Give me a sec.” She came around the desk in surprisingly tight jeans. I’ll go talk to him- sorry, I can’t let you in the back. Chick he’s working on’s not wearing a shirt.” The little receptionist swaggered down to the back of the shop, passing a small mix of ladies and gents, working or getting work done on them.

Sam stood beside the desk, trying not to look too closely at the four out of six stations where people were actually paying to get ink dug into their skin. He looked instead at the walls, at the paintings. Paintings of all things. He hadn’t expected to find ‘art’ on the walls of a tattoo shop. Some were a bit more abstract, others less so. He found he liked the one that was only a sliver of a young girl’s face, with literal stars in her eyes and water beading on her cheeks and lips, catching in her lashes. It was like she was looking up into a rainstorm.

It was a nice distraction until the receptionist came back with a slip of paper covered in spidery handwriting.

“Here you go. Boss man’s address. He said that you can park in his spot.” She grabbed a pen from a little cup on the desk and wrote on the back of the paper, different handwriting than the front. “And this is my number, in case you have any questions… like whether or not I’m free this weekend.”

Sam grinned, laughing just a little. “Uh, thanks.” And he took the paper from her.

“I am, by the way. Just in case you were curious.”

“Thanks.” He repeated. He thought he heard laughter somewhere from the back of the shop, but when he glanced over everyone was working. “Thanks Nick!” He called, hoping his voice would carry over the music.

The apartment wasn’t too hard to find as all the streets downtown were either numbered or lettered, he just had to look for the right intersection. Luckily it wasn’t too far away. He followed Nick’s poorly written directions, parking in a covered spot with a little white forty-three painted on it. Sam had the joy of hoofing it up three flights of stairs to the fourth floor and letting himself into his soon-to-be-fake-boyfriend’s apartment.

It didn’t feel so much like breaking and entering as it did just generic trespassing, despite the fact that he had been given full permission. Verbal and written. The note in fact told Sam he was welcome to anything in the fridge and to turn on the heater if it was cold.

And it was.

Sam found the thermostat then settled himself into the table, trying not to look around and pass too much judgment on the state of the apartment. It was clean, to the point it looked practically unlived in. Hardly any furniture, no clutter, no mess other than a monthly calendar sitting on the kitchen counter instead of on the wall, and an odd stack of books that seemed to have flooded out of the already packed bookcase in the corner beside the lumpy plaid couch. It was an odd apartment, not uncomfortable, just odd.

But as he dug out his textbooks he remembered the conversation that they had had their first night in the restaurant. Apparently Nick really had meant it when he said that he spent the majority of his time away from home. Saying that he ‘lived at work’ had seemed like an exaggeration, now it seemed a lot closer to the truth.

All of that aside- it was quiet.
Soft purr of the heater kicking in, dry sound of pages turning.

It was like he had died and gone to study-heaven.

He got lost for a few hours, ignoring Dean’s phone calls, putting his cell on silence and just basking in the silence.

He almost jumped out of his skin when there was a knock at the door.

“Little pig, little pig. Let me come in.” Nick sang softly from out in the hall. “It’s colder than a witch’s tit out here.”

Sam got up and unlocked the door with a grin. “I don’t think that’s how it goes.”

“It is tonight.” Nick handed Sam his helmet and shouldering his way into the apartment. “Oh, bless your soul, you beautiful man. You turned the heater on.” He smiled over his shoulder, hair mashed down, cheeks ruddy. “If you start a pot of coffee while I’m in the shower I might propose.”

“I will start the coffee only if you promise not to propose.” Sam set the helmet on the counter and looked around the empty kitchen for a coffee maker that he didn’t see. “You sure you want coffee, it’s after midnight?”

“I want to be warm.” Nick announced, pulling off his jacket and tossing it onto the couch. He looked marginally smaller without the leather jacket, left with just a tshirt and flannel in washed out colors. “Shower now. Coffee after. Sleep later.”

“Whatever you want.” Sam shrugged and started digging through the cabinets, looking for and finally finding a coffee maker. If the man wanted to be strung out on caffeine in the middle of the night then it was his choice.

Sam would be his enabler.

He was good like that.

Ten minutes later Nick was back, hair still wet from the shower, and for the first time Sam saw his arms bare. His shirt sleeves were pushed up, almost to his elbows, showing beautiful colors and complex patterns.

Sam held out a chipped mug and Nick took it with an almost greedy look in his eyes.

“How many of those do you have?” He nodded towards the tattoos curiously.

“Three.” The man grunted into his mug.

Sam raised a questioning eyebrow, looking at the artistic mess.

“There were more, they sort of bled together over the years. Now I’ve just got one on each arm.”

“Where’s the third?”

Nick just winked over his mug, eyes glinting.

Sam shook his head and returned to his books.

“Aw, come on. You just going to not respond to that?”
“Studying.”
“How late are you planning to be studying?”
“How late can I stay?”

Nick almost threw himself down onto the couch, sitting sideways with his long legs stretched out across the cushions, mug held high so as not to spill any. “As late as you want. I’ll be up for another few hours. I’m always a bit buzzed after work.” He pulled a tablet out from beneath the couch, as suitable of a hiding place as any.

“Thanks again, Nick.”

“Phf.” He let out a dismissive breath before setting his tablet on crooked knees and turning some movie on at a low volume. “Just le’ me know if I’m being too loud.”

A quiet movie was oddly more distracting that one at a normal volume might have been. Sam found himself straining to hear what was going on, trying to figure out what Nick was watching.

“How is Silence of the … because it’s about eating.” Sam answered his own question with a shake of his head. “That’s not ok.”

“It’s festive.” Was Nick’s weak excuse.

“Cannibals are festive?” Sam tapped his pencil on his notebook.

“You worship in your way, I’ll do it in mine.”

“But… Thanksgiving isn’t a religious holiday.”

Nick kept up his long distant eye contact, taking in each and every flicker that moved over Sam’s face. “Does this mean that you’re done studying?”

Sam kind of laughed, looking away, thinking that if nothing else, allowing himself to be so easily distracted meant that it was probably time for a break- if not just time to call it quits for the night.

“Yeah. I think I’ve earned a break.” He finally relented, tossing his pencil in between the pages of his notebook before shutting it.

“Get yourself something to drink and come over here. I’ll scoot.”

It wasn’t a matter of scooting over, on account of the man was laying the full length of the couch. But Sam got himself half a mug’s worth of coffee and came over. Nick lifted his legs and Sam didn’t really consider what he was doing as he sat down where the man’s feet had been. Maybe he just expected Nick to sit up like a normal person- he certainly didn’t expect to suddenly have the man’s legs sprawled over his.

And it wasn’t that Dean didn’t do this kind of thing to Sam all the time, it was just that he didn’t know that he and Nick were already at this point of comfortable physical contact.

“Hey-”
“Give me a sec.” Nick positioned the tablet on the coffee table, folding the case to make a nifty little stand so that it was at an angle that they could both see. “There.”

Sam considered doing something about the shins that were laying over his thighs, then he realized that over the next few months the touching between the two of them was quite possibly going to get far more varied and interesting- so he decided that he would ignore it like the lesser sin that it was and just enjoy the movie.

And he did enjoy it, or at least the small portion of it that he did see before falling asleep.

Sam woke up when his shoulders were suddenly cold, a blanket he couldn’t remember curling up with, slipping down to pool around his waist. He stretched and looked around the room, empty except for the morning sunlight streaming in through a little window over the kitchen sink.

He was alone on the couch with a heavy blanket and a mug of cold coffee.

Nick had tucked him in and let him sleep on his couch.

Sam found himself smiling until he remembered that he hadn’t let Dean know he was going to be out over night.

Twenty three missed calls.

Eight voicemails.

Nineteen texts.

Oh, Sam wished that he hadn’t pulled his phone from his pocket.

There was trouble, then there was twenty-missed-calls trouble.

He could either go straight home and face the furry that was his big brother, which could involve bodily damage-

Or he could call him back from the safety of Nick’s.

Dean picked up on the first ring. “Sammy? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I’m sorry, I fell asleep.”

“Where the fuck did you go and why weren’t you answering your god damned phone?” All the worry rushed from Dean in the wake of his understandable anger.

“I went to a friend’s to study and I turned the ringer off.” Sam tried not to yell back, firstly because it wouldn’t help, and second because Nick was probably in his room sleeping.

“You left last night. You could have fucking called me if you were gunna’ stay out all night with my car. You better not have parked her on the street or something. If someone scratched her I’m going to kill you.”

“The car’s fine, Dean.” Sam said without even knowing for any certainty.

Dean made a frustrated sound. “You going to be home soon?”

“What time is it?” He rubbed at his face, stretching again, trying to get the kinks from his shoulders.
“Almost ten.” Dean was still biting off his words, anger in each syllable.

“Sorry. Yeah. I’ll be home in a bit.”

“I swear to god, Sam.” That was it. The whole sentence.

“Bye.” Sam said hurriedly, hanging up, knowing that he had a small window to get back home that would land him between when Dean calmed down enough to be reasonable and when he started to get angry because he was still waiting.

He folded the blanket, not sure where it came from, so not knowing where to put it. He settled for the arm of the couch. The coffee cup got rinsed and left in the sink. Sam was collecting his books, shoving them back into his book bag when Nick came out of his room.

Now, despite what his brother might think or say from time to time about him- Sam had never considered himself to be particularly sentimental.

Apparently Nick stumbling around, half asleep, in flannel pants, and a Johnny Cash tshirt, was an exception. For a full grown man, heavily tattooed and with occasionally salty language- he was adorable. His eyes were bleary, squinting against the sunlight, his hair was pressed up on one side, messy from sleeping with it wet.

“’morning.” He mumbled, leaning against the door frame, rubbing sleep from one eye with the heel of his hand.

“Hey. Thanks for letting me stay over last night.”

“It’s part of the plan, right?”

A sinking feeling. “Oh, god. I stayed over last night.”

With a ‘friend’ there was no implication, nothing sinister that could be inferred from that… but staying with someone you would soon be telling people you are ‘dating’?

Nick stopped rubbing at his eye to fully look at Sam, a slow realization breaking over him. “Well… does this make us official?”

“It hasn’t been long enough yet.”

Nick started laughing.

“It’s not funny. I’ve only known you two weeks.”

Nick was all grin and no apology. “And we may as well tell people had sex last night.”

“But we didn’t.”

“Everyone is going to assume that we did.”

“But we didn’t.” Sam insisted. It was like arguing with a brick wall. A particularly stubborn one that refused to listen to reason.

“It only took two weeks for you to give into all those secret yearnings, Sam.”

“I didn’t.”
“And in a few weeks when we announce that we’re a couple? Who’s going to believe that you stayed the night last night to just ‘study’?”

“Dean will.” Sam assured himself. “He trusts me.”

“He trusts his trampy brother?”

“I’m not- shut up.” He pulled his bag over a shoulder. “And nothing happened. I studied. That’s all.”

“Right…” He said in quiet disbelief. “I took a shower and then we cuddled on the couch.”

“That wasn’t cuddling.”

Nick looked at him knowingly, sort of undermining the expression with a yawn.

“It wasn’t. You’re the one with the, with the crazy legs- I was just sitting there.”

Nick laughed again, a low chuckle as he shrugged, arms wide in surrender. “Let’s just go with it.”

“No. It’s too soon.” Sam insisted again.

Nick sighed deeply. Frustrated. “If you say so- but you’re missing out. I’m a fantastic lay.”

“I’ll be sure to let everyone know. But not for another few weeks.” He said with eyes rolled towards heaven, asking silently for strength.

Nick grinned again, a quick flash of teeth before looking away.

“I’ve got to get going. Dean’s already freaking out.”

Nick gave him a gentle shove out of the kitchen. “I’ll see you in a few hours. We can eat and awkwardly not make eye contact.”

“I’m good at that.” Sam confessed.

“I noticed.”

Sam smiled over his shoulder, trying not to laugh, because he knew it would come out weird and strained. “Shut up.”

Of all the ways to say goodbye, Nick blew him a kiss, just a slight pursing of his lips, but unmistakable. Sam left, hanging his head, not sure exactly how to feel about any of this- and he got to keep that confused feeling all the way home.

Dean was waiting on the porch and Sam knew that he had missed that little window where it was safe to come home.

Sheepishly, Sam handed over the keys.

Dean didn’t say anything, just went back inside.

“I’m sorry.” Sam called out as he followed. “I was studying and lost track of time.”

“Don’t- alright?” Dean stalked into the kitchen, all tense and annoyed. “I don’t want to hear about your lame ass studying. It’s great that you’re such a good student and all- but you’re an adult now, Sam. You could at least stay out late having a good time for once. Hanging out with friends, going
to parties, touching girls. You’re in college, you should at least act like it. It’s embarrassing for both of us.”

It wasn’t the first time that they had had this conversation.

Dean meant well.

He wanted his brother to be happy.

In fact, Dean’s good intentions were exactly how Sam had found himself in the awkward deal with Nick.

Sam stood in the kitchen doorway, watching his big brother getting two pies from the fridge, adjusting the aluminum foil that he had covered them with.

“If it helps- I went to a friend’s place to study. We ended up watching a movie before I fell asleep.”

“Was it a chick’s place?” Dean’s eyes lit up for a moment.

“No- it was Nick’s.”

Dean got a complicated look, like he wanted to keep smiling, but thought better of it. “You two really hit if off- didn’t you?”

Bodies are traitorous- and Sam realized he was blushing. There was no reason for it. None at all. Just the thought of Nick, of their conversation that morning, of what they were pretending had or hadn’t happened between them.

Why was his face hot?

Oh, god. What was wrong with him?

Dean had this little smile, something crooked and curious and awful.

“We get along alright.” Sam said quickly and left the kitchen. “I’m going to get a shower before we get going.”

That was one of the problems with a proper Thanksgiving dinner- apparently people didn’t eat it at dinner time. They were supposed to be there by noonish, and because they were going to go in Cas’ car, and were driving out to Half Moon Bay, they needed to leave sooner rather than later. Apparently they would be helping with… things?

The little accountant was waiting downstairs by the time that Sam had showered and dressed in clothes that didn’t look like he’d slept in them. Dean had also changed clothes, which was surprising for some reason. He looked… nice. It wasn’t like his brother had put on a tie or anything as horrifying. But he’d brushed his hair.

Sam didn’t even know that Dean owned a brush.

“Hello, Sam.” Cas’ voice was just as low and startling as it had always been. His smile was so soft and warm. Such a gentle guy. And Sam thought for a second that there was no similarity between this man and his gruff and sassy older brother, other than maybe in those blue, blue eyes. They were the same eyes.

“Hey, Castiel.” He smiled back, easy and honest. “Thanks for the invitation.” He really meant it. It
wasn’t often that him and Dean were invited to someone’s house… in fact, he couldn’t think of the last time that they’d been to anything like this since coming to California.

The dark haired man smiled with his whole body, if such a thing were possible. He just lit up, looking between the brothers. “Thank you for talking Dean into it. He seemed very reluctant. But it’s the time of year where it’s best to be with friends and families.”

“Better with friends than with family.” Nick said from near the front door and Sam wished that he didn’t jump as badly as he did. Startled, because he hadn’t even noticed that the room had a fourth occupant. “We can just stay here.” He suggested.

Castiel sighed, like this was not a new argument. “No, Nick. We promised Michael we’d be there.”

“But we’ve got pies, Cas.” Nick said in a way that was meant to be tempting. “Sam’s told me all about Dean’s pies. They are the sort of pies worth ditching Michael for.”

Castiel simply turned his back on his brother, brushing him off so easily, and smiled up at Dean instead. The two standing very close together. “Do you need help carrying anything?”

Dean smiled at his friend in a way that Sam felt that you shouldn’t smile at a friend. It made Sam uncomfortable and he didn’t know why.

“Yeah, come on.” He went to the kitchen, Castiel following, presumably to get pies.

Sam looked over at Nick, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion. He wanted to ask if the man had seen the weird exchange, but Nick didn’t know Dean well enough to have a point of reference for odd behavior. “Hello.” He offered instead.

Nick nodded, hands in his jacket pocket. He looked marginally awkward and Sam didn’t know if it was honest, or if it was just him playing it up because their brothers were coming back into the room.

“Come on, Sammy. Get your shoes on and let’s go.” Dean was carrying to pies like they were his first born children. “And leave your books. No homework.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He did his best to follow directions in the most belligerent was possible. Taking his time—until he realized that he wasn’t just being childish in front of Dean— he had a full audience. With a sense of purpose he got on his shoes and his jacket and they were ready to go.

His brother put a pie in his arms, and Sam realized that there were three pies.

“I thought you were only making two?” He wondered if he would be able to peek under the foil without Dean yelling at him.

“Car, Sammy.” His brother instructed firmly, pushing him out the door and locking up once everyone else joined them on the porch.

“Pumpkin and two apples?” Sam knew his brother’s favorite. It wouldn’t be surprising if he made himself an extra pie.

“Pumpkin, apple, and rhubarb, bitch.” Dean announced before calling shotgun— which was unfair because it meant that Sam had to fit his long, long legs into the back seat of Castiel’s bubbly little blue Prius. The tiny car was like a sullen eco friendly reminder parked beside the Impala.
“Jerk.” He answered automatically, but there was no force in it. Sam climbed carefully into the backseat, mindful of the pie he was holding that his brother had made specifically for him.

The car ride could have been more uncomfortable. It could have been longer. Half an hour wasn’t so bad.

Sam sat behind his brother, listening to him chatting along to Castiel about everything and nothing. It was good to see his brother interacting with a friend, but it left him sitting on the outside of things.

He must have got some expression on his face along those lines, Nick’s knee bumped into his and when Sam glanced over they shared a little smile.

The older man held up his phone and Sam got the idea.

If their brothers could get all caught up in each other then they could as well.

-I’ve got rhubarb pie :)

Sam sent and Nick’s shoulders shook in a silent laugh.

-ppl actually eat rhubarb?

Nick sent back.

-Be that way

-I’m not sharing with you

He punctuated with a firm knee bump. They shared another smile, but Dean was laughing and Sam couldn’t help but look at the back of his brother’s head.

-theyre cute together

Sam looked at his phone as it vibrated in his hand, then at the men in the front seats. They’re cute. Both laughing and smiling- but to him it was more strange than anything else.

Something Nick had said back at the pool hall, something about Castiel that Sam had never really considered.

-does your brother like my brother??

Nick didn’t text back, he just gave Sam a meaningful look like the answer was too obvious for words.

‘oh’ Sam mouthed silently, no idea what to do with that information. It didn’t make him feel any different about the accountant, other than maybe a little pity for him. If there was one person straighter than Sam, it was his big brother.

It was better not to dwell, because there was nothing that Sam could do about it now.

…now?

Or ever.

If Dean’s friend had a crush on him, it wasn’t any of Sam’s business.
He had enough things to worry about right now.

Nick’s knee still pressed against his was one of those things.

-Cas talks about him ALL THE TIME

-I know more about your brother than I do about u

Sam looked at his phone, smiling at the notion because frowning wouldn’t change anything.

-we will have to fix that

And they did, or at least they made some excellent headway while Castiel drove them ever closer to the ocean. Nick asked questions, Sam gave answers, divulging all his lesser known secrets. From his boring childhood in dusty, dry Kansas, to playing soccer in jr. high, taking home stray dogs that his dad wouldn’t let him keep, stealing fireworks with Dean, and almost burning down a field in mid September when they finally set them off.

Nick’s leg never left his, a nice, solid constant as they rambled down the occasionally very bumpy highway.

It wasn’t just a one way exchange. Sam got to ask questions too, typically just turning around whatever was asked him. As such, he found out that Nick had been born out on the East coast, never played sports, but took violin lessons for almost ten years (which Sam found oddly difficult to believe), never owned any pets, had been arrested once and kept overnight on a drunk and disorderly charge when he was twenty, and once his family had gone camping out in Yosemite and his brother said he saw a bear- but Nick didn’t believe him.

It was just all the stupid things that you talk about when you’re trying to get to know someone new.

“There are totally bears out in Yosemite.” Sam whispered, not sure why they were so determined to keep quiet in the backseat.

“I’m not saying there aren’t.” Nick whispered back like a secret. “I’m just saying he didn’t see one.”

“You’re not talking about the bears again. Are you, Nick?” Castiel interrupted loudly, and Sam could see his gaze on them in the rearview mirror.

“There weren’t any bears.” Nick slapped the back of his brother’s headrest.

“It was twenty years ago.” Castiel said with a sigh. “Let it go.”

“I will when he admits he was lying.”

“You’re not going to bring it up tonight, are you?”

Nick looked to be struggling to keep a straight face, glancing as Sam for support, then away. “I’ll behave.”

“You better. Last time someone brought up that camping trip punches were thrown.”

Sam couldn’t help himself, he started laughing, just quiet and he thought that he hid it well enough- but Nick’s knee jostled his almost violently.
“Shh.” Nick hissed, such a serious turn to his mouth that at all didn’t match the glint in his eyes. “It’s not funny, Sam. Castiel made us sit in the corner until we were willing to apologize.”

Dean was chuckling now too.

“I didn’t make you do anything.” Cas’ voice was even yet exasperated. “You and Michael are both adults. I just think it would be nice if you acted like it now and then.”

Nick, being the adult that he was, older brother and all, stuck his tongue out at Castiel.

It was a good car ride.

And perhaps Sam could have happily suffered with cramped legs through another hour or so of it.

They arrived at Gabriel’s house, and it was close enough to the ocean that when they opened the car doors they could hear the waves, smell the salt in the air.

Dean let out a low whistle, taking in the house that wasn’t all that big, but from the location alone it must have cost almost at least half a million. “What does your brother do for work again?”

“Mostly embezzles and blackmails, last I heard.” Nick said so soft only Sam could hear him.

“He’s a lawyer.” Castiel answered Dean with a happy smile, taking one of the pies and leading the way to the house. “It’s come in handy a few times.”

And Sam thought he caught a meaningful look shot back to Nick.

Nick only rolled his eyes and shut the door to the car once he was sure Sam was free.

They didn’t get all that far before he leaned up into Sam, their shoulders brushing, close enough that his breath ghosted over Sam’s neck. “Promise you won’t leave me alone with these people.”

“They’re your family.” Sam chided. Trying not to smile. Trying not to encourage him.

“Promise me.” The humor was still there in Nick, but underneath it was something else. Something too close to anxiety.

For a moment He said nothing, just stood there, startled by the visible cracks in the other man. Vulnerability where he hadn’t expected to find any.

Sam leaned in, even closer- close enough that his lips brushed Nick’s cheek, though it wasn’t intentional. “I promise.”
A heart that's harder than stone

Chapter Notes

I couldn't bring myself to name someone Kali.... like, people don't really name their kids after deities, right??
In an AU I really struggle with names like that (or like Lucifer- anyone who would actually name their son Lucifer is a horrible parent, just saying).
So for visualization purposes, when you see 'Rekha' know that it's actually Kali. I like to think that (for this story) her and Gabriel never actually ever got married, but they've been 'dating' since like third grade or something. Been together for so long that they just call it marriage, because why not.

... and sorry this chapter took so long.
but it's a big chapter, so it balances out. right?

The curtains in the widow fluttered as they walked up the driveway and Sam thought he saw a small pale face. Before any of them could knock on the door it was flung wide, a small girl with high pigtails and a sweater the same copper red as her hair, facing them like a foul tempered gatekeeper.

“You are late.” Her cubby little fists were planted firmly on her tiny hips, as if she planned to bar the door against them.

Nick was the only one that seemed completely unsurprised. He kept walking, stalking up to the child, well over twice her height, and scooped her up like a football, easily tucking her little body up under an arm.

“We're early, monster.” Nick informed her with a gentle shake. “I just missed you so much- I made Uncle Cas drive extra fast so we could get here sooner.”

“Uncle Cas?” She peered around Nick’s elbow, looking from one man to the next until she found the familiar face. “Do you have candy for me?”

“I have pie.” Cas told the girl with a smile. “And you can have a piece after dinner.”

She seemed to consider this, looking very thoughtful and completely unfazed as Nick easily turned her upside down and took her into the house.

The entry way was all tiled floors and vaulted ceilings. White and cream and all the kinds of colors and cleanliness that one doesn’t normally associate with small children- despite the pile of little bitty shoes beside the door.

“Is it chocolate pie?” The little girl asked as she dangled from Nick’s arms, looking like it was the most comfortable orientation to be in.

“It’s apple.” Cas offered a fair substitute, before smiling up at the Winchesters. “Hannah, this is Mr. Dean and Mr. Sam. Can you say hi?”

She pouted instead, disapproving little mouth. “Do they have chocolate pie?”
“Sorry, kiddo.” Dean apologized, trying to fight a smile of his own. “Pumpkin and rhubarb.”

She looked like she was going to say something, but Nick tossed her up into the air, taking advantage of the vaulted ceiling to get some good air on her. She squealed in delight and hugged Nick around the neck when he caught her.

He gave her a squeeze like it was the most natural thing in the world before setting her on the ground. “Monster, go tell mom that we’re here, ok?”

She took off running at a full tilt, slipping on the tiles with her white socks, catching herself on walls and corners as she vanished down the hall.

Sam thought that she was perhaps one of the cutest things that he had ever seen, and almost said as much but Nick was looking back at him with a decidedly sober expression. “Michael’s youngest.” He explanation.

“Castiel? Nick?” A woman came down the hall, same red hair as the little girl who had run to get her.

“And that is Michael’s wife.” He whispered to Sam like a warning. “Brace yourself.”

And for a moment, Sam didn’t understand the last part, but the woman had closed the distance, stalking the short hall with fierce intent. As soon as she reached them she pulled Cas into a hug, mindful of the pie, kissing his cheeks. Without any regard for the fact that they were strangers, the woman moved down the line, hugging and kissing Dean, then Sam, and finally Nick. She talked the whole time, a long practiced lecture.

“You should have called and said you were going to be early. Oh, Castiel, you look like exhausted. Did they make you drive? I know you hate taking the Five. And you boys- don’t listen to whatever Nick’s been telling you about me, I don’t bite. You both are far too tall, you’ll have to meet me half way.” This was said as she tugged both brothers down, one at a time, to kiss their cheeks. (Which Sam didn’t know how to feel about, but Dean looked to be thoroughly enjoying.)

“And you-” she hadn’t let go of Nick, lingering in a hug that was a lot closer to a strangle hold. “We don’t see you in almost a year and you don’t even bother to shave before coming.”

“I’ve shaved since last year.” Nick was like a bear, folding around the much smaller woman, enveloping her in long arms and broad shoulders until she almost disappeared. “Just maybe not since Monday.”

She made a soft annoyed noise. “How is it your brother and these nice young men all brought dessert and you brought nothing but sass?”

“Hey, I also brought the nice young men.” He kissed her forehead in such a tender way before giving her the same parting squeeze he had given her daughter. “Oh, god. You’re pregnant again, aren’t you?”

She hit him firmly in the chest before letting him go. “You’re awful.”

“Sorry, you must just be putting on weight.” Nick offered as an apology- which was so much worse.

Sam didn’t have all that much practice with women, and even he knew how wrong that was- but judging by the wicked little smile that the blonde was wearing it was obvious that he knew it too.
Cas’ eyes went wide, in something like horror. “Anna, should we just put the pies in the kitchen?” A distraction with the intent of saving his big brother.

“Just hand it over and go find your nieces.” She pulled the pie from him. “They’ve been looking forward to seeing you all day.”

Castiel grinned at the order. “Yes, mam.” He started to wander off, but looked over his shoulder at Dean, sort of questioningly- and Dean followed, little apology to Nick as he passed off the pie he was holding, little smile at Anna, a wink at Sam, and then he was just as gone as Cas.

“And don’t give them candy.” Anna called after them. She shook her head and sighed before scowling at Nick with the smallest hint of a smile in her eyes. “Come on.” She led the way. “And which one are you?” She asked over her shoulder.

“I’m Sam.” He smiled and looked over at Nick, almost for approval and he didn’t know why. But Nick smiled back, a quiet little thing just for the two of them.

“You’re the poor sap that had to go on a date our Nick.” She set her pie down on the kitchen counter, and smiled sympathetically up at him. “He’s not so bad once the shock wears off.”

Sam set his pie on the counter too, a nice collection of pastries. “He’s growing on me.” Which was close enough to the truth that he didn’t mind saying it.

“He does that.” She sighed, looking up at Nick, placing a hand on her slightly rounded belly. “You know, I told Michael if it’s another girl I want to name her after you.”

Nick got a confused look, eyes narrowing as he reached out to touch his sister-in-law’s stomach with his fingertips. “You’re going to name her… Nick?”

“Luci.” She corrected with a wide, innocent smile.

The insult was lost on Sam but he watched in fascination as Nick bristled like a cat rubbed the wrong way.

“I could have stayed home today.” He pointed out to her in a soft voice, not exactly angry, but certainly no longer friendly.

“We haven’t seen you since Easter, Nick, and your brothers have missed you. They’ll be happy to see that Castiel talked you into coming down.” She continued, undaunted. “Now why don’t you and Legs here go set the table? Rekha got out the dishes but then she went out to have a smoke. Gabriel followed and I have a feeling we won’t see either of them for at least half an hour.” They traded a meaningful look which was a little less lost on Sam.

“They’re really doing that with your kids in the house?”

“We’ve been here visiting them for almost a week. You know they can’t keep their hands to themselves for more than a few days.”

Nick shook his head and went to the small mountain of dishes on the end of one counter. “And where’s Michael?”

“Upstairs.” She went to stir something on the stove. “The plastic dishes are for the kid’s table.”

“I’ve set the table before, Anna.” The gruffness was already fading, settling for something more long suffering and tired.
“Well, we’ve got four people at the little table today. I just wanted to make sure that you set it right.”

“You’ve only got the three kids.” Nick handed a stack of plates to Sam before collecting an armful of glasses.

“Gabriel has been banished.”

Nick got a little smile, corners of his eyes crinkling.

“I still can’t believe that he set you up on a date with a guy- no offence.” She added, giving Sam a quick once over and a sly smile before looking back at Nick. “The man can’t stand seeing you alone. I swear, he’d date you himself if he thought you’d go for it.”

Nick made a retching noise as he left the room.

“At least he picked a nice looking one.” Anna said soft enough that it was probably not meant to carry far enough to reach Nick. “I’m glad that you both got a friend out of it at least.”

Sam stood awkwardly with the plates, “How did you know about that whole…”

“When Castiel called a few days ago to tell us you and your brother were coming to dinner it all sort of just came out… he worries about things. About Nick’s temper and how mad he really was about the blind date. Apparently he fears retaliation of sorts.”

“I-I don’t think we’re planning anything that Cas needs to worry about.”

“Don’t let her suck you in, Sam.” Nick called from the dining room. “She’s a gossip and a flirt. Ignore whatever she’s telling you and bring me those plates.”

Sam grinned sheepishly and left Anna to her stirring. He carefully set out the plates in the oddly formal dining room. “She’s… nice.”

“She’s scared the hell out of me since Highschool.” Nick confessed as he set little red and blue and purple cups down at a little card table in the corner. “Her and Michael started dating our Junior year. She was my lab partner in Biology and over a dead frog she told me that she was going to marry the jerk once we graduated.”

“That’s almost sweet.”

“Nothing sweet about a dead frog.” Nick nudged him, warmth down Sam’s whole left side. “You watch what you say around her. She’s nosy.”

Sam found himself nudging back, liking the contact, liking to be close enough to see the little flickers of humor that passed like shadows over Nick. He decided that you had to get close to really appreciate them.

“Why’d she call you Luci?”

Nick showed his teeth in an underrated snarl. “It’s what Michael and Gabriel used to call me when we were kids.”

“But not Cas?”

“Cas didn’t come to live with us until he was almost old enough to drive. He missed out on the name calling faze.” Nick watched Sam, answering the inevitable question before it could even be
asked. “We’ve all got different mothers. Michael, me, and Gabriel were born just a few weeks apart. Little Cas is almost six years younger than us. Dad traveled a lot when he was young and he’s probably got quite a few more kids than us four. We’re just the only ones whose got dumped here.”

Sam touched Nick’s arm. It wasn’t that the man had sounded particularly sad or angry when he gave his lineage. There was actually a stunning lack of emotion, of anything at all when he spoke.

It was the same stoniness that Dean got when he talked about their mom, or John. One parent dead and the other an alcoholic that neither of them had seen in the four years since leaving Kansas. It was like a quiet wall settling into place whenever either of them were mentioned, and it hurt Sam to see the same reaction in someone other than Dean. Dean he knew how to fix, knew how to help. Nick was still new and unfamiliar.

Nick rolled his lower lip under, biting with just a hint of teeth. Aggravated little flash of white. “Dad had a very specific taste in women- regardless of what state he was touring in. Apparently he liked them cheep and not particularly maternal.”

“Touring?”

“He’s a writer. Or he was. He hasn’t put out a new book in years. Now he just goes on these long trips to… find himself or whatever the fuck it is that senile old men do once their kids have grown up and left home.”

“Uncle Nick!” The redheaded kid, Michael’s youngest, was in the doorway, her hands full of forks. “That’s a bad word.”

“God damn it.” Nick mumbled in Sam’s direction before forcing a smile for the child’s benefit. “It is, but I didn’t mean it. You don’t have to-”

“Mommy! Uncle Nick said fuck!” She yelled as she ran from the room, all excited, knowing that someone was going to get in trouble.

Sam tried so hard not to laugh, and he might have made it if Nick hadn’t turned to him with such a dangerous expression.

“This is your fault.” He accused even if they both knew there was no way he could properly be blamed.

“That was all you.” He chuckled, shifting his grip from resting against Nick’s arm to holding his sleeve, tugging on him. “I’m just here, trying to set the table and be a supportive boyfriend. You’re the one dropping f-bombs.”

Anna stormed into the dining room like a force of nature. Cheeks flushed with anger, brandishing a wooden spoon flecked with little bits of bread. “Nick-“

“I’m sorry.” He said quickly.

“We’ve only got two rules for family get togethers.”

“I didn’t know she was there.”

“You’ve been here less than an hour and you’ve already got the five year old swearing like a sailor.” She shook the spoon for emphasis. “If Michael heard her-“

He held his arms out wide in surrender. “It’s just a word, Anna.”
She took two very threatening steps towards him, spoon held up like she planned to smite him down. “You-”

Nick gently took the spoon away. “I won’t tell him, and you won’t tell him.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “And me and Sam will set the table.”

She swatted at him with open hands. “You promise me you’ll behave yourself or I’ll find a way to fit you in at the kid’s table too.” She took her spoon back and looked at Sam. “Same goes for you.”

“Yes, mam.” Sam nodded seriously to her, not wanting to get threatened with the spoon because he didn’t think that he would be able to keep himself safe with gentle words and a kiss.

She poked Nick once with the bowl of the spoon, sharp tap in the middle of his chest. “You only get the one warning, Nick. I won’t hesitate to take you out back and give you what for.” She turned on her heels, herding her daughter with her back to the kitchen.

Sam waited until he was sure she was out of earshot. “She’ll give you ‘what for’?”

Nick shrugged like it wasn’t a fight he thought he could win, so why bother trying. “Come on, there’s some more silverware and stuff still on the counter.”

“What’s the second rule for family get togethers?” Sam followed the blonde back to the kitchen.

“The only rules are no booze and no swearing.” A man who wasn’t Nick answered. He was leaning over the counter, investigating the pies but spared a moment to look up with the most crooked smirk Sam had ever seen. Shaggy blonde hair and eyes so pale brown that they were almost amber. “Which one did you break first, Nick?”

Sam glanced over at his friend to see a strange look pass over Nick, complicated emotions that he couldn’t read settling into something unpleasant.

“Hello, Gabriel.” Nick said his brother’s name like it tasted bitter.

“Hello to you too.” He set the aluminum foil back into place, seemingly satisfied with his examination. He pushed himself up from the counter, standing at his full height, which was considerably less than his brother. He held his arms out wide, asking for a hug that he was never going to get.

The brothers looked at each other for a minute that threatened to stretch on into an eternity.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Gabriel broke first, dropping his arms in favor of eyeing Sam with a friendly expression. “Or at least tell me how tall I need to be to ride that ride?”

“This is the Sam Winchester you talked Cas into throwing at me.” Nick collected the last few odds and ends that needed to go to the table, handing half of them off to Sam.

“Oh.” Gabriel’s eyes lit up, giving Sam a complete once over. “Oh Nick. You are so welcome.” He turned back to his brother with a grin.

“With all respect for Anna, you can go screw yourself.” Nick managed to smile in anger, which was as fascinating as it was disturbing.

“Nick.” Anna warned without even look up from the stove.

“Screw isn’t a bad word.” He pointed out as he left the room, forcing Sam to take long strides to
keep up. “Technically, neither is bastard. It’s in the bible.”

“Ass is also in the bible.” Gabriel offered helpfully as he followed them. “As in, you’re an ungrateful ass.” He looked at the table setting and adjusted one of the glasses that Nick had sat down earlier, moving it to the other side of the plate.

“I remember specifically telling you to stop setting me up on dates.” Nick moved the glass back to where he had first set it.

“Come on, we both know I wasn’t listening. And isn’t it great that I didn’t? Look at him. He’s gorgeous.”

The younger Winchester stood there awkwardly, handing over silverware as needed. “Thanks?”

“I don’t see why everyone’s pissed at me for finding a way to introduce you two. So what if you’re a guy? Attractive is attractive.” Gabriel winked at Sam, which wasn’t as charming as the few times that Nick had done it. “And despite all his protests of being ‘straight’ my brother still likes you well enough to invite you to dinner, so I say it worked out perfectly.”

“Cas invited him and his brother.” Nick set down the last bit of cutlery with a firm thunk. “It had nothing to do with me.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes so hard it must have hurt. “Don’t be like that, Nick. You’ll hurt his feelings.” He pushed at his brother and smiled apologetically at Sam. “He doesn’t mean it, you know. Once you get past his hard shell you’ll find he’s got this soft gooey center.”

Nick gestured rudely at his brother, and for whatever that’s worth, it probably didn’t count as a bad word since he didn’t say it out loud.

And Sam found himself struggling again not to laugh. Nick had shown himself to be many things in the short time that they had known each other- but soft and gooey he was not.

“He’s like a bear trap with a kitten in the middle.” Gabriel added, which was almost certainly meant to be affectionate, but just provided a very bizarre mental image.

“Kittens are soft and gooey?” Sam grinned and it was almost like a betrayal to Nick who looked on the close end of murderous.

“No analogy is perfect, kido.” Gabriel said conspiratorially. “Neither is any kitten, or big brother for that matter.” He was standing between Sam and Nick, looking up at the younger man. It put his back to his big brother and meant that he didn’t see those hands coming for his neck.

Sam narrowed his eyes at Nick, giving a little shake of his head because strangulation wasn’t a good solution.

“But I don’t need to tell you about our Nick’s good points.” Gabriel said in a sing song voice. “Apparently you already know. I heard that you stayed over at his place last night.”

Before Sam could fumble through that accusation Gabriel floated away, drifting on light feet towards a woman who apparently had been standing behind Sam.

If Anna was lovely in the way that foxy moms can be sometimes, with bright eyes and high, soft cheeks- this new woman was lovely like a goddess. Some glorious creature that had descended down into the unworthy dining room. Dark, smoky eyes, a spill of black wavy hair and skin the color of strong tea.
Gabriel took her hand, so reverently, raising it to his lips to kiss the gold rings on her long fingers.

“I think you are the main reason that he doesn’t come to visit more than twice a year.” She sighed and pulled her hand away, brushing Gabriel off in favor of his older brother.

Nick took her into the same easy, brotherly hug as he had Anna, but kissing her cheeks instead of her forehead. He closed his eyes and just held her for a second, and Sam felt a strange little stir of something that couldn’t be jealousy, but at the same time he couldn’t think of a better thing to call it.

With an almost husky voice, Nick whispered, “if you every want to get rid of him, I would come anytime you wanted me to.”

“I bet you would.” She chuckled, warm as molasses. “Now, introduce me to your nice young man.” A gentle command.

“Sam, this is Rekha- who somehow got tricked into marrying that weasel over there.” He nodded in Gabriel’s direction. “Rekha, this is Sam Winchester, a friend of mine.”

“A friend who stays the night?” She still had an arm around Nick, loosely behind his back, but she offered a hand to Sam.

He took it, her fingers so small and soft against his. “It was a quiet place to study, that’s all.” Sam tried to clarify.

Her smile made her look older somehow, little lines on the corners of her mouth. It didn’t make her an ounce less beautiful. “Oh? What are you studying?”

“I’m prelaw, at Stanford.”

“Really?” Gabriel bounded back over, far too much energy in such a small person. “I graduated from Stanford. Nick, he’s perfect. Can you marry him, please? And if not, can I keep him?”

“No.” Rekha said firmly, finally letting go of Sam to give her husband an exasperated look.

“Oh, but I’ll brush him and wash him and ride him every day.” Gabriel promised his wife.

“Whoa now.” Sam held up his hands, taking a step away from the little blonde, closer to Nick who was marginally safer because he had never said such concerning things to, or about him. “I-I’m not-“

“He’s spoken for, Gabe.” Nick interjected in a low, angry voice. No room for doubt. He didn’t take Sam’s hand, or put an arm around him or anything even half as possessive- but he didn’t have to. It was all there in his voice.

Gabriel looked between the two of them, a curious expression on his face before he lit up. “Then you are even more welcome and I expect a fantastic Christmas present this year.”

Nick repeated the same lewd hand gesture as before, with a bit more violence, a bit more emphasis than the first time.

With firm determination, Rekha put an arm around her husband’s shoulders, and she was taller than him by a few inches so she was still able to peek over his head at Sam and Nick. “If you two don’t mind, I will take my jackal back to the kitchen where he belongs. He promised to make sweet potatoes.” Her words got a little muffled in the end, and Sam had the impression that she was kissing Gabriel’s mess of hair as she physically dragged him from the room.
“What was that?” Sam asked in a gutted whisper.

“That was Gabriel behaving himself surprisingly well.” Nick ran his hands over his face, up through his hair, mussing it just a little. Agitation bleeding into every little movement.

“No, I mean…” Sam shook his head, struggling with the notion that that was anything closely resembling good behavior. “You just put it out there. What happened to the plan? What happened to waiting another week or two?”

“I had to do something, and you and Rekha weren’t going to let me kill him.” Letting the tension run out of him with a sharp breath, Nick took Sam by the shoulders, smoothing out his flannel, thumbs notching comfortably into the indents beneath his collar bone. “And it was either let him take a go at you or let me keep you.” One of his thumbs stayed high enough to brush the smooth skin of Sam’s throat. “We were going to get here eventually, so don’t puss out on me now.”

Which was true, but eventually was one thing. Today was another. Sam was still struggling to warm up to the idea of this fake relationship and now he found himself sinking into it like quicksand. The comfortable weight of Nick’s hands on his shoulders only solidifying their lie, pulling him down faster.

“I’m not… backing out.” He didn’t think he could easily reuse Nick’s words. “I told you. I’m in. We shook on it.” He held on to the man’s wrists, his own thumbs sliding along the sharp little curve of bone- his skin almost cold to the touch. “I just want to know where it puts us since you’re jumping ahead.”

“Same place we were last night. Same place we were this morning. Only difference now is that one of my brothers thinks that there’s something more.” Nick said softly, aware that they weren’t exactly in a private place, standing in the middle of the dining room, within throwing distance of the occupied and noisy kitchen.

Plans, bad plans and second guessing muddled his thoughts for a moment. It suddenly struck Sam how messed up this whole thing really was. How nothing good could come from it. How much he could already tell he was going to miss Nick when it was over.

Three months really wasn’t all that long.

“I might come over again to study tonight.” He decided, leaning into Nick hands just a bit, just in case anyone from the kitchen happened to be looking their way it would at least look like they were doing something other than scheming.

Nick considered this, biting his lip thoughtfully before answering with an almost regretful tone. “If you stay a little too late, after I’ve had a bit too much to drink, I might accidently kiss you.”

Sam felt heat rising up into his cheeks and he fought it down, because it was a stupid reaction to have. “If anyone asks, I’ll be sure to tell them that you did.”

A suggestion of a smile warmed Nick’s pale eyes. “You almost make this too easy.”

“It better work. That’s all I’m saying.”

“You’ve got to trust in the plan, Sam.” Nick leaned in, almost close enough to taste. “The plan is good. The plan is freedom. The plan is sleeping in on Saturdays mornings with the comforting knowledge that no one is going to bother you Saturday night.”

Oh, but Nick knew how to sweet talk another guy.
“Not in my dining room, boys.” Rekha announced loudly and Nick took a quick step back, wearing a slightly guilty expression like he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been doing. “Help cook, go on a walk, play with the kids, go out to Castiel’s car and fool around.” She set three long white candles on the table, not lighting them yet, but settling them into place just so. “I don’t care what you two do, but there is none of this,” she wiggled her fingers in their direction, “where we eat food. And certainly not where the children might see.”

Nick wouldn’t look at Sam, he was too busy wearing a fantastically convincing sheepish expression.

“You’re going to give your brother an aneurism if he catches you.” She gave Nick a level look, but she may as well have been telling Sam too. It was just as applicable. “Unless your goal is to put Michael in an early grave. Then by all means, kiss your boy- but wait until after we eat. Anna and I have been cooking since yesterday and a dead husband will ruin dinner.”

“You do know that there’s not actually anything going on between us, right?” Nick managed to sound like a terrible liar and Sam was honesty surprised at how good the man was at this.

Rekha looked from one to the other, patient disbelief plain on her face. “Whatever you say. It’s just nice to see you smiling for a change.” She patted his cheek before walking back to the kitchen.

“I’m not going out to Cas’ car with you.” Sam said firmly before Nick could get any ideas.

And Nick did have a good smile when he thought no one else was looking.

Sam tried not to smile back, scowling as hard as he could, mouthing the word ‘no’.

A little before they all sat down to eat, Michael came down to join them. The greeting between brothers was even more strained than Sam had expected. They had shared a brief hug, a begrudging kiss on the cheek and less than a handful of words. Then seemed to make a point during dinner not to even look at each other and Sam wanted to ask, but he knew it was none of his business.

It was like Nick and Michael were content to pretend that the other didn’t exist and everyone else just played along.

The last real holiday meal that Sam could remember had been Christmas morning the year before he and Dean left for California. John had surprisingly not had a hangover and had made his sons pancakes. The three of them had been subdued, but happy.

This was different.

Worlds different.

Anna hadn’t lied, Gabriel had literally been banished to the kids table, but he took the punishment with a smile, sitting alongside his nieces and a nephew, laughing and joking around like he belonged there in their midst.

Maybe it wasn’t all that much of a punishment after all.

Once they were all seated, Sam between his brother and his ‘boyfriend’, all around a table not really big enough for the seven adults pressed together, Michael offered a prayer. As the oldest brother, and certainly the most serious out of the boys (which was impressive when he was being
compared to Castiel and Nick), it seemed fitting. Sam who had never had a family prayer over food felt a little lost, but was willing to roll with it- except when he realized everyone was holding hands with the people on either side of them. He felt like he should have been warned.

Nick’s hand fit oddly well into his, their fingers twining in a way that was unnecessary but not unwelcome. Dean’s hand was rough, a mechanic’s hands, and he didn’t seem to be able to help the urge to briefly have a squeezing match with Sam to see who was stronger. Sam won by stomping Dean’s foot and they shared a look of mutual relenting before lowering their heads for the prayer.

It wasn’t a long blessing, and once everyone said *amen*, Sam assumed that they were done. He and Dean certainly let go of each other fast enough.

Michael nodded to the Winchesters, something that could pass for a smile catching the corners of his mouth. “Typically before we eat we go around and all say one or two things that we’re thankful for.”

A tradition that Sam could go along with, but he felt Dean shifting next to him, ready to eat and not interested in more of this stalling.

Sam didn’t retake his brother’s hand, but at the same time he didn’t let go of Nick’s either. Which might have meant something, but Sam stubbornly refused to look too far into it. Everyone else was still holding hands. Even Dean and Cas.

The ‘thanks’ started at the kid’s table. Little voices piping up about being grateful for things like ice cream, mommy, and a pet fish. Gabriel was grateful for a tolerant wife. It moved to the adult’s table, people being grateful for things like good health, food, family, a new baby on the way. The usual things to be happy about this time of year. Nick’s answer was a bit off beat from the rest. He was grateful for finding someone who would have his back in a fist fight after only knowing him for two days. This earned him and Sam both slightly disapproving looks from Nick’s family, and a hearty laugh from Gabriel.

Then it was Sam’s turn all he could think to say was ‘family’- which sounded nice enough even though someone had already used it, but he and his brother knew that it wasn’t a particularly inclusive title. Sam’s family basically amounted to the man sitting on his right and an Uncle that he called once or twice a month. Dean gave him a complicated expression and softly added that he was grateful for a job so he could take care of his brother.

Cas was grateful that Nick and the Winchesters were willing to join them for dinner, and bees.

Sam kept his opinion that the little accountant was a bit strange.

With that parting note, they were allowed to fall on the food.

The dinner itself was fantastic. It was warm and the company was noisy and perfect in the way that family can be- even if, for the most part, no one here was actually *his* family. It didn’t seem to matter. They were welcome and included and the food was delicious.

Sam almost wished he had a wife of his own. Maybe Dean cooked once in a blue moon, but no matter how good it was when he did, it was never on this grand of a scale. This was enough food for a small army. It meant that Sam could shamelessly eat as much as he wanted.

And he did.

Oh, he did.
Somewhere into his third helping of stuffing and potatoes, Nick nudged Sam’s knee under the table. The younger man looked over, fork hesitating above his plate- but Nick was listening and nodding as Anna talked about tagging along with her son Isaac and the field trip that his third grade class had had recently to the San Francisco Zoo.

Sam nudged back, not knowing what else to do. No idea what it meant.

Up until that point, he had been talking to Dean and Cas about the walk they had taken with the older of the two children down to the beach. He did his best to still listen as his brother told him about all the ‘high-tide’ signs and the rock caves worn into the cliffs, but now he found himself glancing back at Nick, suddenly aware of the man’s little movements.

From somewhere Nick had produced a silver flask, laying it on leg, tapping it softly with his knuckles while he spoke to the woman sitting across from him. He glanced at Sam, a questioning curve to the corner of his mouth and Sam thought he understood the offer- enough at least to give a tiny shake of his head.

It was almost funny to watch, like an awful pantomime, as Nick so casually took his glass of apple juice, had a small sip, and lowered it beneath the table top. Very carefully and slowly he poured a decent amount of the flask into the glass before raising it again and taking another, longer drink.

From the glass leaving the table to it reappearing was maybe two or three minutes at best. It was all done so nonchalantly that no one seemed to take any notice. Sam wanted to applaud his friend, but at the same time found himself vaguely horrified by what he was doing.

In the end he decided to treat it just like he would if it were Dean spiking his own drink during a family get together. Sam ignored it. He bumped his knee into Nick’s (let him interpret it how he wanted) before looking back to his brother and Castiel, asking some weak question about work.

Hindsight told Sam that if he was going to treat Nick like Dean in one little aspect, he really should have let it become a more encompassing decision. His own glass had been left casually somewhere between his and Nick’s plates. By choosing to turn away, Sam left his glass unguarded. It was a stupid thing to do.

Sam smelled the alcohol before the rim of the glass touched his lip and he shot Nick a surprised look, but the man was leaning back, talking to Castiel behind the Winchester’s backs. Making some plan to water Cas’ plants for him while the younger brother was on a business trip down in San Diego next week.

Sam tried to switch glasses back, kind of hoping that he had just grabbed the wrong one on accident.

But now both glasses had that sharp, bitter scent to them. Nick had been busy.

With a shrug, Sam just went ahead and took a sip, thinking it probably wouldn’t hurt him.

It was definitely whisky.

He cleared his throat, smiled at Dean and blatantly traded glasses with his big brother.

Though they had been talking the whole time, Dean had been curiously watching Sam’s struggle with the glasses. Instead of protesting at the theft of his juice, he simply took the new glass, lifted it, smelled it, and then grinned.

“Cheers, Sammy.” Dean offered and they clinked glasses together, both overly pleased with the trade.
As the meal wound down, Anna got up, wrangling her husband’s help into taking their two youngest upstairs for a little post turkey nap. It left Gabriel alone at the card table with his nephew Isaac, who had hair as dark as his father’s and eyes as pale as his uncle’s. The two of them were animatedly devising a plan to build a tree house in the back yard.

Rekha rolled her eyes at the two, but didn’t tell them no. She folded her hands on the table top, and nodded to the men who remained. “It is also a tradition in this house that those who don’t cook clean up after the meal.”

“Sounds fair.” Dean said in a rough voice, cheeks a little rosy. He had always been good at handling his liquor, so Sam wasn’t worried about Dean doing something embarrassing- but at the same time, he couldn’t help but laugh quietly, because Dean had obviously moved into a good place with the addition of the whisky.

“We can clean the table and put the food away if you and Sam will wash the dishes.” Castiel offered Nick.

And his big brother took a little longer than necessary considering this trade before finally nodding. His cheeks, for the record, just as rosy as Dean’s.

Sam got up from the table wondering how much the two men had managed to actually drink during the course of dinner, but he didn’t really want to know, so he didn’t ask.

Nick swayed into him from time to time while they stood over the sink, Sam washing while Nick loaded the dishwasher or set things to dry on a dishtowel that had been laid over the counter.

“How drunk are you?” Sam whispered as their shoulders touched for possibly the fifth time since they started washing.

“Not very.” Nick sounded almost disappointed in himself.

“Wasn’t that the only other rule that they have here?” Sam handed over another plate.

“Two Thanksgivings back Isaac got into some wine- so started the booze ban. Which is completely unfair for the rest of us. I feel that as long as I keep it out of the hands of the children there’s no problem with it.”

This seemed fair enough in Sam’s opinion, also it wasn’t his family and Nick was an adult, so he decided it best not to argue. “I think Dean appreciated it.” Which was the only positive thing that he thought he could add without being too encouraging.

“I did.” Dean said with a grin, setting the last of the dishes on Sam’s side of the sink. “It was a shame it had to be watered down with apple juice, but it was still good.”

“It was either whisky or vodka- but I figured on account of this being an American holiday having a Russian drink might be in bad taste.”

Dean patted Nick on the back. “That is some firm, anticommmunist thinking, my friend.” And they shared a warm laugh which dissolved into something close to giggling but somehow more masculine.

Castiel gave Sam this sympathetic, long suffering look before gently muscling his brother out of the way and joining Sam at the sink. “They aren’t going to be much help, I think.”

“Dean never is.” Sam rolled his eyes and started handing dishes off to his new partner.
They washed in peaceable silence, listening to their brother laughing and joking about odd things, sudden bonding happening over their shared contraband.

“I am sorry for tricking you and Nick into dinner.” Castiel said suddenly.

“It’s been a while since I had a proper Thanksgiving, but it wasn’t all that shocking. I kind of knew what I was agreeing too.”

“No. I mean at the restaurant when you were supposed to be meeting me and Dean. Your brother had been telling me about how you have been feeling sad since your friend got married, and it made me think about how Nick has been alone since the divorce.”

*Divorce?* Sam glanced back at Nick, watching him showing off the tattoos of his left arm to Dean who was asking questions and poking at the colors.

“I didn’t know he had ever been married.”

“It was… maybe eight or nine years ago?” Cas looked thoughtful as he set aside a large serving dish too big to fit in the dishwasher. “She was his highschool sweetheart. It didn’t end well, and Gabriel’s been trying to find someone for him since. I probably shouldn’t have gotten involved. And I’m sorry for dragging you into this.”

“I… I don’t really mind.” Which was the truth.

“He’s a good man, even if he’s…” Castiel took a turn looking back at their brothers and he shook his head. “He’s a good man.” It was left at that.

Sam wanted to say something, maybe to agree, or ask Castiel a question, but the laughing and talking behind them stopped so suddenly that he had to turn around and see what happened.

Michael stood there like a disapproving storm cloud, arms folded over his chest.

Castiel spoke first, and it was hard to tell if it was because he was the bravest or simply had no inherent aversion to his eldest brother. “Did you need something, Michael?”

“Anna wanted to know if Nick will be coming to Christmas this year.” Michael spoke directly to Castiel, not even looking at Nick and it was all kinds of an uncomfortable exclusion.

“I don’t know.” Castiel’s smile was slightly strained and he looked over at Nick. “Do you think you’ll be able to make it?”

“I’ll probably have work.” Nick wasn’t interested in whatever was going on, not talking to the man who had asked him, but staring directly at Michael.

Michael took his time looking over at Nick, mouth working slowly as he sought the right words. “It would be nice if you could take the time off. Your nieces and nephew miss you.”

“I’ll send their presents with Cas. Same as I always do.”

This was not a particularly pleasing answer if the angry tilt to Michael’s eyebrows accounted for anything. “I talked to dad a few weeks ago. He said he might try to make it out for Christmas.”

Nick laughed without an ounce of humor. “Yeah. If he actually shows up, you call me. I’ll drive down.”

Michael narrowed his eyes. “Have you been drinking?”
That quiet pause reared its ugly head again, the unease almost touchable and Sam had a firm belief that this was one of the reasons that Nick had made Sam promise not to leave him alone this afternoon. Only Sam was nowhere near brave enough to get himself between the brothers. Him and Dean fought sometimes, but never, never had there been any kind of quiet animosity like this between them.

“I didn’t even want to be here. Cas had been bothering me since June about coming, and your wife’s been calling me for weeks. At this point you say ‘thanks for showing up’ and leave it the hell alone, Michael.”

This was an even less pleasing answer somehow and Michael looked about five seconds away from armageddon.

“What are you going to do about it?” Nick dragged out the words, taunting. “It isn’t your house. You can’t kick me out this time.”

Beside Sam, Castiel whispered “Nick, no,” under his breath, which gave Sam only the smallest hint of warning before punches were suddenly being thrown.

Just like at the pool hall, Sam didn’t think about what he was doing.

And he should have.

He really should have.

But he didn’t. He just suddenly found himself there, alongside Cas, trying his damnedest to keep the two men apart.

Initially upon meeting the man, Sam had made the grievous mistake at assuming that Michael was the ‘good brother’. He had been quiet and very serious looking, but such things do not a good man make.

The things he said to his brother were… they were the kinds of things that were best not repeated, but amounted to quite simply that there was nothing about Nick, nothing that the man had ever said or done or thought, that was worth anything. There was nothing that Michael could see in his brother that he liked, and he made it abundantly clear up until his wife came into the room and did a far better job than Sam or Cas could at keeping him off of Nick.

All she did was say his name in a warning tone and just like that, the fight went out of him. If Sam wasn’t struggling so hard to keep Nick from taking another swing, he would have seen the almost surprised expression that Michael suddenly wore, as if he couldn’t believe the things that he had just said.

Nick on the other hand didn’t seem to feel guilty at all and kept up making a pleasantly long list of bad things to call one’s brother—right up until Anna said his name as well. The same deathly serious warning held there in.

The kitchen refound it’s quiet.

Sam wasn’t sure if he should let go of Nick or not. No way to tell if it was actually safe.

“Michael, upstairs. Nick, take a walk.”

And apparently the earlier request for not leaving Nick alone did not extend to this. The man left on his own, not quite slamming the kitchen door behind him, but definitely putting much more force into it than necessary.
“You know,” Dean leaned a little into Sam, keeping his voice low even though it was just the two of them and a very subdued looking Castiel left in the kitchen. “This is actually starting to feel a lot more like one of our family get togethers than I thought it would.”

Sam found himself laughing, but for some reason the noise hurt his chest.
Call me a safe bet, I'm betting I'm not

so I'm a dirty liar when it comes to which story I'm going to update and when. But I've been in such a fantastic mood I've only wanted to write fluff. Apparently I wanted it so bad I wrote a whole chapter of it.

You're welcome in advance.

Apparently nap time translated to 'watching a Disney movie and being quiet'. Sam didn't really mind joining Castiel's nieces in the den upstairs. It was a big comfy room with a projection tv, enough seating for a small party and seemingly any movie anyone could want to watch. They let the sisters pick, despite Dean's quiet protests.

Castiel took up the majority of the couch, one redheaded little girl tucked beneath each arm, looking as if everything was right with the world again. He seemed to have recovered from his brother's fight much faster than everyone else. It was almost like a few minutes ago he hadn't been clinging to Michael, pleading with him to calm down- but in all likelihood he was simply more used to dealing with these sorts of things.

"Man, prince charming is such a wuss." Dean groaned, looking to Sam for agreement. "What does this dude do other than sing?"

"He kisses Snow White and she wakes up." Sarah, Anna and Michael's middle child said sharply. "You have to wait for it."

"Is he gunna keep singing the whole time?"

"No. The bad man tries to kill Snow White and she runs away and meets the dwarfs."

Dean looked slightly distressed. "Dwarfs?"

"They are tiny men and some have beards." Sarah explained in an annoyed tone.

Dean leaned back on the recliner he had claimed, folding his arms behind his head and making a face. "They're going to sing too, aren't they?"

For such a small girl, she had a surprisingly large, vindictive smile.

The child had either seen the movie before or simply understood the formula- because there were indeed dwarves and more singing.. Dean took the easy out and fell asleep in his chair.

Sam got up from the floor where he had sprawled to sit as close to Castiel as he could without smooshing a child between them.

"Castiel, can I ask you a question?"

"I like the one with the glasses best. He seems nice." The man said quietly so as not to speak over the movie.
But Sam didn't really care which dwarf was Cas' favorite so he just shook his head and tried again. "No. Can I ask you something about your brothers?"

The man looked up at him, eyes curious. "I suppose so."

"Do they always fight like that?"

"No." He got a small frown. "They used to start as soon as they saw each other and they used to be much worse about it. Over the years we've been able to slowly postpone the fight until after we finish eating or the kid blows out the candles on the cake, or whatever it is that we're doing. And thank you for jumping in there with me. It's almost impossible to keep them apart single handed without some kind of bloodshed." He sighed and adjusted one of Hannah's pigtails.

"Did they ever get along?"

"I think maybe two or three times, back before Dad left." He answered after a moment's thought.

Sam smiled. "Just two or three times?"

"I didn't grow up with them… so there might have been one more time that I don't know about." He returned the smallest hint of a smile. "We're brothers. Not sisters. There's lot of things that they don't talk to me about."

Sam chuckled. "Dean's not big on sharing either."

"I've noticed." Castiel looked over at the man slumped in the recliner. "Sam… can I ask you a question about your brother?"

Sam nodded, feeling that it would only be fair.

"What kind of movie should I ask him to come see with me if I want him to say yes?"

What a dangerous question.

Sam could simply not answer- just tell Cas that Dean wasn't the kind of guy to go to movies with other guys. Or he could tell the truth and set Dean up on a little date of his own. Just like Dean had done for him.

"Something with explosions. He likes action movies." Sam said, knowing that this wasn't exactly fair to Cas, but at the same time- he was an adult. He could figure out he was barking up the wrong kind of tree all on his own. "And offer burgers beforehand. I've never seen him turn down food."

"Explosions and food." Cas repeated the recipe to himself. "Alright." He gave Sam such a sweet smile that the younger man almost felt guilty about what he was doing.

"Uncle Cas?" Sarah asked from where she was half asleep against her uncle. "The movie's done. Can we have pie?"

"Well," he looked around the room for an answer, sort of shrugging at Sam. "I'll let Hannah sleep but should we wake Dean?"

"Let me tell you a secret about my brother." Sam kept his voice low and secretive. "If pie is involved, the answer is always yes."

They joined the other adults downstairs, leaving the smallest child upstairs to continue her nap, as
was appropriate etiquette when dealing with small children Sam learned. Dean looked a bit bleary eyed, but very pleased to sit down at the table with a large piece of apple pie all to himself.

Sam sat beside his brother and made polite conversation with Gabriel of all people.

The man was a little more forward than Sam was used to, but at the same time he was very open and enthusiastic, and it was too soon to tell if that was a good thing or not. So they spoke of Stanford, and some of the teachers that they shared and the weird layout of the English department, a handful of other odds and ends. Even if Sam wasn't all that good at making small talk, Gabriel seemed to have no problem taking control of the conversation, steering it around to wherever he saw fit.

The backdoor opened in the other room and Nick came into the dining room, a small piece of pumpkin pie on his plate. His cheeks were a little red from the cold ocean breeze outside, but his eyes were clear and the anger was gone. He sat down beside Rehka, because Gabriel had stolen his seat on the other side of Sam, and he leaned into his sister-in-law, whispering something in her ear before earning himself a slap on his arm and a soft laugh.

The younger Winchester looked over at Nick, offering a hesitant smile and to his surprise, the man smiled right back, mouthing something that looked an awful lot like the word 'sorry'.

Sam just rolled his eyes, because really, there was nothing that had happened that the man needed to apologize for.

Not long afterwards, they were packing up the few remaining pieces of pie and Castiel was hugging his siblings and their wives, bidding them all a cheerful goodbye, promising to be back for Christmas.

Nick was much quieter about his farewells, kneeling beside his nieces, getting little kisses on his stubbled cheeks and tight hugs around his neck. He thumped his nephew on the shoulder and they traded a manly look before Nick stood and kissed both his sister-in-laws, telling that would see them in the spring- which to Sam seemed unnecessary. He could have just said goodbye, but it was like he wanted to specifically emphasize that he wouldn't be coming back in a month like he had been asked to.

He never even looked at Michael, and Gabriel got as little as a begrudging one armed hug and what looked to be a whispered threat pressed into his cheek with words too soft to hear over the general noise of everyone else talking. Gabriel looked a little shocked before laughing happily and patting his big brother's chest.

All in all, Sam wished that he wasn't paying so much attention to what Nick was doing. There was no reason for it. But there he was, in the back of the group, beside Dean, just watching the man interacting with his family. It was weirdly voyeuristic and he made himself look away, feeling too much like he was invading on something personal that he hadn't earned a right to yet.

He smiled a tight lipped smile at Dean, sort of a 'yep, we're still here, and not part of this'. Dean just kind of nodded and shrugged in agreement. But it was too soon because Anna chose then descended on the brothers, pulling them both down, one at a time, into a warm, pleasant smelling hug.

"It was wonderful to meet you boys. And the pie was absolutely delicious." She grinned brightly up at Dean, arms still around him and by the overly pleased look he was wearing, Dean didn't seem to mind. "And if you boys don't have plans for Christmas you're welcome to join us."

"Oh, we couldn't do that." Dean said with an apologetic smile.
"Nonsense." She shook him slightly before letting go and stepping back to join her husband's side. "Castiel told me that all your family is back East somewhere and if you boys stay here in California then you're invited over for dinner. The holidays are about family and friends. Even new friends."

"Especially new friends." Nick said soft enough that Sam wasn't sure anyone else heard him. He looked over at the blonde man in time to earn himself a little half smile and Sam didn't know what it was supposed to mean.

Final farewells and the four men made it out into the falling dusk. It was jarring after the light and warmth of the house, all there was now were heavy clouds tinged with bits of orange and red from the setting sun and the bitter cold gusts coming off the ocean. They piled into the car and Castiel cranked up the heat, warming his hands on one of the vents before starting back on the road that would take them to the highway.

"Hey, Sammy-" Dean peered around his head rest into the backseat. "How's about you cleaning the kitchen for me when we get home since I made you that nasty pie you enjoyed so much?"

"I was going to go over to Nick's to study again tonight." Which was a great way to get out of doing dishes.

"I thought you were going to lay off the books for today." Dean complained, but Sam could tell from his tone that his big brother was already giving up on him.

"I said I wouldn't bring my books to dinner. I never say I wouldn't study today."

"You're so lame." He turned back to look out the windshield. "And you can study at home. I'll keep the music down."

Sam did his best to not look over at the man sitting beside him, not wanting to look too guilty. "That's alright. There's less distractions at Nick's."

Dean seemed to chew that idea over for a bit before slowly saying, "Right… less distractions."

"He doesn't even own a television." Castiel piped up, vouching for his brother. "I used to go over there to study during the holidays when campus was closed."

"You're supposed to be on my side." Dean grumbled, folding his arms and looking sullen.

"I thought that we wanted them to spend time together… if that's what they want." He added quickly, eyes darting to the rearview mirror to peek into the backseat. "I'm not trying to say that-"

"We get it, Cas." Nick said softly, soothing his younger brother's anxiety. "It's ok. Really."

"Really?" Castiel's eyes flicked back to them.

"Really." Sam confirmed with a smile.

Dean got dropped off at the house and Sam ran inside to grab his book bag with promises that he would do dishes when he got home later that night. He tried to rush back out, not wanting to keep Castiel waiting, but his big brother stopped him from leaving, leaning against the door frame, barring any escape.

"Come on, Dean. Nick'll give me a ride home later." Sam shouldered his bag, sighing.

"It's gunna' rain tonight. You really plan to let him take you back here in the dark on that bike?"
"It'll be fine, and if it's raining I'll just stay the night again."

The muscles in Dean's jaw tightened. "Course you will."

Sam blinked rapidly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just… dude, you met the guy two weeks ago and you're already staying the night at his place. If it was anyone else I would congratulate them. But this is you, Sam. Don't you think this is moving a bit... you know… fast for you?"

"Whoa now." Sam held up his hands, palms out. "Let's pretend for one second that you didn't set me up on a date with this guy. Let's also pretend, just for good measure, that you didn't send me a text that same night telling me to get my 'freak on' with him- which I believe were you're exact words. All that aside, no one said that there's anything like that going on between us."

"I've seen the looks you've been giving each other."

"We haven't been… what looks?"

"Oh, there's been looks."

"Neither of us are even remotely gay." Sam tried to clarify, not sure how defensive he was supposed to be getting- reminding himself that this kind of argument flew in the face of his and Nick's plans. Too much denial would make for an awkward transition later.

"I'm not either. But if I was… gay, and wasn't your brother, I'd… I'd hit that."

Sam thought that he managed to make some kind of useless noise, mouth hanging open between shock and confusion.

"Even if the guy's straight, Sammy, he's not blind." How Dean could manage to make these bizarre arguments with such a straight face had always been a puzzlement to Sam.

"God- do you realize how insane you sound, Dean?"

"I just don't think you should be jumping into something with a guy you don't know."

"You set me up on a date with him!" Sam felt his voice rising along with his frustration.

"That was supposed to be a one off- just someone willing to jump your gangly bones so maybe you'd be less of a tightly wound son of a bitch all the time. You weren't supposed to make friends with him and set up play dates. Next thing you know the two of you are gunna' be telling us you're engaged and I'm going to end up in-laws with that crazy ass family."

Sam took a long breath through his nose before putting his hands on his big brother's shoulders and forcibly pulling him away from the door. "Good night, Dean."

"Fine. But I've got work in the morning, so keep it down if you come home real late."

Sam waved goodbye and ran back out to the car, only slightly surprised to see that Nick had moved to the front passenger seat. So Sam folded himself into the back and sat alone. More room to stretch out anyways.

"Sorry for taking so long." He said while he buckled his seat belt. "Dean felt a need to give me 'the talk' before I left."
Nick laughed, startled but pleased.

"The talk?" Castiel questioned as he started back to his brother's apartment.

"The birds and the bees, Cassy." Nick explained with a grin in his voice.

Castiel got quiet, busying himself with flipping on the windshield wipers against the light sprinkle. "Birds and bees?"

"Sex." Nick clarified, and Sam was glad he did, because he was honestly too surprised that the accountant didn't understand the reference.

"Oh..." Cas glanced into the backseat. "Aren't you a bit old to not know about sex? I thought that they taught it in highschool."

"They do." Sam assured between chuckles. "I think Dean's just worried that with me being so young and naive, Nick might try to take advantage of me."

This only made Nick laugh harder, up until his younger brother shot him a stern look. "It's not funny. That's a very serious accusation, Nick. I will have a talk with Dean and explain to him that you are not that kind of person."

"Thanks for that." He patted Castiel on the shoulder, the movement almost tender, but mostly sarcastic.

Castiel pulled up in front of Nick's apartment, and put the car in park, turning in his seat to look at his brother, then back at Sam in turn. "Thank you both for coming today. It meant a lot to me... and everyone else." He tacked on, looking pointedly back at Nick.

"Don't worry about it. It was just nice to have a home cooked meal."

"It helps that Anna was cooking it." Cas said with a significant look. "You know, she'll be cooking on Christmas too. She'd probably make anything you wanted if you promised to come by."

"Don't push it." Nick warned gently.

Castiel looked away, relenting. "Good night... and good luck on your tests, Sam."

"Thanks." Sam grinned before climbing back out of the car.

The little accountant unrolled his window and called after them. "I'll drop off my spare key at the shop on Sunday."

"Got it." Nick waved. "Drive safe, Cas."

The two hoofed it up the long flight of stairs, Sam huffing a little around the third story.

"No elevator?"

"Elevators are for the weak." Nick grinned over his shoulder, not at all bothered by the long climb. "Did your brother really try to warn you about me?"

"Apparently you were supposed to be a one night stand and he's worried that we might be getting involved."

Nick scoffed at the idea. "Didn't he set you up with me in the first place?"
"I just don't think he was expecting it to amount to anything."

"Oh, then he is going to love this next part," Nick unlocked his door, "because I actually have every intention of taking advantage of you tonight."

"Yeah, good luck with that." Sam followed him inside, going straight for the table and settling himself in for a good bought of quality time with his textbooks.

In a seeming effort to win the 'boyfriend of the year' award, Nick made a pot of strong coffee and unbidden set a mug down beside Sam's elbow before folding himself down into the couch and quietly watching a movie on his computer. So unobtrusive and out of the way. Practically too perfect. Sam almost wished that this wasn't just a shared lie.

If Sam did plan to settle down with a guy, he would definitely want one like Nick- except maybe without the unexpected alcohol consumption or the violence towards oddly specific family members. Those parts he could pass on.

It wasn't that he was against drinking, just growing up in the same household as an alcoholic made him feel a bit skittish around people who drank for reasons other than socially. He knew from watching his dad, and occasionally Dean, that alcohol was not any kind of solution to a man's problems.

He also wasn't against arguing with family members, mostly because he wasn't a giant hypocrite. But there had been tense levels of animosity between Nick and his brothers that Sam hadn't expected and it made him uncomfortable in ways he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He found himself glancing over at the couch, at this man that he had shackled himself to for the next three months.

Nick looked up, tugging on his lip. "Yeah?"

"Nothing." Sam busied himself with his coffee, hiding behind the steam. "So, uh…" Not really sure where he was going with that so he let the idea wander off without him.

The blonde tapped his tablet screen and the movie grew silent. He sat there, watching Sam, waiting like he had all the time in the world.

"Cas and I were talking today."

"You brave man you." Nick kept a remarkably straight face.

"He said that you used to be married." Nick got this sour look on his face, eyes suddenly darting from wall to wall, skipping over Sam.

"Castiel never really learned when to keep his mouth shut."

"I'm sorry."

"eh," he waved it off. "There's not much to say about it. Lilith and I dated on and off during highschool and for a few years after that. I was almost twenty-one, she got pregnant, told me it was mine, and I tried to do the right thing so we got married." He huffed softly, still not looking at Sam as if it made the whole thing easier to tell. "So she's seven months along, goes up to Tahoe to visit her mother, and I get two letters from her. First one says that she lost the baby, second one is my half of the divorce paperwork."
"I'm sorry." Sam repeated, not knowing what else he could add to something like that.

"You said that already." Nick offered him a hint of a smile. "It was almost nine years ago, and considering how Lilith was I've never been sure that the kid was actually mine to begin with." He swung his long legs off the couch and went to the kitchen to refill his coffee.

Sam watched Nick's careful drink preparations, and all he could think for a few minutes was that the other man had to be thirty. Which wasn't horrifically old in the scheme of things. Nor was it particularly important. Certainly not enough to make Sam reconsider their arrangement or anything like that. It was just…

"Castiel said that you haven't dated anyone since then… that's a really long time."

Nick chuckled. "Just because I don't tell my brothers every time I go out, or every time someone with nice legs takes me home, doesn't mean I've been sitting around all this time moping over a crazy bitch like Lilith." He pulled out the chair beside Sam's, sitting the wrong way round, folding his arms over the back of the chair. "A girlfriend would be nice and all- but I'm already in a relationship with alcohol and bad decisions. Hardly seems fair to drag someone down with me."

"You say to your boyfriend." Sam pointed out quietly.

"You can hold your own against me." Nick scoffed. "You're a smart kid."

"I'm not a kid." He rolled his coffee cup between his hands.

Nick's knee crashed into his almost like an apology, his eyes crinkling just a touch as he blew on his own drink. "Sorry, darlin'. You're just so young and bright eyed. Sometimes I forget."

"You're supposed to be falling in love with me." Sam lectured in his most serious voice. "Please try and remember that I'm a tall, handsome, man that you won't be able to resist kissing tonight."

"How could I possibly forget that part?" Nick looked aghast at the mere suggestion. "Finally getting my hands on that sweet ass of yours will be the highlight of my holiday season."

Sam almost choked on his coffee and had to spit it back into his mug because it was only slightly better than spewing it all over his text books. "We agreed to a first kiss- my ass doesn't enter into this."

"Trust me, it will." Nick winked and Sam had to resist the urge to hit him because that kind of reaction worked with Dean but might not end well with Nick.

He settled for bashing their knees together hard enough that he hurt himself. "Don't you go starting anything you can't finish."

"Oh, it might take me a while, but I promise to finish every last bit of you."

Sam had enough and he almost felt sideways in his seat, doubling over. "What is- what's that even- supposed to mean?" He got out between breathless laughter.

"It's an innuendo." Nick's laugh answered his own, deeper and more restrained. "It means whatever you want it to."

"I- I don't want it to mean anything." Sam shook his head, trying and failing to wipe the grin off his face. "And you keep your hands to yourself."

"What a thing to say to your only boyfriend." Nick got up from that table, mock insult plain on his
"You keep that up and you're getting nothing for me tonight." He managed to put an undue amount of sass into his walk to the couch before folding himself back down and situating his tablet back on his crooked knees.

Sam swallowed down the last bit of his laugh and shook his head again, pushing hair from his eyes. He found himself watching Nick, for what had to be the hundredth time today. And It remained an unproductive use of his time.

Like a big cat, the man had sort of folded in on himself, pale knee peeking out from a small hole worn in his left pant leg, smallest slash of hip bone visible where his t-shirt had been rucked up. The designs on his arms twisted and got lost with how they were pressed up to his chest, holding his mug comfortably against his lower lip.

For maybe just a hair longer than a second, Sam found himself watching the tip of Nick's tongue flick along the rim of his mug, and Sam's disloyal mind entertained thoughts of how the kiss that they were going to say happened would have happened.

In a panic he shoved the idea down, horrified that he had even had it.

He buried his face in his text books, letting the fine print utterly consume him, because it was safe and familiar and good and as far from that confusing daydream as he could bring himself.

One or maybe two hours later Sam's eyes were getting tired, too long looking at too small of words. He pushed his books away, rubbing his face.

He must have made a noise to draw the other man's attention because Nick's soft voice interrupted his stretch.

"You want to watch a movie with me, Sam? Or do you want a ride home?"

Sam glanced at the clock in the kitchen, almost seven thirty, before he looked out the window into the starless night with its black clouds, the quiet pattering of rain against the glass.

"It's a bit wet outside."

"I can order us a pizza. We can cuddle and try to wait out the rain." Nick offered, turning a little, making room for Sam to join him.

Sam pointedly ignored the offer to 'cuddle.' "Are any pizza places open tonight?" Holidays being what they were, most places would be closed. Sam closed his book and got up, getting one last stretch in, arms reaching high overhead, almost brushing the ceiling.

Nick blinked at him, just this slow, lazy sort of expression, eyes following the long arch of Sam's body.

"No… probably not." He looked away, back at his computer. "Let me see what I can find."

They ended up ordering India food from a restaurant down the street. The place didn't offer takeout- so after Nick called in their order the two of them took the short walk to pick it up.

Outside the rain was coming down in a persistent drizzle and the two decided to share Nick's only umbrella, walking close enough that their shoulders brushed from time to time and really quickly Sam gave up apologizing for it.

"How do you think today went?" Sam asked hesitantly.
Nick glanced up, much closer to Sam than the younger man was used to people being.

"It could have gone a lot worse." He said after some thought.

"I take it that the fighting between you two isn't anything new."

"He started it." Nick's shoulder hitched as he got defensive.

Sam pursed his lips and looked away, because saying 'you weren't helping' probably wouldn't be productive.

"Michael and I haven't… we've never really liked each other, you could say."

"You seemed to get along well enough with his wife." Sam immediately regretted those words, biting the inside of his cheek and trying to form a hurried apology.

"Oh my. Is that jealousy I hear?" Nick teased, slowly spinning the umbrella between his hands.

"No. I didn't mean it like that."

"Anna knows that her husband can take things a little too far sometimes. She knows I can too- and she's been trying to keep us from killing each other since she met us. Some nonsense about if she was going to be part of our family she would make sure that there was still enough people left standing to be called a family." He pulled open the door of the Indian restaurant. "She's a good woman. A little intimidating, but good- and honestly better than my brother deserves."

Sam blinked into the florescent lights, shaking water from his hair, watching as Nick carefully folded his umbrella and nodded to the dark haired woman behind the counter. She nodded back, recognizing the man, no words exchanged as she went to get their order.

"Speaking of better than a brother deserves- I may have given Castiel advice on how to ask Dean out."

Nick made a startled noise, his eyes dancing with joy at the prospect. "Well, that's only fair I suppose."

"I thought so." Sam grinned.

The woman returned with two Styrofoam boxes settled into a take-out bag. "Here you are, Nick. Eighteen- forty-three."

Sam got out his wallet, but Nick got there first, slapping down a handful of bills.

"You paid last time."

"And I'll pay next time too." Nick said with a smirk, handing the food off to Sam. "I am the man in this relationship after all."

The woman behind the counter laughed softly, trying to hide it behind a hand as she took the offered money. "Have a good night, boys." Her dark eyes shone. "I will see you next week, Nick."

Nick shared her smile. "Goodnight, Sanjeet." He got his umbrella opened and held it up high for Sam as they started walking.

"Who says that you get to be the 'man' in this whole mess?"
"One of us has to be, and I'm older, so why not me?"

"I don't see why we aren't just both the 'men' … and besides, I'm taller." Sam argued as if it were a firm basis for anything.

"Anything over six foot doesn't count. Relationship wise, we're the same height."

"That's the dumbest rule I've ever heard." And Sam had heard plenty of dumb rules in his lifetime.

"When you're the older one you can pay for our meals- how's that?"

Sam gave one of his best bitch-faces in answer and earned himself a warm laugh.

"I'll let you hold doors open for me?" Nick added to his offer, trying to sweeten the deal.

Stubbornly, Sam kept up his scowl.

"You can be on top… sixteen percent of the time."

A laugh threatened to crawl out of Sam and he did his best to swallow it down. "Sixteen percent?"

"It's a great deal." Nick quickly pointed out. "Over the next three months we will have fake sex… why not… one hundred times? And for sixteen of those I will let you tell people that you bent me over."

"One hundred times?"

"It's about thirty times a month, so roughly once a day." Nick did some quick math. "It's a rigorous schedule, but doable."

"I don't know if you're up to it, old man." Sam's voice had gone a bit off as he rapidly lost the battle to his laughter. "We're supposed to be building a believable lie."

"Hey. I'm only thirty."

"Old." Sam taunted, dancing away as Nick aimed a sharp shove at him. He ended up outside of the shelter of the umbrella, rain quickly soaking into his hair and the shoulders of his jacket. "I just don't think anyone's going to believe that you can keep up with me. Not with that much fake sex going around. When would we even find the time?"

"When you want someone as much as I want you, you find a way." Nick held the umbrella over Sam's head, giving him a sideways smile that had no business being out in public.

Sam stubbornly went back out into the rain. Wanting no part in this nonsense.

Nick's hooded gaze only made his words all that much worse. "Final offer- and this is the bare minimum- eight times over the next three months. That puts me on my knees once if we're going to keep up the sixteen percent ratio."

"I'm not agreeing to this." Sam stubbornly dodged parking meters and kept pace with Nick, rain water running down the collar of his jacket.

"Fine. I will throw in two fairly drunk blowjobs- but that's my final offer." Nick was amazing at keeping a straight face, as if this were the most normal business proposition ever laid out.

Sam looked up into the rain clouds, trying to fight off the heat he felt rising to his cheeks from the mere suggestion of what they were going to lie about now. It wasn't that he was a particularly shy
individual. In truth, he liked to think that his body would have the same adverse reaction regardless of who was offering it such things.

Years of dealing with the regularly awkward things that Dean would say should have prepared him for something like this. Though decidedly, Nick was significantly worse to deal with than Dean. Sam's big brother was grossly inappropriate on a good day. But Nick was downright lewd. And the fact that it made Sam want to laugh instead of scaring him off like it should was probably a bad sign.

He sighed and returned to the shelter of the umbrella. "Charmer."

Nick gave another one of his soft, rolling chuckles and couldn't seem to keep eye contact with Sam, watching his mouth, then neck, and pretty much anywhere else that wasn't direct.

"It makes me a little uncomfortable just how comfortable you are with this." Sam said as they began the long climb back up to Nick's apartment.

"Oh, it's freaking me the fuck out." Nick grinned suddenly. "But I figure the more used to it I get when it's just you and me the easier it will be with other people around. Besides- I'm not the one who keeps blushing."

"I don't blush." Sam stopped on the landing between floors, taking a deep breath before trailing after Nick.

"You do. Like a teenage girl." Nick egged him on, just a few steps ahead, just out of arm's reach. "Which is the other reason why I get to be the man."

Sam managed the last flight of stairs in brooding silence, summoning a frown when he saw the other man waiting for him at the door, keys jingling in one hand. "Nothing? No come back? Does that mean you give up?"

"You are possibly the worst boyfriend I have ever had." There. He said it. So bitterly honest.

"So I win then?" Nick asked, eyebrows hitching, smile wide.

"You win." Sam mumbled, relenting because he knew he didn't have it in him to retaliate. For a moment he entertained the idea of pushing Nick against the wall, towering over him (as much as he could) and giving the man a stern lecture on how loudly propositioning him in the hallway was not welcome or wanted. But Nick was the tallest of his brothers, and undoubtedly knew that trick and he would only smile up at Sam in that infuriating way- just like he was now. And Sam would eventually just give up on the whole mess and let the man say whatever horrible things he wanted to. Nick simply didn't strike him as the sort of man who would ever actually act on his words. It was all just talk. And all those poorly crafted innuendos didn't scare Sam.

Quite the opposite actually. But he couldn't let on how much fun he was having. He was the long suffering, passive aggressive Winchester, who was often too serious for his own good. He had a certain reputation to upkeep.

The two of them pointedly did not cuddle on the couch, though Nick got his crazy legs going again and ended up half sprawled over Sam's lap, a comfortable weight, a nice balance of warmth to fight the chill of the room.

They picked at their food and watched 'Lost Boys' because Nick seemed insulted that Sam had never seen it before. All in all there was too much glitter and too many vampires, but it was good in the fantastic way that movies from the eighties can be sometimes.
By the time the credits started to roll it was almost ten-thirty. Later than Sam had intended on staying. He scraped up the last bits of curry and rice before tossing the box back onto the coffee table.

"Think it's still raining?" He arched, trying to look out the kitchen window from where he sat, but it was only dark outside. No way to see more.

Nick answered by turning off the movie, closing his eyes and simply listening. Sam followed suit, and heard the hum of the heater (which had never been turned up to Sam's satisfaction), his own shallow breaths, and somewhere outside the gusting of the wind.

"I think we should be safe if you want a ride home." Nick finally announced, his legs shifting against Sam as he sat up on his elbows. "I've even got an extra helmet for you. Pulled it out of storage a few days ago."

Surprised by the gesture, Sam smiled. "Thanks."

"Well, I'm sort of invested in that pretty face of yours. Thought I should do my best to protect it." He reached out to touch Sam, tips of his fingers almost reaching the younger man's cheek- but he twisted his wrist, flicking some of Sam's hair instead.

"That's almost… sweet of you." Sam hesitated, not really sure if that was the word he was looking for.

"I am widely known to be one of the sweetest people."

Sam scoffed, pushing Nick's legs off and standing. "I doubt that."

Nick almost managed to obey the speed limit for the short drive back to the little house with the picket fences and flower boxes. The noise of the bike was oddly muffled by Sam's helmet, it made the far too fast and reckless ride almost surreal. The warm curve of the other man's back molded to his chest, and the way that the rain had waited for them to get halfway there before coming at them sideways, swept about by the wind.

The bike settled in beside the Impala, odd angle on the slightly sloping driveway and Sam stumbled off, growing less and less graceful each time he hitched a ride. He tried to find his land legs, taking the opportunity to simply stand there, swaying in the rain, while Nick tugged off his helmet. His pale eyes looked almost black out here in the dark, his smile half hidden but visible enough to be concerning.

With practiced ease, he balanced his helmet on the handle bars, nodding for Sam to do the same, looking expectant.

So, for lack of better choices, Sam pulled off his helmet as well, regretting this choice in the same instant because it had been the only thing keeping his head safe from the determined rainfall.

"It's wet." He said simply, as if it needed to be pointed out. "You want to come inside and dry off?"

"So I can come back out and get soaked again?" Nick tilted his head, sliver of porch light cutting across his face. "I'm going to pass. Besides, I don't think your brother would like me coming in."

Sam waved it off, passing the helmet between his hands. "Dean's alright. He's just a bit overly protective."

"Then it'll bother him something awful if I kiss you goodnight?"
That got Sam laughing, despite the awkwardness and the cold and the rain. "Oh yea. He'll throw a fit. I'm looking forward to telling him about it tomorrow."

"Why wait?"

There was not enough time between Nick asking, and Nick grabbing him by the collar and pulling Sam down, for the younger man to formulate a proper answer to the question. All Sam managed to do was let out a startled noise that was a bit like a yip and he dropped his helmet in favor of bracing his hands against the other man's cheeks out of self preservation.

There were only centimeters between them, close enough that they were sharing breaths, startled silver clouds ghosting between their lips.

"Nick." Sam let out a shaky warning, surprised that he managed that much through the sheer panic he felt.

"God, you're high strung." Nick tightened his grip, making fists in Sam's jacket. "I'm not going to kiss you, you big girl." He was oddly easy to understand despite the fact that the younger man had fingers pressed against his mouth. "Your brother is peeking at us through the window. He sees us like this then you don't even have to tell him anything. Which is great for you because you don't strike me as being all that good of a liar."

Sam licked his lips, logic coming in through the terror of being this close to another guy. In the dark, in the rain, a good fifteen feet back- it wouldn't matter if they actually kissed or not, because with Sam bent down over the bike, with them holding on to each other so close- what they were doing would only be too obvious to Dean.

"You could have warned me, jerk."

"And miss that beautiful noise?" One of Nick's hands slid up into his hair and it was all somehow worse for it.

Sam closed his eyes. "Just promise you won't actually kiss me."

"Can I at least lick your fingers?"

"No." Sam's eyes flew open, and they were still too close, just too close.

"Then you want to get them off my mouth?" Nick was almost as good at that wide puppy dog eyes as Sam.

Feeling more than his regular amount of stupid, Sam moved his hands to Nick's cheeks, warmth beneath his fingertips. "How long are we going to stay like this? I'm getting wet."

"Oh, darlin'." Nick got that awful grin again. "I love when you talk dirty like that."

"The absolute worst boyfriend." Sam hooked an arm around Nick's neck, slowly tugging him into a choke hold, refusing to laugh at the joke.

Nick let their noses brush, punctuating his words. "I'm your only boyfriend."

"Yeah, well. You're setting the bar really low." He pointed out, pulling back by inches, feeling the cold settle down around him everywhere except where he and Nick were still touching.

"How can I resist you when you talk to me like that?" His hands slid down Sam, so lightly they almost couldn't be felt, before settling on Sam's sides, just high enough to miss his hips.
"You'll just have to try a little harder." Sam advised, feeling a little more control over the situation, and honestly pleased with the whole thing. It certainly saved him from having to figure out an awkward way to lie to Dean that he'd kissed a dude.

It couldn't have gone better - that was the last thing he thought before he felt one of Nick's hands slipping to the small of his back.

"I swear to god, Nick. If you touch my ass I will bite your face." They were still close enough to make the threat viable.

Judging by the sudden twinkle in his eyes, the man looked like he was debating whether to consider Sam's words a challenge or not. His fingers wiggled ever so slightly along Sam's spine. A taunt. A tease. A threat of his own.

Sam leaned back in, mouth open, teeth bared - and Nick started laughing, almost giddy.

"He's flickering the porch light."

Sam turned in the circle of Nick's arms, looking over his shoulder to watch in fascination as the porch light flickered off then on again, repeating the impatient pattern just in case anyone missed it.

"I'd better get in before he comes out and drags us apart."

"I'll miss you." Nick almost sang as he let go of Sam.

Sam stooped down, picking back up his poor new helmet which was now scuffed and fairly moist. "Well, I can't help you with that." They shared a grin, both a little too wide and wild, finding inappropriate amounts of joy in their communal lie. "Goodnight, Nick. Drive safe." Sam added on, knowing that there was little chance of it being followed.

"Goodnight, sweet prince." He tugged his helmet back on, started his bike back up with an understated roar and rolled slowly backwards down the driveway. Almost hesitant until he was pointed back in a homeward direction, then he tore off, spray of rain water flying off the back tire.

Sam stood there, dripping wet, watching the red haze of light fading off into the gloom.

Somewhere behind him the door to the house opened.

"Get your ass in here before you drown." Dean demanded with a voice that carried quite well through the rain.

Despite the fact that no actual kissing happened, thus nothing to actually feel embarrassed about, Sam found that he couldn't look at his brother. He settled for pushing his way into the house and avoiding eye contact like a trained professional.

"That's exactly what I tried to warn you about, Sam." Dean didn't waste any time. "That's what those looks can turn into... what the hell is wrong with you? Are you blushing?"

"I'm- I'm not blushing." He thought he managed to get out lamely, dumping his waterlogged book bag, pulling out its contents, making sure that everything was still alright. "Nothing happened."

"I saw." Dean's accusation was startlingly loud. "I saw the whole damn thing."

It was so much easier to lie when all you had to do was tell an unbelievable truth. The blushing was a weird reaction that Sam had no control over, but it was still a nice touch.
"Weren't you going to bed early tonight?"

"Was that part of the plan? Was I supposed to be in bed while some guy feels up my kid brother?"

"I'm an adult, Dean." Sam thunked his books down onto the coffee table with a bit more force than needed. "And you're the one who set me up with him in the first place."

"That doesn't mean I want to see it!" Dean was good at having dramatic arm gestures.

"Then don't look."

"Sammy." But it had more whining than anger in it. "Are you two, like, dating now?"

Sam had never been an actor, never was all that good at lying to his brother. He settled for kind of shrugging and making an awkward face.

They looked at each other from opposite ends of the room, all the tension leaving because after all these years they were good at picking their fights and they both knew that this one wasn't worth it.

"I don't like it." Dean finally decided aloud.

So Sam sighed and shook his head. "You don't have to. He's not going to be kissing you."

Dean's lip curled in disgust at the idea. "Just... don't put out too easy, you tramp- you'll embarrass the whole family. Try and wait til the third date if you can."

Enough was enough. "Goodnight, jerk."

Dean finally answered back, stubborn even in surrender. "Goodnight, bitch."
Chapter Notes

I feel like this chapter is super short, but I guess it's because it's comprised of three short little meetings. I've had it sitting here on my computer for half of forever, not sure if it's ready to post, because I wasn't sure where this chapter stopped and the next one started as they sort of run together- you'll understand better when you get to the end.

Some of you who were around for my last Samifer story might notice the return of Nick's glasses.
To which I say, if you have not treated yourself to looking at Mark Pelligino with glasses on you are doing yourself a disservice.
Or maybe I just have a thing for guys with glasses...
either way.

Classes wouldn’t resume until Monday morning. It gave Sam three whole days to himself. This was ample time to clean the kitchen, bring lunch to Dean at work, and (of course) study. He started on a paper for his ethics class, managed a short nap and even did some laundry all by the time he reached Saturday evening.

Sam was getting ready, settling himself into the corner of the couch with his laptop on his knees and a textbook open beside him. The wifi was turned off to help him resist the distractions of the internet and he was ready to get in some quality time between him and his notes- right up until Dean came home.

The Impala’s headlights spilling through the window for a moment before the garage opened. Sam marked where he was reading and waited for his brother. The rumble of the car’s engines died shortly followed the door between the house and garage opening. Except there wasn’t the regular greetings yelled down the hall. Dean was already talking to someone and it took Sam a moment to recognize the second voice as belonging to Castiel.

The two men came into the living room and Sam was given a set of smiles, one a little reserved, one more reckless.

“Hi kids.” Sam smiled. “What are you two up to tonight?” He asked as if he didn’t know, somehow very proud of himself to see the accountant standing so close to his brother.

“I needed to change, then we’re gunna go get some dinner and maybe see a movie.” Dean hesitated with one foot on the bottom stair. “You wanna come too, Sam?” He added as an afterthought.

Sam glanced at Dean, then at Castiel and they shared well measured look before Sam turned back to his brother. “I’m studying.” He excused himself. “But you guys have fun.”

Dean looked oddly happy about this news and nodded before jogging up to his room. The moment the door upstairs closed Castiel started shifting on the balls of his feet.
“Did you ask him?” Sam did his best not to smile.

“I did, and he said yes.” Cas explained as if anything actually needed explaining.

“You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“I’m leaving town tomorrow for a week and it didn’t seem like something that I should wait to get back to do.” He came to sort of hesitate on the far end of the couch, looking like he might join Sam, but at the same time like he didn’t know if he wanted to. “Thank you for the advice.”

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up too much, Cas.” Sam was struck with sudden guilt about what he had set into motion. Maybe Dean deserved a taste of his own good intentions, but Castiel really did seem like a nice guy and this might not be the nicest thing that Sam had ever done to someone.

“I know we’re just friends.” He tugged on his shirt sleeves, getting the most endearingly awkward smile. “But your brother makes me happy.”

And Sam didn’t know what to say to that, but he was spared having to respond because Dean came barreling back down stairs, clean jeans and not a spot of grease on his tshirt or jacket.

“Don’t stay up too late studying, Sam.” He advised as he searched himself for his keys. Finally finding them and holding them up with a soft jingle. “You’ll rot your brain with all that junk.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Enjoy your movie.”

“I’m serious.” Dean leaned over to push at his head, messing up Sam’s hair. “It’s ok to take a break every now and then.”

“Thanks for the advice. I will take it under firm consideration.” He said to his highschool drop out of a brother.

“Call up a friend or something. Watch a movie. Steal some of my beer. Slack off for a few minutes. I just don’t want to see you still sitting there with your face in that book when I get back.”

It was possible that the lack of any real parental influence in their lives while they were growing up had forced Dean to overcompensate- making him an odd combination of overprotective mother, slacker brother, and supportive father all rolled into one difficult to deal with man. Sam was grateful even if it was frustrating.

“Yes, sir.” Sam nodded, agreeing if only to get his brother out of the house.

“Damn right, yes.” He huffed and walked off to the garage mumbling to himself.

Castiel kind of shrugged at Sam and waved a self-conscious goodbye before hurrying after his friend.

Sam managed to wait almost ten minute before going and getting his phone off the charger in the kitchen where he had left it (also to help avoid distractions) and started texting Nick.

-my brother is taking yours on a date

-right now
Nick didn’t mess around about it, he called Sam and his voice was overly loud with disbelief and amusement. “Shut up- no he isn’t.”

“Dean doesn’t know it’s a date. And your brother is all excited about it, and what did I do?”

Nick just laughed.

“I’m serious. He’s gunna do something brave like… like kiss Dean and Dean’s going to punch him.”

The humor went right out of Nick. “He better not.”

“Well, no…” Sam thought about his big brother, about his almost nonexistent homophobia that came and went at will, his lack of personal boundaries. “No. He wouldn’t. He likes Cas too much. But Dean- he’s not going to take it well when he realizes it’s a date. He gets real weird about those kinds of things.”

“About guys kissing him? That’s an oddly specific thing to get weird about.”

“It runs in the family.” Sam assured, rubbing at his face. “Cas is a… he’s a nice guy. I shouldn’t have encouraged him.”

“Aw, Sam. Are you having an attack of conscience?”

“Yes.” Guilt overrode the need to study.

“I don’t have any appointments tonight… want me to come over and hold your hand or something.”

The short answer was ‘no’.

But Sam found himself saying yes for some reason.

Half an hour later and Nick was sitting beside him on the couch, a pizza between them. And along the lines of this man making a strong showing for winning some kind of boyfriend award, Nick had also brought a book to read, because he didn’t want to make too much noise in case Sam was going to be studying.

Not that he was reading his book right now, right now he was teasing Sam about the very vegetarian pizza that they were sharing.

Sam wasn’t really complaining, because the food was amazing, but still…”I do eat meat you know.”

“I hope so.” Nick winked over his slice.

Sam rolled his eyes as hard as he could and otherwise chose not to justify whatever that was with any kind of response.

“Come on now- that one was easy. You set yourself up.” His eyes crinkled on the corners as he smiled into his slice of pizza.

“I don’t know why I let you in.”

“I don’t either.” He confided between bites.
As long as neither of them knew why they were here like this. It wasn’t part of the game they were playing, or at least Sam didn’t think so. Perhaps he actually did just want someone to ‘hold his hand’, someone to sit with him while he attempted to wait out this anxiety of what he had done.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine, you know.” Nick said after a thoughtful pause. “Cas’ never been all that good at judging what’s socially appropriate, but he can hold his own.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“Do you want me to give him a call, warn him to keep his mouth to himself?”

It was a tempting offer. Nick could simply tell Cas off, let him know that Dean wasn’t going to take any advances well. “Maybe we should just let it happen.”

“Even if you didn’t give Cas a little push, he would have gone that way eventually.” Nick said almost gently. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. Apparently you Winchesters are just irresistible to my family.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do with any of your brothers. You’re more than enough for me as it is.”

“Aw, Sam.” Nick made his name two syllables. “How sweet.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.” Sam promised, wiping his hands on his jeans and pulling his laptop over. It was the most dismissive gesture he could manage to give in an effort to escape their conversation.

Nick made a noise of resignation and pulled out his book, understanding too well that they were done with their little back and forth. But he never argued. He did turn himself sideways on the couch, tucking his feet under Sam’s leg- and there was no telling when he had managed to take his shoes off, or why his toes were so cold despite his socks, but there they were.

“Why are you so cold?” Sam found himself leaning away as much as he could manage without his laptop sliding off his knees.

“Why are you so warm?”

“High metabolism?” He suggested.

“I’ve always run a bit cold myself.” Nick dug his toes in a little deeper between the couch and the meaty part of Sam’s thigh. “Maybe we can balance each other out?”

Sam sighed, because he could already tell that this wasn’t a situation that he was going to come out on top of. He settled himself in, despite the cold lumpiness now beneath his leg. To be fair, Nick wasn’t any more annoying or touchy than Dean, so he should be easy enough to ignore.

And that’s how they stayed until those familiar headlights passed over the window.

Sam glanced at the little clock in the corner of his laptop, rubbing at his eyes. It was almost eleven. When did it get so late?

“I guess Cas talked him into seeing a movie.”

“Hmn?” Nick glanced up and Sam was startled to see that the man was not only over halfway done with his book, but had on reading glasses - because apparently Sam was really that involved
with his notes and books that he never even noticed the man putting them on.

“Maybe everything went ok after all.” He made himself look away, turning to peer down the hall, waiting to see Dean come in.

But Dean wasn’t coming in. The engine died, but no one was opening any doors.

The waiting became a bit too much and Sam started getting antsy.

“What’s he doing out there?” Nick asked, wiggling his toes.

“How should I know?” Sam closed his laptop and pushed it over to the coffee table.

Something was wrong.

“As fun as this promises to be, I have a feeling I’ll only make it worse.” Nick extracted himself from under Sam’s leg and stood to his comfortably tall height. “You’ll let me know if anyone copped a feel of anything good, right?”

Horrible mental image there. “If anything happened I’m sure that Dean won’t be telling me.” Dean had never been big on sharing, and it was something that Sam had never been more grateful for.

Nick fumbled his shoes on. “Well, you tell me if anything seems suspicious. I need to know if I’ve got to get Cas a cherry pie.”

“Why would you…”

“It’s got to happen one day.” Nick’s grin was nothing if not optimistic.

“I don’t want to know.” Sam put his hands up, palms out in surrender. A *cherry pie*? “Finals start on Monday, so we’ll have to put this,” he nodded between them, “on hold for the next two weeks.”

“On hold?” Nick stiffened. “We have our first kiss two days ago and suddenly we’re going on hold? What does that even mean?”

“It means I can’t come out and play until my tests are done.”

“How’s that going to look?”

“Finals.” Sam insisted, because Nick didn’t understand the gravity of it. “They are currently more important to me than oxygen and you’ll just have to keep your hands to yourself for a while.”

“You can still come over and study if you need to.” Nick offered after some thought. “Just to keep up pretences.”

“Can I say I’m coming over? No one’s going to be double checking.” It would save Sam having to sacrifice time in transit from place to place if he could just stay at school between tests.

“I’ll vouch for you, if that’s what you want.” Though he didn’t sound particularly happy about it.

“Aww, are you going to miss me?” Sam teased.

“I will miss you like the stars miss the sun in the morning skies.” He vowed solemnly.

Sam glanced down the hall. Still nothing and it was very possible that Dean would never come
back inside. “Don’t do that.” He said to Nick, never taking his eyes from the door handle that didn’t move.

“You never let me have any fun.” Nick whined softly, brushing past Sam as he scooted between the younger man and the coffee table in his path to the door. He let out a deep sigh when he reached his very bland destination. “So… see you in two weeks?”

Sam got off the couch, because at some point someone instilled in him a need to see guests to the door and he couldn’t let himself just sit there on the couch while he said ‘goodbye’.

“I’ll give you a call once tests are over and I’ve slept for a day or two.” Sam promised.

Nick nodded and then followed an odd moment where they just sort of stood there within arm’s reach of each other with nothing more to say.

Seemingly out of generosity, the universe saw fit to give them a distraction to their sudden unease.

Dean came in finally. From their vantage point, Sam could see directly down the hall and he watched his big brother compose himself. Rubbing at his jaw, scratching the back of his neck, straightening his shoulders. It was an elaborate but subtle dance and more than likely the nuances were lost on Nick who didn’t know how to read the man like Sam did.

With one final touch of fingers to his mouth, all the while staring somewhere down around his own feet, Dean seemed to have found some kind of balance in himself. “Hey, Sammy. You still up?” He didn’t talk too loud, and if Sam hadn’t been looking directly at him he never would have suspected anything was off from his even, almost cheerful tone.

“Right here.” Sam announced and watched as Dean jumped back a few inches, looking over at the two men with a wild expression.

“Oh, hey.” He found a confidant smile within second, and it looked almost completely believable. “I thought that was your bike out front.”

“Yeah.” Nick’s smile was easy, almost innocent. “I was just leaving.” His pale eyes darted to Sam and there was something bad in that glance. “What movie did you and Cas end up seeing?”

Dean sort of shrugged. “I don’t remember what it was called. There was a haunted mirror and a chick and her brother were trying to destroy it because it killed their mom.”

“You took Cas to a horror movie?” Nick sounded appalled at the suggestion. “He’s terrified of scary anythings. Did you have to hold his hand the whole time?”

“Once or twice.” Dean admitted softly, shaking his head. “You didn’t let him study all night, did you?”

“Hell no.” Nick’s smile went wide and Sam felt uncomfortable standing between them. “I like kissing him too much to let him study. Which is incidentally why he’s kicking me out.”

Sam wanted to say ‘no’ or ‘shut up’ but it was a good enough lie so he let it be.

Dean managed to look vaguely nauseous and approving at the same time, which was impressive. “Alright. New rules, whatever it is you two girls decide to do to each other, I don’t hear about it and it doesn’t happen on my couch- or any other place where I nap or eat. And I don’t want to see it.”

“Fair enough.” Nick agreed, ignoring the small noises of protest coming from Sam because
apparently he wasn’t part of the bargaining process and his input was unnecessary. “But then the same goes for you and Cas.”

All of Dean tensed, his whole body going stiff for a second. “You want to run that by me again.”

“I get it. Sam’s your brother and some guy making him hot and bothered isn’t something you want to see. But I feel the same about my kid brother.”

Nick’s assessment earlier had been fairly accurate. He did only make it worse.

Sam wanted to push the man out the door and tell Dean that none of that was ever said, because he could see the anger and denial and everything else unnamable and volatile wash over his brother and Sam knew that there was very little time to salvage this.

“If you’re still hungry, there’s pizza on the coffee table.” Sam smiled at Dean, giving the best peace offering he could come up with on such short notice as he actively started to push Nick towards the door. He leaned into the blonde and bore his teeth. “Go home.” A clean and concise threat hidden under that whisper. “I’ll call you in two weeks- if you’re lucky.”

Unimpressed jerk that he was, Nick only grinned, looking oh so pleased with himself and the trouble that he had cause with only a few misplaced words. He leaned in and before Sam could stop him the man kissed his cheek.

“Good night, Sam. Study hard.” Warm undertones to his voice that prickled along Sam’s skin in an unwelcome way.

“Good night.” He tried to keep up that forceful tone but it had lost most of its bite.

As partings went it was a little lacking.

Once the door closed Dean found his voice. “I don’t like him.”

“He’s…” Sam searched for some kind of defense for Nick and found himself coming up short. “I’ve really got to get back to my books.”

“Dump him, Sam.” Dean suggested, going to investigate the pizza and he scowled at it and its lack of meat. “You can do better.”

“I like him.” That was all Sam had to offer his brother in way of an argument. It wasn’t great- but it was true.

And that kind of surprised him.

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Three days later saw Sam on the near end of a nervous breakdown. He had barricaded himself into one of the study rooms in the lower levels of the school library, back where they keep all the old reel to reels, millimeter films, and other things that hadn’t been used in the last twenty years or so but no one had bothered to toss out.

As per etiquette, if you managed to find a closet not stacked high with canisters then you claimed it as your own and threatened any invaders to your territory with bodily harm. Sam had locked himself in about an hour after his first test of the day ended, in an effort to have the quiet that he needed to rewrite the last chunk of an essay he had due that night.

For possibly the fifth time since he had claimed the room he heard the door handle rattle behind
“Taken.” He said without turning around- but he didn’t need to say anything. There was a window in the door, specifically so people could look in and know it was in use and not knock on the doors and disrupt people who were trying to study.

Wouldn’t it be amazing if people bothered to actually look before knocking?

He rubbed at his face, then his neck, wishing that the tables were a bit taller so he wasn’t hunched down around his laptop, but beggars can’t be choosers and he was just lucky to have found a room.

The door rattled again, annoying, tapping little knocks like they were doing it on purpose.

Sam turned, half climbing up out of chair, and was horrified to see Nick’s sleepy blue eyes peering at him through the little window.

“Oh, for the love of god.”

Nick saw that Sam saw him and the man gave a big smile and a waggle of fingers.

Though Sam could have opened the door, all he did was stare. Too confused at the apparition to do anything.

Nick lightly kissed the glass between them.

Slowly, Sam turned back to his laptop, because no. Just plain and simple. No.

“Sam-” Nick’s voice was muffled through the door, barely more than a whisper. “Sam. I missed your face. Let me in.”

For what it was worth, Sam was able to stubbornly ignore Nick up until the man started singing to him. If he made too much noise he would disturb the other students studying and get himself kicked out. The librarians might send Sam with Nick.

It wasn’t worth the risk and he got up and popped the simple lock on the handle.

“Shut up and get in here before you get us both in trouble.”

Nick just smiled that smile of his and sauntered in like he had every right to be here- which he didn’t.

Sam closed the door and leaned against it, taking a slow breath. He wanted to make some accusation, or at least demand to know what Nick needed, but all those thoughts left, replaced with the singular notion that Nick smelled amazing.

He smelled like roast beef and spicy mustard and- and Nick produced a crumpled paper bag from his coat and held it aloft.

“Is that…?”

“I had to call Cas and get your brother’s number, then had to call your brother, get him to actually answer the phone at work, and tell me what you wanted for lunch.” He handed the bag to Sam like a sacred offering. “Apparently this is your favorite, non plant thing to eat. I couldn’t live with myself if I brought you a salad.”

“I… you have to go all the way to Pacifica to get these.” He took the sandwich that had to have
been made at a little diner he knew so well near the ocean, the little red logo on the bag told him as much. He and Dean had found the place two summers ago during a fortuitous beach trip. The damn sandwiches had to have been made with something more profound, and possibly sinister, than simply bread and meat and cheese, because even after all this time, Sam still inexplicably craved them every few weeks. Just the smell alone was making it hard to think.

“I drove fast. It should still be warm.” Nick sat himself down on the edge of the desk, crossing his ankles and arms, looking positively smug with all that he had done.

“We aren’t allowed to have food in here.” Sam was positively drooling, but rules were rules.

“I won’t tell if you won’t.” He promised.

And that was enough incentive for him. Sam sat back down and got halfway through the sandwich, and deep fried zucchini (Dean knew him well, or Nick was just that good at guessing), before his got his train of thought back on its tracks.

“How did you even find me down here?”

“I asked around if anyone had seen a depressed looking giant with a boy-band-haircut and shoulders like a musk ox.” Nick stole a zucchini slice and looked pensive as he chewed. “Almost everyone’s so busy with their faces in their books that they missed seeing you—except one perky little redhead. She said you held the doors open for her in the stairwell. She was going up, you were going down. She wanted to know if you were seeing anyone, and maybe could I give her your number. I told her thank you, and yes, and no— in that order.”

“You know— I’m sure you were speaking clearly, but I have no idea what you just said to me.”

Nick chuckled. “You brother said you’ve been a bit of a mess since finals started.”

This was not particularly new news to Sam. Dean had been quite verbal in expressing his concern over Sam’s mental health over the last few days. He was honestly starting to worry about himself as well.

“I’m going to run away from home and becoming a highwayman.” He took another bite, chewing a bit before speaking again. “Highwaymen don’t have to take finals or write papers.”

“I think you’ll find a shortage of stagecoaches to rob in this part of the country. It’s not going to be a profitable occupation.” Nick watched Sam chewing. “Is it really that good?”

“I’m considering marrying this sandwich. I will be Mrs Sandwich. You’re not invited to our wedding.”

Nick very gently touched the bend of Sam’s elbow, tugging at his arms and moving the sandwich away from its comfortable eating distance. “Your brother is worried about you, and I think I might be too.”

“I’m ok. I’ve got food.” Had he remembered breakfast this morning? Maybe not. Oh, but it was a good sandwich.

“Can I have a bite?”

Sam looked at his food, then at the man who wanted to take it from him… but Nick had also brought the food in the first place, so it complicated things. Reluctantly, he held out the sandwich and watched warily as Nick took a generous bite.
Nick’s eyes rolled back, closed, as he slowly chewed. “God, I should have gotten two.”

Sam reclaimed his food, keeping it close and safe, wanting to savor the last few bites. “How do you drive all that way and not get yourself something to eat?”

“The goal of today was to bring you food.” He shrugged, lazy expression, though he was now watching Sam’s last bit of food vanishing away with little, hungry bites. “I’m a one thing at a time kind of guy.”

Digging in the bottom of the bag, Sam found some napkins and he wiped at his hands and mouth. “I would tell you to stop buying me food- but anytime at all that you get the idea to bring me one of those sandwiches- just do it. I won’t complain.”

Nick’s smile was the only answer he gave.

It was good enough for Sam.

He felt almost bad when it was time to chase the man off- but those paragraphs weren’t going to write themselves. His hands felt too big and awkward on Nick’s shoulders as he literally had to get behind him and push to get him moving towards the door.

“But I miss you.”

“It’s only been three days- and I told you that I would be busy until the end of next week. You’re going to just have to pine for me.” Even after the heavenly lunch, Sam just didn’t have the energy to joke around like this.

“Can I at least get a kiss goodbye?” Nick arched against Sam’s pushes, looking over his shoulder and fighting the leaving momentum.

“No.” Sam said firmly.

“Not even for luck?”

“Not even for a sandwich.”

“But I love you.”

“No you don’t.”

“No. I don’t. But-”

“Goodbye, Nick.” Sam gave one last, firm, shove. “I’ll call you when finals are done. We can go see a movie or something.”

“I’m going up to the Bay next weekend. Come with me?”

“Why?” Sam felt what at this point was a fairly well earned suspicion.

“I’ve got some things to do and thought the company would be nice.”

“Things?” Sam was still pushing but there was less force now.

“Getting two of the pegs on my violin fixed, concert, touch up on one of my tattoos.”

“Oh.” The majority of Sam’s mental processes were wholly devoted to that essay sitting on his laptop. Sure he could go with Nick. Tests would be done. It might be nice to get out of Stanford
“I think I’d like that.” It was probably ok to let himself get a little excited at the prospect of a light at the end of the test tunnel.

“You’re upsettingly adorable when you smile.” Nick patted Sam’s cheek. “I think I might keep you.” He kept his hand against Sam’s skin, long fingers and standing far too close. “Do well on your tests. Make us proud.”

Sam laughed, turning away, not sure what to say to that anymore than he was sure why he felt oddly embarrassed about the whole thing.

There was an obnoxiously loud ringing that just wouldn’t stop. Sam rolled over in bed, fumbling for his stupidly bright phone, shielding his eyes while he tried to find the ‘accept’ button.

“Yeah?” The fact that he had not actually been gargling with glass before bed was not at all evident in his voice and he had to cough a few times and try again.

“Hey, Sam.”

That voice… he should know that voice. There was something familiar to it.

“Sorry for calling so late. I-“

“Nick?” Sam pressed his forearm to his eyes, trying to push back the sudden headache he felt coming on. “God. What time is it?”

“Almost four.”

“Why?” Sam half sobbed. It was a Wednesday and he had suffered through the first week of finals, the second week starting with a particularly painful Law examine yesterday afternoon and he had another one that promised to be just as bad, if not worse, in about four hours.

“Can I come over?”

“I’m sleeping, Nick.” Sam wasn’t going to cry. Really he wasn’t. It just felt like it. “I am literally sleeping right now. And you can take a flying leap off the nearest go fuck yourself bridge and leave me alone because I’ve got to get up in three hours and take another test.”

“The power’s out in my apartment building.” The man said quickly, pleading, before Sam could hang up on him. “I can see my breath. Please, Sam. I just need a couch somewhere that’s not freezing cold.”

Sam’s brain took a moment to catch up as he rolled to glare at his alarm clock. “Text me when you get here. If you ring the doorbell and wake Dean I will have to make him wait in line to murder you and he doesn’t like having to wait.”

Nick made some noise like a thank you, but Sam was already hanging up, rolling over on his phone and promptly falling back asleep. All too soon, his phone started vibrating under his cheek—which was a horrible way to wake up. He didn’t even bother reading the text, just pulled himself to his feet and stumbled as quietly as he could down stairs.

The lock, as well as the door handle fought him, and he may have fallen back asleep briefly because when he opened his eyes (not even remembering having closed them) he was cold,
standing in a frosty draft with his forehead pressed to the door. Nick was beside him, hand on his shoulder, saying something soft and forgettable.

“You’re wet.” Sam pointed out as Nick took the door, closing and locking it.

“It’s raining.” Nick shadowy silhouette started to struggle out of its jacket. “And there’s sleet and I can’t feel my hands or toes at this point.”

“I’ll borrow you some dry clothes.” Sam started pawing his way back upstairs in the dark, familiar enough with the layout of the house that he knew where to go even with his eyes drifting back closed.

Nick followed somewhere behind him, or at least Sam was fairly certain that that’s what the quiet and clumsy sounds meant.

They made it to his room and with likely good intentions, Nick found the light switch and bathed them both in painfully sharp light. Sam hissed and whimpered, covering his eyes and hating himself for answering his phone when Nick called. He could be sleeping right now. He could.

“Sorry.” The man apologized, dousing the lights. “Sorry.”

As quiet as he could, so as not to somehow wake his brother who was sleeping just down the hall, Sam dug through his dresser and found some flannel pants and a sweat shirt. He pushed them into Nick’s hands and before the man could say anything else, Sam also found the towel he had used that evening after his shower and he handed that over as well.

“Thanks.” Nick took him all with such sincere gratitude. “Where’s an extra blanket?” He was already edging back towards the room’s only door, obviously wanting to get out of the way.

A few minutes ago such a question would have been boggling, but Sam had been upright and having to make coordinated choices for too long, his brain starting to catch up with his body. “Blankets? Dean… he took the extra ones last night.” It seemed like each night was getting colder and colder as they entered the full and promising embrace of winter.

“That’s ok.” Nick said gently. “I’ll just-

“Dry clothes first.” Sam instructed as the foremost order of business even as he was crawling back into bed. “You get the left side. Any efforts to keep me from sleeping- and I swear to god I will smother you with a pillow.” There was no way to tell how the man was taking his instructions because Sam’s was already settling so perfectly into his beautiful, welcoming bed.

He stirred on the edges of sleep, coming back to himself as the far side of the mattress dipped.

“Thanks.” Nick repeated for possibly the millionth time, ignoring the fact that Sam wanted no gratitude. Only sleep.

“G’night.” Sam mumbled into his pillow, shying away slightly as the mass of cold that was Nick came to rest beside him.

“Sam?”

He would kill Nick. He really would. And no one would consider it anything other than justifiable homicide at this point.

“Do I get a goodnight kiss?”
“I hate you.” Sam growled sleepily. “You suck and I hate you.”

“Is that a no?”

Nick’s cheeks were just as cold as promised and Sam did his best to keep the contact as brief as possible while he clumsily grabbed the other man and pulled him over enough to find his mouth and kiss him. Just a rough, dry press of lips, short and to the point- before angrily rolling over.

“Now good fucking night.”

Nick didn’t say goodnight back.

But Sam was already asleep, so he didn’t really notice.
When I sneak to your bed

Chapter Notes

It's late here (it's always late here) and I can never think of great things to say.

But I adore you guys.
I always have mixed thoughts on the things that I write, and then you guys just send me the loveliest notes and I... yeah.
I write for you guys.
You're still here reading this junk, even when it's just another chapter of fluff, and I feel like somehow we're friends because of it.
As one introvert in the depths of California, to the wide and mysterious internet-thanks.

What felt like only seconds later, but was actually a little more than three hours, Sam’s alarm clock went off loud as a klaxon, jarring him to wakefulness. He tried to find the button, slapping at the stupid thing to make the bad sound stop.

It was hard to move and at first he chalked it up to sleep heavy limbs, but it was worse than that. Much worse than that. Someone was in his bed with him- which was a very abnormal thing to happen to Sam even on the best of mornings.

There were arms around his chest and the weight of a whole other human body against his right side, pinning him down. But the extra person wasn’t soft in the right places. The arms were too well muscled. The chest too flat. It’s not that Sam was complaining, but he really would have preferred a blonde of a different gender.

He didn’t remember letting Nick in - and there was a few hard seconds of utter and complete alarm accompanying the notion that the man had just invited himself into Sam’s bed. When and how and most importantly why?

Nick shifted against him, stirring slightly at all the movement and noise, before mumbling something incoherent and warm into the younger man’s throat. And Sam was about ready to throw Nick because this was way too close and wholly unasked for- but tentatively, the slightest memory of letting Nick into the house last night returned to Sam. He had been almost completely asleep at the time, but at some point in the wee hours he had opened the door and given the man something dry and warm to wear along with a corner of mattress and some blanket.

Nick had certainly managed to spread himself out and settled in before sunrise.

But there were more important things to think about now. He had a test in about an hour.

Untangling himself would have been easier if the blonde didn’t sleep like a sack of bricks. It was like trying to move a corpse, one that was still warm and breathing softly along Sam’s throat.
Ok, maybe not as much like a corpse. But Sam wasn’t thinking too clearly yet.

He got up, threw all excess blankets over the still sleeping Nick, quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a few layers of various lengths of shirts, grabbed his backpack and hurried to school.

His second to last test of the semester was a testament to his teacher’s sadism, comprising of a sixteen page fill in the blank exam, complete with two short essays, and Sam left school feeling blindsided and drained. He made his way back home on foot, not bothering to call his brother for a ride, because he wanted the quiet time to decompress after such an awful morning. Dean would want to talk and Sam was fairly certain he had already used up his daily quota of words.

If it wasn’t for the horrible weather it would have been a relaxing walk. If nothing else he had the biting cold to think about and that was simple and clean and not at all academic.

It was just starting to rain again when he jogged up to the porch and secretly he was relieved to see that the Impala as well as Nick’s bike weren’t in front of the house anymore. The ‘boyfriend’ was practically more trouble that he was worth, and Sam just didn’t have the energy to deal with him right now. Maybe in a few days after that last test was done. When he felt human again.

He thought that he would have the house to himself for a few hours until Dean got off work- Sam hadn’t even considered that his big brother would have taken the car into the garage, or that he would have made room for Nick to pull his bike in beside the Impala to keep it out of the rain. Sam had been so relieved at his perceived good luck to make such considerations and when he opened the door to find Nick and Dean sitting pretty beside the fireplace, with coffee and beer respectively, he was struck by how unfair life really was.

Sam weighed the very tempting possibility of simply closing the door and walking away. He could just run away from home and not deal with whatever this was.

“Heya, Sammy!” Dean pointed his bottle at a startled Nick who was innocently sipping on his coffee. “Did ya’ know that your boyfriend’s got a ’69 Shelby?”

Boyfriend? Last time Dean had mentioned Nick it had been with far more colorful names attached. Apparently some kind of manly bonding had been undertaken since the early hours of the morning, and a level of truce had been reached.

Never taking his hand from the door Sam did his best to collect his thoughts, assessing the odd situation before him. “By how happy you are about it, I’m guessing that a Shelby is either a car or a sex doll?”

Nick started choking on his coffee, laughing and setting his mug down in favor of covering his mouth.

Dean grinned without a glimmer of shame. “You guessed right. Now close the damn door. You’re letting all the warm out.”

Sighing in resignation, Sam, finally took the last few steps inside and locked up behind him. “It is a car- right?” He needed the clarification for sanity sake if nothing else.

“Yes, it’s a car.” Dean explained because Nick was still chuckling to himself and he couldn’t seem to take a long enough break to form an answer.

“That’s good to know.” Which was the god’s honest truth. Sam didn’t want to think about the two men sitting around a fire, drinking and talking about anything other than cars. Cars were safe. At least safer than the alternative.
Then the whole thing struck him. “Wait, Nick- you own a car?”

He nodded, still laughing.

“They why are you driving a motorcycle in the rain?”

“Because my car is a princess and I can’t take her out in weather like this.”

Sam looked at Dean for some kind of acknowledgement that that was an insane thing to say- that driving a bike in the rain wasn’t worth protecting a car. But Dean was nodding along in complete agreement as if were the only logical choice and he commended Nick for making the sacrifice in order to spare a car from getting a little wet.

It was always nice to see two people with the wrong priorities in life finding each other. Sam just hadn’t realized that when he had agreed to date Nick he had actually been picking himself up a second Dean. One had been plenty. Thanks.

He was about to add something sarcastic and concise, still not quite able to summon up any complex sentences but he dimly absorbed the fact that Nick was still wearing the clothes he must have borrowed last night and Sam lost whatever words he had been looking for.

The pants could have been anyone’s, ugly grey and green stripes, but the sweatshirt... the logo from Sam’s old highschool back in Kansas was faded and peeling from the well worn, red sweatshirt. Without even being able to see, he knew that the back said ‘Winchester’. It had been Sam’s soccer sweatshirt and Dean had chipped in to help him buy it senior year. His varsity number had been lucky thirteen and according to his big brother that meant something significant and they couldn’t pass up the chance to commemorate it with official clothing.

It wasn’t that seeing Nick in his clothes was particularly noteworthy other than that is somehow triggered a more clear memory of last night. For the briefest of seconds Sam had lingered last night, debating if he was willing to let someone wear his school sweatshirt, if it would even fit Nick. Then Sam had curled up in his warm, soft bed, and Nick had joined him like the man sized ice cube that he was. Careful, but flawed little memories of the night before. Something else had happened after Nick had joined him. Something that...

Oh God.

Sam felt his eyes go wide and his breath stick in his throat- because that man sitting there cross legged, attempting to sip at his coffee despite the fact that he was still chuckling a little too hard- last night... last night that man’s mouth had been pressed against Sam Winchester’s and that wasn’t something that any other man in the world could make a claim to.

There were stupid things to do- and then there were horrifically stupid things to do.

Honestly, he had just wanted some sleep and shutting Nick up looked to be the only way to get there.

Maybe Sam had been accused of being a morning person once or twice- but that was mornings. He could wake up wide eyed and ready to face that day. Nights were a different story all together.

All Winchester men made the worst choices imaginable in the middle of the night. It was like all their common sense went to sleep long before the rest of them did. And as such, the right to make any kind of life altering choice should be taken away from them between the haunting hours.

John’s midnight exploits were too numerous to bother mentioning.
Dean could boast a tattoo that Sam had only seen once due to its indelicate location, as well as a three hour marriage to a show girl named Trixy (or Tina or Trinity… something like that) in Las Vegas about two years back. No alcohol had been involved in either of those beautiful choices. Just a stunning lack of sleep to aide in the decision making process.

And Sam wasn’t much better. There was once, at almost one in the morning, after a double feature at the drive-in, in the Impala that he had borrowed without permission, Sam lost his virginity with a long legged Junior who had been on the track team. She had also been dating a very sturdy senior named Trevor at the time and incidentally the next night Sam found himself in a very impressive fist fight with the guy during their soccer game and they both were threatened with suspension.

There were plenty of other things that Sam had done wrong over the years between sun set and sun rise. Last night however felt like the cherry on the top of all those lovely mistakes.

Some of that dawning realization must have shown on his face because Dean was stumbling to his feet, brotherly concern radiating from him. “You alright?”

“I’m fine.” He answered a bit too quick, suddenly unable to look at either man. “I’m going to go get something to eat.” An easy excuse and he was out of the room, hiding in the shelter of the kitchen. He shuffled through the cabinets, coming up with three practically empty boxes of cereal and all the crumbs and flakes got dumped into a single bowl. It wasn’t that Sam was actually hungry- he just needed something to do with himself that didn’t involve painstakingly going over every little moment of the short, passionless kiss from last night.

He was digging the carton of milk from the back of the fridge when someone spidered their fingers up his spine, and Sam jumped, trying to get away so fast that he smacked his head on the freezer handle. Cradling his suddenly wounded skull, he slunk back, pressing against the fridge then the counter sort of rolling away from the man behind him.

“Oh, darlin’- are you alright?” Nick was chuckling again, such a pleasant, soft noise, more like a good humored sigh than anything else. “Are you always this high-strung, or did I just meet you at the wrong time?”

Sam stayed half crouched, knees bent and leaning heavily on the counter as he felt his hair for blood- certain that there would be some even though he hadn’t hit his head hard enough. “Are you trying to kill me?” He peered at Nick through watering eyes.

“No. But I’m starting to agree with your brother, you don’t look like you’re doing ok.”

“Of course I don’t look ok. I need stitches, you jerk.”

Nick rolled his eyes and forcibly grabbed Sam’s head, pushing fingers through his hair, feeling an impressive bump that was already forming. “You don’t need stitches, you big girl.”

Sam looked up at the man, their fingers touching, brushing together, Nick pushing hair from Sam’s eyes. “Too close.” He said weakly.

It was hard to say if Nick remembered last night the same way. If he felt the same nerve wracked anxiety over what happened- or if he just felt equally alarmed with their proximity. His eyes caught Sam’s and a certain level of unease shifted through him as he took a generous step back. “It was a bit close, wasn’t it?”

Though he had to do it with more care than normal, Sam ran a hand through his hair, shaking out the lingering feeling of a stranger’s touch. “Nick. Last night-“
“Thanks for letting me come over.” The man said clearly and firmly, never taking his gaze from Sam. “I was going to die of hypothermia if I stayed in that apartment.”

Sam pulled himself up to his full height, needing the greater altitude to give him courage. “So, uh…did you sleep alright then?” He would happily pussyfoot around the topic, touching on easier things instead.

“You’re like my own private space heater.” Nick showed his teeth in something that almost resembled a grin. “It was fantastic.”

“Good.” Sam said softly, looking anywhere other than at Nick. “About the… last night…” How do you approach a subject like this? “Did you know, students in the midst of finals have been known to suffer from mild psychotic breaks from time to time. It’s the stress.” He cleared his throat. “We can’t be held accountable for things that we do in the middle of the night during a sleep deprived breakdown while in the company of bad men.”

“Bad men?” Nick made one of those wounded noises that he did so well, hand to his chest in a perfect picture of martyrdom. “Are you insinuating that I am a bad man?”

“You know what you are.”

Nick hummed in something like approval or agreement, before getting the milk out for Sam and closing the fridge. “I’m about as innocent as the devil himself- but that was all you last night.”

“You provoked me… and I was asleep.”

“You didn’t taste asleep.”

“I didn’t taste like anything.” Sam felt heat creeping up his neck and he took the milk from Nick, pouring it into his bowl and making breakfast soup. “And if you thought that was a kiss then you’ve obviously been alone at lot longer than you’re admitting to.”

“Well, maybe it lacked a certain level of… passion or-“

“Or anything at all.” Sam shook his spoon at Nick to make his point.

Nick laughed again. “You want me, Sam- it’s ok to admit it.”

Sam smacked the man firmly in the chest with his spoon before plopping himself down at the table to eat. “I want you like I want another hole in my head.”

“Hey now. Ixnay on the ostilityhay.” Nick hissed the pig latin softly through his teeth, nodding sharply towards the living room where they had left Dean.

He had a point. Even during a ‘break’ it was important that they keep up some level of appearance. Especially when one of their brother’s was within ear shot. Pushing all hostility aside, Sam reached deep and found sarcasm to take its place.

“I’m just stressed. Sorry, Luci.”

Nick’s expression went from one of mild amusement to a mix of shock and exasperation. “Oh, you’re asking for it, darlin’.”

“You know I didn’t mean to snap at you.” Sam held his arms out, looking up at Nick who was looming over him like a pale storm cloud. “Come here. Let me make it up to you.”
“You don’t want me coming down there right now.”

It was true. If Nick fell into his arms Sam would literally have no idea what to do with him. He dropped the offer as if it had never been. “If you’re not going to forgive me can I at least eat my cereal?”

Nick slunk to one of the kitchen chairs, turning it around and resting his chin on the high back. One of his long arms looped around so he could tug on his lip, biting the edge of his thumb and looking thoughtful. “If I decide to forgive you… can it be on the mouth?”

Sam took a few hearty bites of his already soggy flakes before answering in a tired voice. “Not in the kitchen.”

“That’s alright.” Nick’s long fingers trailed up Sam’s arm, prickling the short hairs, giving the younger man goose bumps. “I can think of quite a few other places that I’d rather kiss you.”

“I’m sure you can.” Sam pulled his arm away. They were talking so low and soft, in all likelihood Dean wouldn’t even be able to hear them. Where was the reason behind all this touching and teasing? What was it for?

The simple answer was that it was for fun.

The stress of the last two weeks, the recoiling mortification at what he had done last night, it seemed less now with the soft, early afternoon sunlight coming in the window, and good simple food in his stomach. Good company at his side. An overly protective brother who was notably giving him space- and it must have been hard on Dean to not be there, not to be the one checking on Sam. Hard to give the responsibility to someone else just this once.

Dean had to really like Nick to give him such a vital responsibility.

It must have been some nice car.

Sam stirred his soupy cereal, watching the flakes circle the chipped ceramic bowl, because it was easier than watching Nick. In truth just about everything was easier to look at because Sam found it increasingly difficult to keep a straight face around the man. “Last night though…” He started in a careful voice, trying to figure out where and how he was going with this.

Did he want to apologize?

Did he want to blame Nick for it?

Nick flapped a hand dismissively. “Look- I figure this whole thing is some pretty fucking treacherous paths we’re treading. I’m just putting my feet where you put yours and hoping that the floor doesn’t give out under us.” Nick had such a lovely, if not particularly subtle way of putting things. He touched Sam again, lightest brush of fingertips tracing the pale blue veins that ran along the back of his hand. “You were tired. I pushed you a bit too far and you pushed back. We had a misstep, but no harm done and I learned my lesson.”

“Did you?” Sam asked curiously, not quite believing what he was hearing.

“I did. I learned that I shouldn’t ask you for things that I don’t want because if you’re mad enough you might actually give it to me.”

Sam laughed. “I wasn’t mad. I was tired.” There was a subtle difference, though the two sometimes went hand in hand.
“Either way. And just so you know, you’re an awful kisser. It’s no wonder you can’t seem to find a girlfriend.”

“That wasn’t a real kiss.” Sam bristled with a sudden need to defend himself. “It was… an aggressive bite without teeth.”

Nick laughed at that, nodding in amusement. “Yeah, well, next time I make you mad enough to bite me, can I recommend going a little lower? Maybe trying out the neck region?” He stopped petting Sam long enough to gesture to his own nicely exposed throat.

“I’ll take your request into consideration.” He promised, doing his best not to assess that stretch of pale skin for the best place to lay his teeth.

Nick left for work a little after that, dressed in his freshly dry clothes from the night before. He managed to sneak a parting kiss to Sam’s cheek halfway out the door and it shouldn’t have made Sam smile like it did. Maybe if he hadn’t seen the man kissing his family members in exactly the same way it would have been more intimate, instead it gave Sam a gentle feeling of acceptance and ease that hadn’t expected.

“If they haven’t fixed the power by tonight can I-”

“You can have the couch. I’ll find a blanket just for you.”

The smile they shared was a little more guarded that usual, but Dean was still sitting beside the fire on the far side of the room, not watching every little thing that passed between them.

“I’ll sleep better next to you.” Nick argued gently.

“You slept around me last night, you octopus.”

“What can I say? I’m a cuddler.”

A sighed found its way out from somewhere deep down inside Sam. “Just call me if you’re coming over again tonight so I can brace myself.” He said while pushing the man out the door.

He watched Nick go because he didn’t have anything more complicated in him than to just stand there.

“So,” Dean had snuck up behind him, because apparently anyone and everyone was going to do that today. “He stayed the night last night.”

“Nothing happened.” Sam said quickly because even if Dean was supposed to think that Sam and Nick were involved that way, it didn’t mean that he wanted his brother thinking that they had gotten that far that fast.

“That’s what he said- and I figure I would have been able to hear your girly giggling if he had popped your cherry- so you two must have kept your pants on.” He said so matter of factly like none of this was odd or unusual. “I guess the power for his whole apartment building is out.”

“That’s what he told me.” Sam looked sideways at Dean and was surprised to see how deep that calm acceptance went. “You two had a good morning, didn’t you?”

“We… talked. He’s ok.” Dean decided after a moment’s thought.

“How do you go from telling me I should dump the guy to ‘he’s ok’ and ‘he’s got a neat car’?”

“So you like him now?”

Dean drew a long breath through his nose and frowned again. “Look, last week the guy calls me up asking what your favorite food is. I tell him what a freak you are and how much you love your organic, hippy crap and the dude tells me there’s no way he can go into a place and order that kind of food and still sleep at night. So I tell him about that place in Palo Alto- figuring that if I make it complicated enough, he’ll give up and let me get back to work. And the next thing I know he’s asking for the exact address of the place and then where you like to hide out on campus.

“He likes you, god knows why. And stranger than that, you like him back. Sam, you’ve been wound tighter than a two dollar watch since your finals started, and I just heard you two laughing in the kitchen. I saw you smile for the first time in days. I don’t have to like him. I like you when you’re with him. It’s good enough for me.”

Nick was back that night. Still no power. Apparently the storm had blown out a couple lines and his block wasn’t a big priority to fix.

Sam set him up on the couch with a blanket that had been pilfered from Dean’s bed and a vow to do Nick severe bodily harm if he didn’t behave himself tonight. The man only smiled and asked if he could borrow Sam’s sweatshirt again.

A few hours later Sam stumbled blearily downstairs, wanting to get a drink of water before going to sleep after one last night of cramming, before one last final in the morning. It was dark in the living room. No glow in the fire, no lights left on. Even in the gloom, Sam could see the small lump on the couch which was inevitably Nick. And it was only then that he remembered that they turned off the heater at night to help save on the electricity bill. Sam and Dean both ran a little warm and with all those blankets that they horded it didn’t make too much of a difference to either of them.

Nick on the other hand… Sam had never even once seen the man without long sleeves on, rolled up to his elbows only twice. He was not the kind of man who was built to deal with the cold. Even the subtle cold that California had to offer. But maybe Sam was just a little unimpressed with the icy winds because they didn’t bring snow, like they had in Kansas, so what was the big deal.

He sat on the edge of the coffee table and gently shook Nick. “Hey. You awake?”

“Nick.” He didn’t want to raise his voice too loudly because Dean was not exactly a deep sleeper even if he was all the way upstairs behind a closed door. “Come on. Up.”

The man stirred beneath his blanket. “Is it Christmas? Did Santa come yet?”

Sam was grateful for the darkness because it hid his smile. “Come on upstairs, Nick.”

The palest of eyes peered out at Sam, slow, sleepy blinking. “Oh, it really is Christmas, isn’t it?”

“Shut up and get up before I leave your ass down here.”

Nick was not at all graceful as he stumbled along after Sam, clinging to the back of his shirt, wearing the blanket he had been given like a cape. He tripped on the last step and crashed into Sam with a softly muttered apology.
“Keep it down.” Sam chided, dragging the man along, pulling and then pushing him into bed.

“I like when you get rough with me.” Nick chuckled, sleepy and lost in the dark and shadows as he rolled across the bed, settling into a comfortable middle place.

“Shut up.” Sam found himself saying again as he climbed in, draping them both in a mass of blankets- the majority of which went over Nick. “Go back to sleep. And before you even ask- no. You can’t have a kiss.”

“I’ll settle for an arm.”

“You’ll… what now?”

Nick inched closer, rolling onto his side and tucking his hands up beneath Sam’s arm. His cold, cold hands. “Just an arm. ’s all I need.”

Sam whispered against the crown of Nick’s head, “goodnight, my ice princes.”

“Goodnight, my toasty knight.” Nick whispered back, somewhere down around Sam’s chest.

It was an oddly comfortable way to sleep.

It was just as comfortable to wake up to, though slightly more confusing than it should have been. At some point Sam had managed to roll onto his side as well, and though he had never known himself to be a ‘cuddler’, Nick had no such restraints. He had once more plastered himself to Sam, both arms rucked up beneath the younger man’s shirt, fingers curling along the slow arch of his ribs right beneath his chest. One knee tucked up between Sam’s, one knee over, their legs woven together in an easy tangle. He’d made himself a small lump against Sam, like a limpet clinging to the underside of a ship, as close as he could get with cloth and skin still between them.

It was far more intimate than Sam had been mentally prepared for, even with both of them being fully clothed. He was fairly certain that, despite any fluctuations in temperature, this breached the ‘straight man physical contact’ code.

Sam wriggled away to turn off his alarm clock and then he had to fight the urge to curl back around Nick, because that break in contact had left a cold spot on his chest and stomach.

It was a conflicting morning if nothing else.

Nick was looking around with a bewildered expression like had no idea where he was or how he got here. “What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty.” Sam started pushing Nick off, trying to figure out how to untangle their legs without acknowledging that they were tangled to begin with.

“Ungodly hour.” Nick rolled away with a grumble, hiding his face beneath the blankets, tacking on the accusation of “sleepless heathen,” for good measure.

Sam slid out of bed, straightening his clothes, eyeing the lump burying itself deeper beneath the covers before he started looking for something to wear to school. “I’ve got my last test this morning.”

“Good luck.” Came the muffled words.

“You have work today?”
“This afternoon. You still coming with me to Frisco tomorrow?”

Sam hesitated halfway into his jeans. “Tomorrow?” That would technically fall into the weekend, wouldn’t it? He had almost forgotten that he had said yes to the offer. And he had certainly forgotten how soon it was.

“Pick you up around three?” The lump suggested.

“Are we, um- taking your bike?”

“No.” The lump shifted, settling.

“Are we going to take your sexy car that can’t be out in the rain?” Sam pulled on a clean tshirt and shook hair from his eyes.

“Only if you ask nice.”

Sam picked up his pillow and hit the lump where he thought the words were coming from. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The lump only hummed in agreement, and Sam smiled as he grabbed a hoodie and left.

Two nights later saw Sam stumbling with Nick back to the car- witch incidentally was a stunning piece of American automotive ingenuity that even Sam could appreciate.

They both reeked of sweat and beer and pot- and if it counted for anything at all Sam had only participated in the first of the offences, and Nick only had only gone as far as the second. But the room had been packed with people and hazy with smoke from cigarettes and other, less legal things. It had permeated their clothes and Sam was grateful for the short walk back to the parking garage because it gave them both time to air out.

Initially when Nick had listed their errands in San Francisco- being the violin dropped off (which they had done first thing upon entering the city), a concert, and a touch up to an old tattoo - Sam had foolishly assumed that the ‘concert’ part of their to do list would be more closely linked to the violin. Something classical and lovely and meant for sitting in seats wearing button up shirts and serious expressions.

Looking back at the invitation, as well as looking at the man who was currently hanging from his shoulder like the hot mess that he was, Sam should have known that the concert would not be a formal affair. In fact, when Nick had come to pick him up that afternoon and Sam asked if he would need a tie and Nick only laughed, that should have been indication enough.

It had been a punk rock concert, headlining an Irish band that Sam had never heard of. It had been loud and energetic and absolutely fantastic even if it was not at all what he was expecting. He had lingered near the back of the large room where there was empty pockets of floor, and watched as Nick was swallowed whole by the crowd, only to reemerge from time to time to buy himself another overpriced beer- or as the night wore on, lean on Sam close enough to be heard over all the noise, too long and far, far too close.

It wasn’t that Sam didn’t enjoy the music or the energy, in fact it was hard to not get swept up in the almost gleeful mob mentality of the whole thing. It was just that he didn’t want to get separated from Nick and lost somewhere in San Francisco- so he stayed put and let the man drift back whenever he needed a breather or more than a few inches of floor to stand on.

The concert had ended a little past eleven and they had made it outside into the foggy night. Cold, pressing drifts of air clinging to them. There was no way to tell exactly how drunk Nick had
managed to get himself. All Sam knew was that the man was very warm and very close and his
feet didn’t seem to go where he wanted them to. And so they stumbled together. It would have
been easier if Nick wasn’t so tall or heavy, because every time he tripped over the very flat
sidewalk he threatened to take Sam down with him.

“You do know that there is no way I’m letting you drive us back to the hotel.” Sam tightened his
arm under Nick’s shoulders, his grip on the back of the man’s jacket to keep him from wandering
off into the street like he seemed so determined to do.

Nick blinked up at him with glassy eyes and a wide smile. “What?”

“When we get to the car- I need the keys.”

“But you can’t drive my car.”

“Well one of us has to and it’s not going to be you.”

Nick didn’t drive his car any differently than he drove his bike, which was to say that Sam spent
most of the ride into the city that afternoon with his eyes closed because if death was going to take
him he would rather it be a surprise. There was no way in hell that he was going to let the man
drive them somewhere in his drunken state.

“Sammy, asking to drive a man’s car is like asking to drive his wife. It just isn’t done.” Began the
slightly slurred lecture.

“Don’t call me Sammy.”

“Your brother gets to.”

“Yeah well, he’s the only one.” Sam pulled Nick a little closer to let a group of people who were
walking considerably faster pass them.

“Big meanie.” Nick said into his shoulder, leaning on Sam enough that they started to cant too far
and almost crashed into the building on Sam’s other side.

“I could be at home right now, watching Netflix, listening to Dean complain about unrealistic
blood spray.” And Sam didn’t know if he was reminding himself of this or just letting the other
man know- just as he wasn’t positive if the alternative was better or worse than where he was.

They got down one more block and into the parking garage before Sam had to drag Nick to a halt
beside his car.

“Keys.” Sam said firmly, the same way that had so many times with Dean over the past few years-
the same way he had to with John so many times before he’d had enough and left home.

“Can you even drive a stick shift?” Nick was squinting up at Sam under the harsh florescent
lights.

“It’s been a while, but I know how.”

Nick’s mouth became a small, unhappy little line. “You’re going to hurt her.”

“I will be so careful.” Sam tried to keep any sarcasm from his voice for fear that Nick might hear
the insincerity even through all that liquor.

Stubbornly, Nick folded his arms, pulling away from Sam and leaning against his car. “I’ve never
let anyone else drive her.”

“Well you really should have thought about before you decided to try and embalm yourself tonight.”

“ ’m not that drunk.”

Sam narrowed his eyes and put one hand on Nick’s shoulder, giving him a firm tug forward. The man fell, no chance at all of keeping his footing and he careened into Sam with a clumsy, solid impact. He made small sounds of protest but the younger man cut him off quickly.

“People who can’t even stand don’t get to drive.”

And much to Nick’s objections, Sam easily pinned him to the side of the car and patted him down until he found the keys he needed in one of Nick’s pockets.

“Now can you get yourself into the passenger side or do you need me to carry you?”

Nick glowered as much as he could but he turned and carefully felt his way around the car, letting himself into the shotgun seat and muttered quietly about how mean Sam was.

Some people got sentimental or real touchy when they’d had too much to drink- people like Dean.

Others got violent.

Sam stayed outside the car for a few seconds, silently thanking whoever might be listening that he had saddled himself with someone who was more like his brother and less like his father.

Someone pouting at him was far easier to deal with than the alternative.

He got them safely back to the hotel, despite how much Nick whined or swore at him every time that Sam had trouble shifting gears and the car made it’s horrible grinding sound- or the single time that he accidently stalled at a stop sign on the wrong side of one of the steep hills and started rolling backwards. They made it in one piece and as far as he was concerned Nick could thank him in the morning.

“You could have hurt her.” Nick said sullenly as he took back his keys and refused Sam’s arm while they made their way to the elevator.

“You’re car is fine.” Sam sighed and pushed the up button.

“Getting your big, rough hands all over me is one thing.” Nick held his keys to his chest like Sam might try to take them back. “But you can’t manhandle her like a cheap whore. She’s a lady.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He sighed again and watched the numbers over the door counting down, waiting. It wasn’t like Nick had been at all gentle when he had driven them this afternoon, though he never ground the gears or stalled the engine, so perhaps he had a point.

Nick looked to be lost in his own world for a moment, thinking so hard it showed on his face. “You really do have big hands though.”

Sam frowned and couldn’t help but glance at his hands which looked the same size that they always did. Before he could really argue Nick reached out to him, clumsily pressing one of his hands against one of Sam’s, struggling to line up their palms or their fingers, seemingly not able to decide which would be better for measuring.
“Like this.” He took Nick’s hand and very easily lined them up, a little disappointed to see that his own hands were marginally bigger. “I’m tall… it’s a proportion thing.” He said lamely like it was any kind of excuse.

“No.” Nick laced their fingers, still holding them up around chest level so he could really look at them. “I’m tall. You’re a giant.”

The elevator doors opened and Sam wrested his hand back. “Come on, Nick.” He called over his shoulder and then frowned when he saw that he wasn’t being followed at all.

Nick was too busy looking at his own hands, frowning at them like they had done his wrong somehow.

“I’ll leave without you.” Sam threatened even as he put his foot in way of the door to keep it from sliding shut.

“Do they look smaller than normal to you?” He held his hands out for Sam’s inspection.

Frustrated, Sam just grabbed the man by his wrists and pulled him into the elevator, awkwardly catching Nick as he stumbled.

His pale eyes went wide and he held himself tensely against Sam’s chest. “Hey.” Came his confused, feeble protest.

Sam snaked an arm around Nick, holding him comfortably in place as he gently wrested the keys from the man before tucking them back in the pocket he had originally taken them from. The last thing they needed was drunk Nick somehow dropping and losing the keys somewhere in the hotel- never to be found again.

“You keep touching me like this and I’ll have to charge you.”

“I was putting your keys where you wouldn’t lose them.”

Nick patted at his pockets until he heard the soft jingle, then settled back into Sam like he belonged there, his warm hands resting against the curve of Sam’s shoulders. “How long have we been doing this, Sam?”

“I’d say maybe fifteen seconds. It’s not the fastest elevator, but we don’t have all that far to go.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Nick rolled his eyes and his head kind of followed, nodding to the side and before he hid a grin against Sam’s chest. “I mean how long have we been dating?”

“About a month?” He surprised himself with the answer. Had it really been that long? Sometimes it felt like they just met- but then there were times like this, when Sam felt so comfortable with Nick it was like they’d known each other for years. Only a month?

“A month.” Nick repeated softly, face still hidden, no indication that he planned to surface anytime soon.

For just a second Sam let himself enjoy the rough, warm contact- then the elevator leveled out on their floor and the doors opened. “Come on, we need to get you in bed.” They did a little two-step, dancing with each other as Sam tried his best to drag Nick with him in the direction of their room.

“Sam?” He kept one hand on the younger man’s shoulder, the other he trailed along the wall to aid in his balance. “If you were as drunk as I am- and I was as drunk as I am,”
Sam couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“And one of us was a girl- would we have sex tonight?”

The laughter died pretty quick and Sam found himself struggling to remind himself that Nick was drunk and there was no real harm or threat meant by the question.

“I think if I was as drunk as you are then I would have passed out by now.”

“Lightweight.” Nick laughed and then frowned as they stopped walking. “Is this our room?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have the card thing for the lock or do I?”

“You do.”

Nick got that same deep look of concentration that he had at the elevator. “Maybe I put it in my wallet?”

“Where’s your wallet?”

“In a pocket?” Nick asked carefully, raising his arms and looking down at himself.

“God, you’re useless.” He said in the most affectionate way he could as he propped Nick against the door and started searching for a wallet. The fact that the man started squirming as soon as Sam started looking didn’t make the goal any easier.

“Hold still, or find your own wallet.”

“It tickled.” Nick whispered harshly.

And Sam didn’t really know how to respond to that, because Nick wasn’t supposed to be ticklish. And even though he had suddenly been given a beautiful opportunity to get himself in trouble, Sam did the noble thing and held his hands up where they could be seen and waited as Nick made a point of straightening his clothes and slowly going from pocket to pocket until he finally found his wallet.

Despite the odds, they got the door open and into their room, and Sam smiled at the two beds, just as happy to see them now as he had been that afternoon when they check in and dropped off their stuff.

Maybe he had initially expected some kind of shenanigans from Nick.

When Sam had told him where he was going, Dean had certainly made a point of warning him against all the indecent things that Nick could have planned for the two of them alone in a hotel together for a weekend. And Sam knew, he knew that Nick had nothing towards him other than the purest of intentions- and even still he had doubted just for a moment because it was healthy to occasionally question the lunatic situations that you put yourself in.

But then he had seen the two beds and he remembered why it was that he was so fond of Nick.

He steered his mess of a friend towards the bathroom. “Why don’t you try taking a shower, see if you can sober up a bit- at least get some of that stink off you.”

“You didn’t answer my question… at least I don’t think.” Nick held the doorframe, not willing to
be banished quite yet.

“What question?”

“Would we have sex tonight if one... or both of us were a girl? I don’t remember when we were supposed to get around to it.” He frowned as he struggled to collect all his thoughts and get them in the right order to make some kind of sense. “It just seems like tonight would be a good night for it, doesn’t it?”

Sam did his best to look at the question for what it was. Not a proposition, but a simple inquiry as to what they were going to tell (or not tell) their brothers when they got home. They needed to keep their stories straight. A long term lie needed to be very carefully put together.

“No.” He decided.

“No?” Nick tilted his head so far to the side he was resting against his own shoulder. “I must really be in love with your gangly ass if I’m waiting more than a month for you to put out. I usually don’t wait more than a few hours.”

Sam sat on the edge of his bed, the one closest to the window, and scrubbed a hand over his mouth. “Look, you’re drunk off your ass and there’s no way I’d take advantage of you tonight.”

“You... you don’t want to take advantage of me?” It was a good thing that Nick had the doorframe to hold him up because in his unbalanced state it was the only thing keeping him standing as he started to laugh. It took him almost a full minute to get control of himself enough to speak. “Oh, darlin’- you’re too perfect.”

“Look- I’m just saying there’s no way I would with you so drunk you can’t even stand.” He knew that Dean would never go for it- he knew Sam too well. Aside from that, the suggestion made Sam feel a little sick. Nick was his friend and Sam wasn’t a complete asshole. There are some things that you just don’t do.

“You, sir, are a gentleman and I don’t deserve you.” He fumbled the bathroom light on and started peeling off his jacket. “But there is always tomorrow night and it would be a shame to waste this romantic room.”

Sam looked at the two separate beds and the overwhelmingly beige color pallet of the room.

“And for the record, I’m not as drunk as you seem to think I am.”

“I’m surprised that your liver hasn’t staged a mutiny and left you in a puddle of your own vomit.”

“You always say the sweetest things.” Nick finally managed to get his jacket off and Sam averted his eyes while the man began the arduous task of wrestling his own shirt. “Have you considered that maybe I’m just playing up what alcohol I have going for me so I had an excuse to touch you.”

“And how well did that work out?”

“You carried me here, didn’t you?” The shower turned on. “My big, strong, protective man.”

It was hard to not be charmed by such logic and sentimentality. “Don’t drown in there, Nick.” Sam advised, thinking it would be a shame to waste all the work that they’d put in so far.

Nick hummed thoughtfully. “You wanna’ join me, keep me safe, make sure I don’t bump my head?”
“I’m going to sleep.” Sam informed the ceiling.

“But I’m almost naked.”

“Close the door and don’t tell me about it.” He really hoped that Nick couldn’t see him smiling, because it would only encourage the man.

The door didn’t close and the shower ran—there were no continued sounds of undressing or anything else productive. Sam chose to ignore all of it as much as possible, laying back on his bed, debating how deep his regrets would be if he just slept in his clothes.

“Sam?”

“Yes?”

“I can’t get my shoes untied.”

“How is that ‘not as drunk as you look’ thing working out for you now?” He folded his hands comfortably over his stomach and closed his eyes.

“If you don’t help me I will just shower with them and my pants on—because I can’t get them off over the shoes—and when they’re all still wet tomorrow I will make you go to the store and buy me new shoes and dry pants.”

“You’re worse than Dean.” But just as if it were his big brother in there, Sam dragged himself up off the bed and went to the bathroom, doing an award winning job of not smiling or laughing at the man who was sitting on the edge of the tub, wearing only jeans, tennis shoes, and a pitiful expression.

Despite his protests, Nick had to be completely sloshed, because he was sitting with his bare back to the shower spray, water sprinkling from behind, darkening his hair, wetting his shoulders down to the back of his jeans. And at no point did he seem to notice, just blinking slowly at Sam with a slightly hopeful glint in his eyes.

Sam knelt on the floor next to Nick and started to untangle the mess that had been made of his shoelaces. “What would you do if I wasn’t here to save you from yourself?”

He considered slowly before giving his answer, like it was a test. “Woulnd’t bother with a shower. Wake up in the morning smelling like I’d been sautéed in cheep beer and shame. My mouth would taste like ass— and I would have many regrets.” One of his fairly wet hands came up to touch Sam’s hair. “The biggest one being that apparently you weren’t here to take care of me tonight.”

Sam smiled and shook his head, moving onto the second shoe.

“I mean it… same for what I said earlier. You’re too good for me.”

“Nick, whatever stupid thing you’re about to say, you won’t remember it tomorrow and I doubt that I’ll want to. Do us both a favor.”

“You’re not a psycho bitch. I never thanked you for that.”

“You’re welcome I guess?” It wasn’t the worst complement someone had paid him, and if nothing else it made Sam smile and he set aside the second shoe.

“I mean it.” Nick said with the kind of sincerity that only drunk people seem to be able to master.
“For the longest time I’ve been worried that I’ll turn around and suddenly realize that you’re this insufferable asshole like every other person I’ve ever dated. But look at you- you’re like a boy scout… male model… moose man- and you laugh at my awful jokes and you have those god damned dimples and why couldn’t you have been a girl?”

Sam laughed, sitting back on his butt on the cold floor and looking up at Nick. Without a shirt the man was even more pale, and at the same time somehow far more colorful. Ink lines running over the hitch of his shoulders and down his arms. One design stood out from the rest, sitting along on the left side of his chest, apart from the others, looking for all the world like a child’s drawing. Literally, like Nick had given a pack of markers to a small child and let them draw what may or may not have been a dragon? Some kind of rounded monster with horns? Whatever it was, it was as charming as it was confusing.

“Nick- take your shower. Make it a cold one.”

“Yell at me if I’m not out in five minutes. If I don’t come out assume that I died and you have my advanced permission to attempt mouth to mouth- just no tongue, ok? We’re not at that point in our relationship yet.” He still hadn’t taken his hand from Sam’s hair and it was an odd counterweight to his words.

“I’m not sure I would want to do better than you, Nick.” Sam found his mouth making words that he had no desire to take back- even if he questioned how honest they were. They felt like the right thing to say right then.

Tired, glassy eyes crinkled around the edges and Nick smiled a smile that he probably wouldn’t remember in the morning.

Sam crawled to his feet, using the edge of the sink for leverage. “Five minutes. Don’t drown.” And he left the steam filled room for the safety of the bed he had to call his own for the night.
The Smell Before Rain

Chapter Notes

I posted this earlier today- had second thoughts and took it back down quickly before I ran off to work. So here it is again... don't know how your notifications are going to handle this all. Sorry.

Also?
How is it that you guys have stuck with me this long?
This story is over a hundred pages, most of which are fluff, and there is still no kissing?
We'll get there.
And soon.
I do promise.
But it just surprised me how patient y'all are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Sam?”

“No.” He grumbled into his pillow, not bothering to look over or even open his eyes. If the word felt tired and worn it was only because he had said it nearly twenty times over the last few minutes.

“Please, Sam-” Nick’s voice was lost in the dark of the room, soft and insubstantial. “I need you.”

“What you need is to go down to the front desk and ask for another blanket.” He rolled and put his back to the other bed, clinging to his own blankets just in case the man got any ideas.

“But that’s all the way downstairs, and I know that you’re warm.”

“I won’t be if I let you put your corpse feet on me.”

Nick made a plaintive noise, going beyond needy to downright pitiful. “You’re my boyfriend. You’re obligated to keep me warm.”

“I never signed anything.” The argument had been going on far too long. It was sheer stubbornness that kept him from just giving in to the request at this point. But stubbornness can only take you so far and the need for sleep was starting to win out.

Taking a deep breath, Nick began again. “Sam-“

“How long are you going to keep this up?”

“Until I am safe and warm, wrapped in those big strong arms of yours.”

“No.”

“Come on, I’m letting you be the big spoon.”
Some fights weren’t worth having. It’s not like he could have won anyways.

“Absolutely no spooning.” Sam lifted the corner of his blankets and just waited. He didn’t have to wait long.

The springs on the other bed creaked in anticipation as Nick shifted with eagerness and hope. Bounding happily from one bed to the next, the man slid in beside him, adding his own blankets to the pile and wriggling until he was pressed up as close as skin would allow.

He had taken Sam’s advice and sobered up at bit- though it had come in the form of a short but seemingly very cold shower. The man was still a bit slower than normal but it didn’t seem to hamper his ability to annoy Sam into submission.

Case and point, Sam had invited the meat popsicle to join him, even knowing what was going to happen.

True to form, Nick showed no restraint in tucking his appendages anywhere that seemed marginally warm, like he was curling up alongside his own personal space heater and had every right to all Sam’s most sensitive nooks and crannies.

“Oh god. Stop. Stop. Stop-” Sam tried his best to shrink away, but quickly found himself on the edge of the bed, teetering over the void and he was left with no choice other than to accept Nick’s hands and feet and elbows and cheek. “Why?”

“I was very serious about those arms of yours being around me.” Nick mumbled into his chest.

“How are you this cold and not shivering?” Sam couldn’t convince any part of his body to willingly engage in any physical contact beyond what was absolutely necessary to keep himself from falling off the bed.

“Really bad circulation and I am shivering- you’re just squirming too much to notice.” He answered with a frustrated noise as he tried to find a welcoming spot for his long, cold fingers.

And that was wrong, because Sam could feel the man trembling ever so slightly.

“You could have turned the shower to hot for a while before you got out- you know.” He caught Nick’s hands and held them between his own in an effort to warm them and keep them away from his stomach at the same time.

And it was like Nick understood that he wasn’t going to willingly be given the cuddle that he had been requested- because he decided to take a different approach. He stole back his hands in favor of grabbing the younger man’s shoulders and forcibly pulling him over. The roll resembled something that Sam had seen on Animal Planet during a crocodile documentary- and though he did his best to fight the momentum all he managed to do was instigate a very sleepy, half hearted wrestling match between the two of them.

On a good day Sam might have won- but this was neither a day, nor was it good (being a very subjective term which had nothing to do with everything up until this point and more specifically referred to the last few minutes when he much rather would have been sleeping instead of arguing).

In the end, Nick reigned triumphant over the clumsy tussle and his prize was a very heavy, living, and loudly protesting blanket.

Sam found himself reverse pinned to Nick, held tenuously on top of the man with a tangle of long, intoxicated limbs.
“This is where I’m sleeping.” Nick announced in a pleased voice. “Do be a dear and fix the blankets that you tossed off during your little struggle. My left foot isn’t covered and it’s cold out there.”

Some things were easier than fighting, and this right here barely made the cut off.

It took some coaxing from Nick followed by very careful maneuvering to make sure that certain parts of their anatomy didn’t line up in ways that would be too awkward. Little things that Sam hadn’t considered before this very moment, and frankly he could have gone his whole life never worrying about how he and Nick we so very close in height that if their shoulders lined up it meant that their hips would as well, which also leveled their faces and- really, this would be far more acceptable if they actually wanted to have sex with each other at some point this weekend.

It was a fact and a soon to be elaboration on their communal lie that Sam chose not to focus on anymore than necessary at such a close proximity. Instead he took stock of how cold Nick was, and how to best lay around and over the man to provide maximum levels of warmth without becoming one with the cold himself.

Their chests were fine to press together, nothing more unsettling there other than what you would get from a good hug. Sam’s shoulder hit somewhere along Nick’s sternum and he stubbornly angled the rest of his body away after that point of contact. Though a bit more arguing and tugging, Nick twisted himself, legs slating between Sam’s, their knees notched together like jigsaw pieces.

And Sam was laying half on his stomach, half on Nick’s and he just gave after that point, because the curve of his left hip fit almost perfectly into the curve of Nick’s left hip and there came a point at which it was best to just accept one’s own doom.

“I’m so glad that no one is going to walk in on this.” There were more compromising positions to be in, but all of them required substantially less clothes- and that wouldn’t help the goal of warmth that they were going for.

“Don’t be ashamed of our love, Sam. Accept it.” Nick whispered, comfortably tucking his arms up between their chests.

“This is literally the gayest thing I’ve ever done.”

Nick turned his face towards Sam’s, startlingly close on their shared pillow. “Enjoy it while it lasts because we’re having sex tomorrow and that will probably be a better benchmark for your budding homosexuality.”

“Don’t talk about it like that.” Sam begged, turning his head the other way because with everything else he just couldn’t handle that last bit of closeness. “No one else is here- can we just pretend that we’re normal for a few hours?”

“I’ve got a mouth full of your hair and a bruise already forming where that hip of yours is digging into mine- I don’t think that normal is an option.”

“Sorry.” Sam tried to adjust, but Nick’s hands caught in his shirt.

“I just got comfortable. I’ll take the souvenir for what it is- just don’t start the ‘trying to find a good spot’ dance again.”

Sam settled even though it went against his better judgment. “How did I ever let you talk me into any of this- and why haven’t I punched you for it yet?”
It was Nick’s turn to consider, at least he grew very quiet and Sam wondered if the man had finally just passed out. It was after midnight. It wouldn’t be surprising if he did just drift off, finally warm and comfortable.

“Sam, how long has it been since you were with a woman?”

He tensed. “Excuse me?”

“You’re excused.” Nick’s smile could be heard even if it wasn’t seen. “I mean, when was the last time someone really rang your bell? Got your bed rocking and your toes curling and all those good things that we as a species need to feel right and good and sane?”

“I… that’s none of your business.” It wasn’t that Sam was particularly shy- but literally, it wasn’t Nick’s place to ask questions like that.

“Sam…” Nick dropped his voice to a stage whisper, managing to sound worried and horrified in the same breath. “You have had sex before… right?”

“Of course I have.” He shifted, suddenly very uncomfortable with the topic.

“But it’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Nick was probably the only person on the planet who could manage to have this conversation, while twined around another man, showing only concern. “You let me get away with this kind of shit because you have the basic human need for physical contact that we all do- and I’m here.”

“You’re an easy target, is that what you’re saying?” Sam relaxed but it wasn’t out of ease, it was out of surrender. Nick was right. The only proof needed was right there in bed with him. It’s hard to argue with such strong evidence.

“I’m a convenient target-” Nick corrected gently. “But I don’t mind.” One of his arms slid from between them and loosely found its way around Sam’s back, somewhere up near his shoulders. “You’re convenient too.”

“Wow. With smooth lines like that it’s amazing that you don’t have to fight the ladies off with a stick.”

Nick’s chuckle tapered off into a yawn, and then he was blowing Sam’s hair from his face. “Joke all you want- because you’re still the one dating me.”

“Pretend dating.” Sam reminded softly.

“Same thing in the long run, isn’t it?” He blew on Sam’s hair again. “At least as far as everyone else is concerned, right?”

“It is… Stop blowing on me.”

“You’re hair is everywhere, Rapunzel.”

Sam grumbled and turned his head to face Nick despite the fact that it put their faces startlingly close together. “You going to behave?”

“Do I have to?”

“I’d like some sleep before the sun comes up- though the fact that you haven’t passed out yet is really amazing and I’m actually enjoying watching you slowly deteriorate.”
“Charmer.” Nick chuckled and settled more comfortably beneath Sam, shifting his hips and knees and toes until everything lined up in just the wrong way.

Sam considered simply pushing Nick off the bed altogether, but it was late and he was tired along with being oddly comfortable- and he remembered weeks ago, the blonde laughing and explaining that if he could find a way to be more ok about all this when it was just the two of them alone, then it would be that much easier when they were around other people.

He pulled an arm around Nick, earning a surprised noise from the man. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” He repeated hesitantly, edging close enough to touch his cold nose to Sam’s throat.

Sam whimpered into a laugh and just took it all for what it was. He got himself into these situations, not just letting them happen, but encouraging them somehow and… and he was happy.

He almost hated to admit it, but he was honestly happy right in that moment.

So, for the sake of keeping our stories on the same page-“ Nick looked up from his crepe, licking a smear of green ice-cream from his lower lip. “What happened this weekend?”

Sam looked at his feet, shuffling his sneakers on the concrete and then lightly kicking at the table leg, hearing the dull ping and finding no reassurance in it. “Well, we went to your concert yesterday. I put your drunk ass in bed last night. We’ve supposedly got a working violin in the trunk of the car now, though until you open the case and actually show me an instrument I’m assuming it’s really full of drugs and the whole violin thing was a lie.” He went to take a bite of his own crepe and gave up halfway, lowering the too sweet thing back down to cradle it in both hands. “We visited the Japan Town mall- which I didn’t even know existed… got these…” he pointed his crepe at Nick’s and then found himself frowning.

Nick was grinning at him, and Sam had come to know over the last month that Nick didn’t smile so wide all that often. It was like he brought it out only for special occasions, determined to regularly employ the smallest hints of smiles for casual, every day use.

“What?”

“Well, darlin’, that’s all well and good that you can grocery list our trip so far. But what happened this weekend?”

“I just told you-”

“You’re not this dense. I know you’re not.”

Sam ate a bit of his crepe and looked out at the shop windows, refusing to go along with Nick’s… whatever he was trying to do.

Maybe Sam was still just bothered by how they had woken up that morning. It had certainly put a damper on his mood so far.

At some point during the night the two men had managed to shift positions, both of them sprawling diagonally across the bed (because Sam fit better that way anyhow), and for whatever reason Nick had deemed that the position of upmost comfort was across Sam so that they made a big letter X.

It’s not that it was uncomfortable- it was just that laying there like that, in their odd position, Nick
had somehow managed to confiscate one of Sam’s hands.

And Sam liked his hands.

Mostly he liked to keep them to himself.

For almost half an hour he lay there, fascinated by the way that his fingers curled over Nick’s cheek. At the clash of texture between skin and stubble. The way his thumb looked so ruddy against the pale skin of the man’s lips.

And Nick came awake piece by piece. A slow hitch in one shoulder, a small crease between his eyes, the way he hmmed softly to himself then tucked his arms a little more beneath the mountain of blankets that he had cocooned himself in. His eyes never open, but kissed the tip of Sam’s thumb and this somehow lead to Sam toying with Nick’s lower lip, feeling the petal softness- that lead to a second kiss against his thumb, and then a bite and the next thing that Sam knew they were wrestling, rolling over the bed, struggling to throw each other to the floor.

Sam had won, but winning meant that he was the top of the pile between the two beds, Nick laying beneath him, his pale eyes so wide. Apparently he wasn’t used to losing, because he didn’t seem to know the rule of surrender like Dean had learned to do so many years ago. Instead Nick twined his long arms around the younger man’s shoulders and started to pull him down, making sharp clicking noises with his teeth as he went for the soft skin of Sam’s unprotected throat.

Hours later, sitting in a mall, looking at the chipped blue paint on the table, Sam resisted the urge to touch the tender spot on the underside of his jaw.

But damn it- you’re not allowed to bite people.

Nick was just a cheater.

“Are you going to be able to be big and brave and tell your brother that you’re not a virgin anymore?”

Sam did his best to not chuck his food at Nick. “I haven’t been since I was in highschool- and since it happened in Dean’s car, I’m fairly certain he already knows about it.”

“Really?” Nick looked impressed.

“I stole the Impala to take a girl to the Drive Ins. I think Dean would have killed me in the morning when he found out if he hadn’t been so damn proud.”

For whatever reason that shut Nick up, and he spent a long moment just watching Sam with an oddly appreciative look. “You surprise me now and then.” He looked down at the remnants of his crepe, licking a bit of the ice cream that had started to melt and run down the side. “I don’t mean I thought that you were… unspoiled goods. With a mouth like yours someone must have taken their clothes off for you at some point and simply begged until you gave in- I just didn’t think you would have stolen a car to get there. But I have to commend you on your choice of vehicles.” Nick pointed a strong finger at Sam. “And don’t look at me like that. Fake relationship aside, just one straight man to another, I would let you fuck me in that car.”

Sam could feel himself go pale at those words. There were things that you just don’t say to a friend- and that may have been one of them. “Sometimes I think you picked the wrong Winchester.”

“It’s a very nice car. And I didn’t pick you. Cas picked you- for me.” He rolled his eyes and sighed, being taken slightly aback by Sam’s stony expression. “I’m not complaining. I’m just
saying, on my own there’s no way I could have got you without someone’s help. To keep my pride in check I think it’s important to remember that fact.”

Sam ate in silence, contemplating Nick’s words, weighing the open complement against the perceived insult. “It’s true.” He relented, not quite making eye contact because it would have undone his oh so serious tone. “I’m only here as a favor. Suffering along for the next two months, just waiting for it to be over.”

“That hurts, Sam. It really does.”

“You know what else hurts?”

“Getting bitten?” He knew exactly where this was going and the heat in his eyes said that he not only didn’t care, but also was enjoying it.

Sam kicked Nick beneath the table, getting him right in the shins and it was oddly satisfying to see the man jump.

He rubbed at his leg, out of sight, “I forget sometimes that you’re such a tender little lamb, and I can’t be too rough with you.” Nick managed to keep an unsettlingly cheerful tone even if it didn’t match his gaze. “And that means, as unsatisfying as it is, that tonight’s going to be all slow and careful.”

Sam gritted his teeth against the idea. “I didn’t know that you’d already decided.”

“It’s not so much deciding as simply acknowledging the way it will have to be. We’ll make love,” he said like a dirty word, “and you’ll blush and maybe cry a little. You’ll swoon and beg and it will be so romantic and perfect just like you read about in your books.”

Tonight could wait. Sam was already blushing. “Don’t you even. If anyone asks- it happened. The end. No details.”

“There’s got to be details. Gabriel and I have been giving each other very concise play by plays since we were teens and first started kissing girls behind the school gym.”

“Why would you want to tell your brother-”

“Because he’s going to ask and if I just stand there stupidly, trying to figure out a good story to tell him then he’s going to know what a giant lie it is.”

“But why would you want to tell him?” Who tells their brother those kinds of things? Aside from being ridiculously unbelievable, those simply weren’t the kinds of things that you tell family members about. At least not Sam’s family.

Nick let his voice drop as two old women walked past them with bags of groceries. “Because we always tell each other. He still calls me when him and his wife try something new- just to tell me how it went.”

“I don’t swoon and I don’t cry.” Sam said firmly.

Nick chuckled.

“I’m more likely to leave bites and bruises.” He added and felt himself grow warm again, because that definitely fell into the territory of things that you don’t tell your friends. He was almost sure of it. Nick didn’t need to know that Sam enjoyed being considerably indelicate when the given the chance… then again… perhaps Nick was the only friend of Sam’s who should be privy to that
particular bit of information.

The laughter went right out of Nick, his eyebrows climbing high. He wet his lips and got a bit of a smile before seeming to think better of it. “That’s... ok.”

The longer that Nick sat there watching Sam’s mouth the more uncomfortable the younger man grew.

“It’s not something you need to go and tell your brother about.” He pointed out even though he felt that that little fact should be obvious on its own. It wouldn’t hurt to point it out to Nick who had the marvelous ability to overlook things of that nature.

“I’ve already told him about last night and this morning- texted him while you were in the shower.”

The bottom dropped out of Sam’s stomach, butterflies spreading everywhere accompanying a sudden, giddy feeling. “And what exactly did you tell him?”

“How you took care of my drunk ass last night. How you helped me, you know… with my clothes and the shower.” Nick looked at shop windows and back at the table, talking so soft like he didn’t want anyone to overhear them. Despite the fact that no one else was around. The mall was close to closing time.

“And how did I help you exactly?” Did Sam even want to know?

The corner of Nick’s lips twisted up at the memory. “Oh, I was far too drunk to remember anything specific from last night. We just kissed and touched a bit and I tried to talk you into joining me in the shower but you got noble and didn’t want to take advantage of me… I do remember that part.”

Sam didn’t exactly like Nick’s accusatory tone, but he took it for what it was. “Well you’re half right I guess.”

“And half truths are the most believable.” Nick nodded, pleased to have Sam going along with him. “I’ve even got a bruise or two from this morning’s tumble- which is fairly damning evidence on its own considering you apparently like to get a little rough.”

Sam took a slow breath, determined to keep himself from blushing again because he was over twenty years old and this whole conversation was as petty and childish as it was indecent. Wiping his sticky fingers on a napkin he summoned up enough courage to ask the next question. “And what did you tell your brother happened this morning?”

Even though Nick was doing a commendable job of not looking at Sam, the younger man could still see the hint of color creep over his pale cheeks. And that was a bad sign if there ever was one.

Sam pushed hair from his eyes and tried his best to sound put upon and frustrated by the whole thing, because those were easier emotions to have. “You’re the one telling all these great lies about me to your brother, Nick. I’d kind of like to know what I got up to in your demented little fantasy, since apparently it happened whether or not I wanted it to.”

Nick’s little smile vanished and he looked up at Sam with round, earnest eyes. “Don’t say it like that- you were willing by all accounts.”

“No. I just meant that you’ve,” how to explain… “It’s in writing now since you texted him. It happened. He knows and I don’t’ have a chance to put in my two cents to change it anymore. Just tell me what we did and let’s be done with it.”
“Well… we wrestled and goofed around after we woke up.” He paused, watching a group of teen girls giggling and hanging off each other as they slowly made their way past. “The wrestling turned into fooling around and,” Nick tugged at his lip and if Sam didn’t know any better he would say that the man looked embarrassed.

“And?”

“And you made the prettiest noises while I sucked you off.”

“Nick. No.” Sam put his face in his hands and he was grateful for his shaggy hair because he thought that perhaps it would help to cover his face and hide how mortified he was.

“Well I couldn’t do it the other way around- “ Nick almost pleaded, trying to get Sam to understand why this was the story that he had chosen to give Gabriel that morning, out of every other lie he could have chosen from. “We’ve already established that you’re not a tramp. I wasn’t just going to say that you’d go down on me. That seemed like something that we needed to discuss first.”

“Oh my god.”

“Calm down. It’s not like I told him we got out the riding crop. It was just a blow job.”

Sam put his head down on the table and stayed there, trying to silently convince the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

“So… would you like to give some input on what happens tonight, or should I just wing it again?”

Sam’s hands stung as he slapped the table, sitting upright and staring down Nick, daring him to keep going.

“You are possibly the worst person I’ve ever known.”

“That’s not what you said this morning.” He replied with a wink.

Sam’s laughter sounded an awful lot like a sob as he put his head back down on the table.

“Nick?” Sam watched the freeway junction signs speeding past. “Don’t we want to take that junction to get back home?”

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Nick never took his eyes from the road, easily passing someone in the left lane, blowing by at almost a twenty miles over the speed limit.

Sam could feel the trap- it was Sunday evening, and after almost three days straight with Nick, he could practically taste the ambush.

“I didn’t really have any plans.” Wrong answer, but he knew it before the words even left his mouth.

“Have you ever been to Sana Cruz in the off season?”

More signs rushed by and Sam knew that he was past the point of protest. Arguing wasn’t lost miles ago, but weeks back. So he rested his head against the window, hiding a smile. “I haven’t.”

Nick smacked at his knee. “Tell your Dean that we’ll be late. I’m taking you to the beach.”
It didn’t really matter that Sam had lived within an hour of the beach since coming to California. The ocean was still something of a treat and honestly… the prospect of spending one more night with Nick was too good to pass up.

He dug out his phone and called his brother, a little shocked at how fast he picked up.

“Hiya, Sammy. How’s that big gay vacation going?”

“It’s not a-” Sam sighed. “It’s been fun.” He slapped Nick’s hand off his leg.

“You two uh…you guys been going at it like a couple of rabbits the whole weekend and just thought to give me a call between rounds?”

“God, Dean.” He managed to sound so casual and he fought to not congratulate himself. “We have some restraint.”

“Good to know.”

“It was just twice last night and once this morning. But we were both kinda tired so we only-”

His big brother managed to cut him off with a very distressed sound. “Gross, man. Don’t tell me about it.” And Dean took a moment to regain what composure he could while he let Sam stop laughing. “Is that why you called? Letting me know you’re too sexed out to come home today?”

“No. We’re just headed to the beach, so I’ll be late.”

“Yeah, whatever, you big girl.” He sighed in this long suffering kind of way and Sam knew every line that would show over his brother’s face even if he couldn’t see them forming. “You… you ok, out there?”

“I’m fine.”

“You still going to be fine in a few days?”

It wasn’t something that anyone else would have asked Sam- at least not that way. But Dean knew his brother better than anyone else and Dean knew what tomorrow might be like after a weekend like this.

This wasn’t like a one night stand with a girl he met at a bar, or even a little fling with a classmate. This was a tentative venture into a whole other lifestyle. Under normal circumstances it was absolutely conceivable that he would find time to have a complete breakdown once he got home. All sorts of suffocating regret over what he had done.

A twinge of guilt crawled through Sam, because those few words of concern meant that Dean was buying this whole giant lie. And it wasn’t even a good one. There was little to no proof to substantiate it- all Dean had to go on was Sam’s words.

Somehow that was enough.

How could he not feel guilty for a lie this huge?

“I’m a big boy, Dean. I’ll be ok.”

“Yeah, yeah. If he does anything … you know… punch him in the throat or bust his head or something.”
“Punch him in the throat. Got it.” From the corner of his eye Sam saw Nick get a confused little frown.

“And… offer still stands. You need me to come out and pick you up and beat his ass- at any time- you call me. Ok?”

Sam thought that there was a pun in there, something about Nick’s ass and Dean mentioning it… but it had been a long few days, and he had already used most of his good jibes on Nick.

“Thanks.” He said instead, because somewhere amidst all this, he meant it.

“Enjoy the beach, bitch.”

“See you tomorrow, jerk.” He hung up, tucked his phone away and smiled softly to himself up until he realized that Nick was shooting him odd little looks every few mile markers. “What?”

“First, you two are disgustingly adorable.” Nick splayed his fingers over the steering wheel for emphasis. “Second, whose throat are you punching?”

“Yours.”

A small noise caught in his throat. “I’m not saying I wouldn’t deserve it. But why?”

“It’s only as a last resort.” Sam knocked his knees against the glove box, too long for the sleek car, but honestly feeling more comfortable than confined. “Just depends on how touchy you plan on getting tonight.”

Nick sighed in this deeply put upon way. “Sam, you know I have no control over my body when I get cold.”

It didn’t help that every time Nick got that suffering, chilly look about him and started in with his whining, Sam gave in. A little quicker each time. In all honesty his actions were more a sign of his weakening resolve and had almost nothing to do with any tenderness or sympathy.

“You could try to keep your hands to yourself- just this once. I’ll give you the bed next to the heater. You can put it on full blast.”

“What bed?”

“The one in the hotel that we’re staying in tonight…?”

Nick glanced over wearing an almost innocent expression. “Oh, did you want to stay in a hotel?”

“As opposed to what?”

Nick didn’t answer right away, and Sam didn’t know how to take the silence.

“I thought, since it’s only an hour from there to home we could still make the drive tonight. We’ll just get in real late… or real early, depends on how you look at it.”

“Oh.” And Sam eyed the low, grey clouds, wondering what it was that they were going to be doing if they weren’t staying the night. But he supposed that he would find out soon enough.

Santa Cruz was a tourist town and as such, in the dead of winter, on a Sunday night, the Boardwalk was like a ghost town. The midway was still open, high strung, industrial Christmas lights, twinkling yellow. Music still piped in on grainy speakers, but every shop front had those metal curtains lowered and locked and there was no one there other than the two lanky men.
metal curtains lowered and locked and there was no one there other than the two lanky men. Sam had been out here once before, last summer. It had been loud and hot, packed with bodies all sweating and talking and laughing under the glaring sun.

This was different and it took him quite some time to figure out if it was the good kind of different or not. They walked in relative silence from one end of the midway to the other, their long shadows dancing as the small breeze made the stung lights sway. Sam settled deeper into his jacket, pulling up his collar, thinking that if he was a bit chilly then Nick must be suffering- but the other man said nothing. Hands dug into his pockets, shoulders hunched against the wind. Trooping along like it wasn’t early December and the chill from the none too distant waves wasn’t startling.

“Well.” Sam said with some finality when they reached the end. “Back the other way?”

“No.” Nick scoffed. Insulted by the suggestion. “We’ve already seen that way.”

“Alright then.” He looked from the exit gates to a set of short stairs which led to the beach. “So we just keep walking off into the night?”

Nick rolled his eyes and took Sam by the hand, dragging him towards the stairs, out to the sand. The Boardwalk was one of the only beaches along this part of the coast that was regularly cleaned of the mess of seaweed that was constantly washing ashore. During the day it was pale gold and almost blindingly bright under the sun, stretching from one end of the curving coast to the other. At night, beneath the scattering of heavy, wet clouds, the sand was almost as black as the waves that crawled hungrily over it.

“Hold up. I’m getting sand in my shoes.” Sam pulled back, slowing Nick down like an anchor and postponing his sudden over enthusiasm for the sea.

“You big baby.” But he stopped tugging and stooped over to get his shoes off as well.

The sun had been down for hours and the sand was surprisingly cold. Sam dug his toes down, hoping against hope to find a bit of warmth if he went deep enough.

No such luck.

“Everything about this is insane.” Sam said, wiggling his toes.

“I used to come out here with my brothers during winter break when we were kids.” Nick smiled, leaving his shoes behind and just shuffling out across the stretch of sand. “We’d have an end of year bonfire and toss all our old school work in.”

“A bonfire with your brothers?” Sam jogged after to catch up, uncertain where exactly they were aiming for, because it wasn’t the water. He could make up hulking shapes in the sand here and there, big dark things that didn’t visually make much sense in the low light.

“Well, not all my brothers. Though Anna found out about it and talked Michael into coming once.”

“I take it it didn’t end well?”

Nick looked over his shoulder with a crooked expression. “You could say that.”

Sam had come to realize that his friend wasn’t too big on proper answers to questions.

“Here.” He announced, a few yards off, standing beside what Sam started to realize was
driftwood. Enormous driftwood. A whole tree it looked like.

“Here. Yes. But what is it?” Sam asked skeptically.

“A place to sit.” He pointed as he busied himself with what Sam was starting to understand was the remnants of a bonfire that must have died out hours, if not days ago.

And Sam sat, because he didn’t have much reason not to. If nothing else, it let him tuck his legs up a little closer. Let him try to hold in a bit of heat as he watched Nick fiddling around with the small, charred logs.

“You won’t have much luck with those.”

“These? No.” He looked back over his shoulder, pale faced and blinking into the wind. “But typically the beach bums leave a bit of good wood behind for the next guy.”

Sam couldn’t help but smile. Just the idea of young Nick out here with his brothers, gangly legs and red cheeks, throwing homework into a fire in the middle of the night like some horrible offering to a scholar god. Freckles and skinned knees- and honestly he had no proof that the man ever had a single freckle, but Sam could imagine to his heart’s content while he watched Nick build a careful stack of ready to burn wood and slightly charred branches and logs.

“I hope you have matches. I didn’t bring any.” Sam advised

Surprisingly, the man did have a lighter. Little bits of paper were produced from his pocket next, and Sam struggled to recognize the receipts as what they were. Little bits of evidence from their past few days, and Nick managed to coax a curl of smoke and then a flicker of flame.

“Where did that come from?” Sam asked as Nick tucked the lighter into a pocket.

“Just an old habit.” He said with a hint of a smile that was almost lost in the dark.

Even after the fire started to grow Sam struggled to feel the heat, small light that it was that hardly stood a chance to combat the night.

Perhaps a bit too soon, Nick came to join him, sitting close enough that their sides touched. Shoulder to shoulder and knee to knee. If the man weren’t a pillar of winter himself it would have been a welcome bit of contact. Instead he shied away as much as he could without actually standing.

“How have you not keeled over from hypothermia and just died?”

“‘m stubborn like that.”

Sam sighed, watching the fire instead of his friend. “You sure you don’t want to go somewhere warmer?”

“I like it here.” He said stubbornly, tucking his hands between his knees, eyes fixed on the steadily growing flames.

Wayward starlight, steadily crashing waves, and the warm crackle of a fire.

Simply agreeing with Nick felt like a bit of an understatement. It might just have been good timing, this little trip falling right after school let out- but it was exactly what Sam needed. He needed the change of scenery, and the chance to just forget about all the things that he was supposed to be and do and just enjoy being himself for a change. Or at least as much of himself as
he could be while gently perpetrating an enormous lie.

In place of an answer he pulled an arm around Nick’s shoulders, offering to share whatever bit of warmth that he had left with his friend.

Leaning into the embrace Nick practically purred, a grumbling groan of pure contentment. “I think I could really fall for someone with a core temperature like yours.”

Sam laughed and resisted the sudden and strange impulse to press his face into Nick’s hair. “God, just shut up and be warm.”

“Good thing you’re so mean all the time. It helps me to resist the urge to thrown you down into the sand and ravish you.” If there was any longing or passion in his words then Sam would have pushed the man off the log. But he sounded as dry as the sand they were digging their toes into and he was permitted to stay in the circle of Sam’s arm.

Though it didn’t really matter, because Nick unseated himself, sliding down into the sand and shoving one of Sam’s legs aside to make room. As everything else for this weekend, Sam found that arguing was useless and he let his friend settled between his feet, Nick’s spine pressed into his stomach and chest. The man taking shelter from the wind, using Sam as a breaker. Body heat to his back and fire to his front, drawing his knees to his chest.

Sam tried not to laugh, always aiming to do his best to not encourage the man’s unsolicited touching. Even when he found that he enjoyed it far more than he thought that he should. Sam had been raised (mostly by Dean) to show affection in the most physical of ways, usually resulting in rough shoves and rougher hugs. Punches and tussles, and all the sorts of things that brothers could easily get away with.

But they only ever acted that way with each other. Sam couldn’t say the last time he hugged anyone other than Dean.

That’s a lie.

He had hugged Jess at her wedding, and again before she left. He’d hugged Nick’s sister-in-law, though that was more of a byproduct than any action on his own part.

And then there was Nick. Sam had found himself crashing into and tangling limbs with the man almost constantly since they met.

As much as he hated to admit it, Nick was probably right their first night in San Francisco when he had assessed that Sam had a craving. A need for human contact- because everyone did- and he had simply found a willing partner.

He pressed his legs in on either side of Nick, gently crushing his shoulders and ribs. “You good down there?”

“Better than good.” Nick sighed, resting a cheek against Sam’s thigh.

It wasn’t the most compromising position that they had found themselves in over the weekend- real or fabricated. Though this was one of the odder ones. Sam let it be, opting to just enjoy the growing warmth of the fire, and the more solid, though less substantial heat of the man tucked neatly between his legs.

They watched the blaze guttering in the wind, twisting and climbing and kissing the sky.

“I think… that this is the healthiest relationship I’ve ever been in.” Nick spoke with his mouth
against Sam’s leg.

“That’s not a good sign considering that we aren’t actually in a relationship.” He felt a need to say gently, wanting to remind Nick of that little fact that he seemed to so willingly forget.

“No. We aren’t actually dating. This is a relationship though. I’m here, you’re here, we’re relating.” His breath was making a little warm spot on Sam’s knee. “Ours is a love based purely on a need for fraternal freedom, warmth, and assured mutual destruction. It’s honest and true.”

“I suppose that friendships have stood on less.” Sam relented, though he questioned the choice of the word ‘honest’. Maybe with each other-but certainly not with anyone else.

Nick made a soft agreeing noise, rutting his shoulder until he wedged it in the crook of Sam’s knee. “Think we can keep this up for another two months?”

Sam could have just said yes. It was an easy question. It was an easy answer. But he considered it, really thought about whether or not he could manage to maintain this counterfeit romance. The thought curled through him, warm as the fire they were watching. If he was asked to, he could manage at least twice that long.

In place of a proper answer he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, arms crossing over Nick’s shoulders, up against his neck. The blonde glanced up for a second before resettling his head against Sam’s forearm.

“I’ll just be glad when it’s over.” Sam said in order to sharpen his actions. Not wanting Nick to get the wrong idea.

The man tensed and the little shift would have been missed altogether if he wasn’t pressed up against Sam at so many little junctures.

“You will?”

“I’m not as good at this as you are.”

“You’re doing fine. Your brother seems to be buying it well enough.”

Too well, Sam thought. “I’ve never been all that good at lying to him.” He tucked a food beneath Nick’s. “He practically raised me. He knows all my tricks.”

“You think you’re going to fuck it up somehow?”

“I know I will, and the longer this goes on, the harder it’s going to be to explain.”

“Don’t explain. And don’t fuck up. ‘s my suggestion.”

“You’re so helpful.”

“And you’re doing fine.” He repeated. “This isn’t a life and death game, Sam. The worst that can happen is that our brothers somehow figure it out and realize just how desperate we both are for a little bit of freedom.”

Sam felt a drop of rain hit his knee, saw the little dark spot.

“Great.” And he started to uncurl from round Nick, but the man looped his arms around Sam’s shins and held him in place.

“Stay.” Nick’s words were pressed into his leg. “A bit of rain never hurt.”
“Stay.” Nick’s words were pressed into his leg. “A bit of rain never hurt.”

Sam relented, easing back down those few inches that he had managed before being weighted back down. “Sometimes I think that you’re trying to kill me.”

“Why would I want to go and do a damn fool thing like that? I’d have one hell of a time convincing my brother that I was dating a dead man.” Nick chuckled as he looked up, the firelight catching in night black eyes, and for a moment Sam thought he could be religious.

More rain fell, light sprinkles that made the fire hiss every so often. Speckling the sand like dark stars.

With face turned to the sky, he watched Sam upside down. Features almost alien when viewed the wrong way. Nick’s laughter faded to a soft rumble in his chest. Something low that Sam could feel in the long bones of his legs.

One of them had to look away first, and one of them did— but Sam couldn’t say who because he had closed his eyes. He couldn’t bring himself to open them again until he felt the weight of Nick’s head settle back against his arm.

The fire suffered as the rain started to come down in more than just a sprinkle. Something inside of Sam suffered as well. He found himself curling tighter around Nick, partially to find a bit more warmth, partially to keep the rain off of the other man. And there may have been another reason in there somewhere, but if it was then Sam didn’t know what it could be or what he would call it.

Nick huffed a soft breath, seeming to struggle to find words after such a long pause. “Have you ever considered renting yourself out as an umbrella?”

Sam managed to make a noise almost like a laugh. “Is there good money in that?”

“I’d pay to keep you.” Nick mouthed against his arm.

As interesting of an offer as that was, Sam made himself uncurl. Shaking water from his hair. “I hate to break this up but I’d rather not spend my winter break in bed with pneumonia.”

“Care to spend it in bed with me instead?”

“I worry about how much you’re enjoying this, Nick.”

“This?”

“All of this.”

Nick looked at him again, water beading on his skin as he turned his face to the sky. One of his hands came up, curling behind Sam’s head, tugging him back down. “You going to lie and tell me you’re not enjoying it just as much as I am?”

Honest?

“You are the most convincing sinking ship that I’ve ever been asked to board.” Sam found himself saying softly, feeling the warmth of his and Nick’s mingling breaths curling against his face and neck.

“Cheeky.” Nick grinned, arching up just enough to kiss Sam’s unprotected jaw line. Managing to get almost the exact same spot that he’d bitten yesterday morning. It was the same soft type of kiss that he had given Sam two or three times before. Familiar and warm and innocent, even if the curve of his mouth wasn’t.
Sam closed his eyes and just shook his head. It was a gesture of self preservation, a moment as alone and he could manage. An opportunity to calm the shiver that ran up his back. Mostly from the cold. God, he hoped it was from the cold.

Nick let go of him, fingers sliding through his hair. “We should get going before it gets any worse.”

There was a basic understanding that Nick probably meant the rain. They should get going before the rain got any worse. It had nothing to do with Sam’s shiver or how his mouth felt cold without Nick’s soft breaths. Those sorts of things would only get worse on their own, regardless of if the men stayed here or went.

At very least- if nothing else could be done- they could fix the rain.

Chapter End Notes

also, I've been kind of writing down little scenes from this and the next two chapters from Nick's perspective and hiding them in my computer. I'm thinking of uploading them as a separate little story, just additional tidbits. Is that something that you would be interested in?
do you know that every time I post a new chapter I agonize over what to put up here? I make so many drafts and delete so many words because no one really needs to hear me rambling on about things.

Just know that these past few weeks were rough for me out here and getting those absolutely lovely reviews from you guys gave me life. I was exhausted and miserable and everything else, and then my email would ding and let me know that someone out in the mysterious and wide internet liked all the stupid words that I put together. I grin like an idiot each and every time. and I know that I don't comment back- but it would mostly just be inarticulate keyboard mashing and little hearts <3

I'm happy that we found each other.
I want to keep all of you.
Come to California.
It's warm and I will make you cookies and we can talk about boys.

It would have been far too much to ask for a whole day to himself. Three straight days with Nick, a day and a half with Dean and all of five minutes to himself- to sit on the couch with a cup of coffee and a book – before there came a knocking at the door. Sam would have expected just about anyone at this point, from Nick coming back to harass him to Jehovah Witnesses. Instead he got Castiel. Slightly rumpled suit, pale faced and dark eyed.

“Oh. Hi, Cas.” Sam felt his frustration at being interrupted ebb slightly. “Dean just left for work. He should be back around eight.”

The accountant gave one of his slightly strained smiles. “I came to talk to you.”

“Why?” Sam asked before he really intended and felt a bit guilty for being so gruff. It wasn’t Castiel’s fault. “I mean, come in. Can I get you a drink?” He tried to remember his manners.

Before long Castiel was settled nicely onto the couch, a cushion’s width between him and Sam, holding a glass of water between his knees. If he had come to talk to Sam he certainly looked like he intended to take his time getting started.

The silence only filled Sam with a terrible unease. Horrible possibilities of what this talk was going to be about. Ten bucks said it was going to involve Dean in ways that Sam didn’t want to think about and he really had brought this on himself by pushing Cas in his brother’s direction a few weeks ago.

“What’s up?” Sam asked as gently as he could, hoping that Cas wouldn’t pick up on the anxiety underlying the question.

“I need to ask you a favor.” He informed his water glass. “And I know that we’re not friends exactly, but I… I need help with Nick.”

“Oh?” Sam wasn’t sure if he was relieved or more worried at this news.
“Do you think that you could talk him into coming to Christmas this year?”

Oh.

“I… um,” Sam kind of chuckled, relieved that it was something so simple. “I don’t think that he wants to go.”

“I know that he doesn’t want to go.” Castiel sighed, setting his glass on the table. “That’s why I’m asking for your help.”

“Cas, I don’t have that kind of power.”

Castiel’s eyes were a bit darker than his big brothers, though no less expressive and he pleaded with Sam in that single look.

Sam was unprepared. “W-what should I say?”

“I don’t know. I’ve tried everything. But we had lunch yesterday and he was… he really likes you, Sam.”

This wasn’t gossip. Sam was fully aware of the feelings that he and Nick had decided to have for each other. They had spent almost half an hour arguing over crepes and kicks to unprotected ankles about the very subject only a few days ago. It still made Sam smile.

“He just ignores me when I invite him. He has for years. But it might be different if you ask.”

“I don’t think so.” Sam apologized, but then Castiel got that kicked puppy look again. “But I can ask.”

“Thank you.” He slumped back into the couch, looking relieved and happy. “It would mean so much to the girls if he showed up. And not just Hannah and Sarah, their mom too. Her and Nick used to be very close back in school- at least that’s what I’ve been told. It was before I came to live with my brothers.”

Sam kind of nodded along, still a little confused by their family’s timeline, but now was not the time to ask for clarification.

“He stopped coming to any kind of family function after his divorce… I think he blamed Michael for it somehow, at least that’s what I got from some of their arguments- and things have calmed down a bit since then for whatever that’s worth. He shows up for Thanksgiving and Easter, but twice a year to see your family is hardly enough.”

“He sees you more often than that.”

“Well, yes.” Castiel smiled just a little. “But I’m non-confrontational. I don’t try to push his buttons like Michael and Gabriel do. I don’t bring up Lilith, or June, or the Marines, or bears in Yosemite. When you know what to not talk about he’s very easy to get along with.”

Sam perked up. Lilith was Nick’s ex, and the bears was an argument that Sam had heard before… but the Marines? June? How can someone’s button be the whole month of June? Oh, Sam wanted to ask, but he knew it wasn’t his business. If Nick wanted to share he would.

Apparently Castiel could read the curiosity on Sam’s face because he suddenly paled. “Never mind. I ramble sometimes. I don’t mean to.”

Sam’s coffee was cold, but he still sipped at it, occupying his mouth so it wouldn’t ask stupid
questions.

“Thank you for agreeing to help.” Cas took a little sip of his own drink and when he glanced up there was a mischievous look about him- though Sam could have been misinterpreting that one, because it certainly didn’t seem like a familiar expression for the accountant. “If I can ask one last thing, Sam?”

“Go for it.” As long as the man wasn’t expecting anything more complicated than he had already asked for.

“How was your weekend with Nick?”

“It was… nice.” Sam said hesitantly. Which was basically the same answer he’d given Dean. What did it matter what sort of story he and Nick had concocted? He knew that he could just be vague and his brother would assume the worst.

Castiel’s eyebrows went up a bit. “Nice?”

“We got his violin fixed. Saw a concert. I got to hold his hand while he got a tattoo on his arm touched up.” There was blood and Sam had been far more uncomfortable about the whole thing than Nick. “We went to Pier Thirty-nine… just normal things I guess.”

“Does he still play his violin?” Castiel leaned forward, suddenly excited.

The simple answer was yes. Sam remembered it quite clearly. Teasing Nick again in the parking garage, about the man smuggling drugs in his violin case. And Nick had laughed and taken out the smallest, most fragile looking instrument that Sam had ever seen. He had been afraid to touch it- especially when the man told him it was almost a hundred years old. He’d asked Nick to play, assuming that he would shoot him down on account of the rolling echoes of the practically empty garage.

But Nick played. He played ‘Whisky in the Jar-o’ of all songs, and even with the confusing acoustics it was startlingly wonderful. Everything about Nick seemed to be, so it was only fair.

Sam shook himself of the memory and smiled at Castiel. “He does. Do all you guys play an instrument?”

“We all tried at some point. He was just the only one of us that was ever any good.”

Sam waited, expectantly, but when no further words came he nudged. “What about you?”

“I tried to learn the piano.” He looked down, shoulders hunching slightly. “I gave up by the time I graduated high school.” He glanced back up. “I’m glad you two had fun. He needed a vacation.”

“I did too.”

Castiel got to his feet and Sam followed. “I hope you don’t mind… today is the day I go into the shop to do payroll. Dean and I are going out for drinks afterwards.”

“I don’t mind.” Sam grinned and decided that he would really need to have a talk with Dean about this at some point. “I’m glad. Just try and keep him away from vodka or tequila. He knows that they make him sloppy, but when he’s in the mood for trouble he doesn’t care.” It was only fair warning.

“Nick is the same way.” Cas shook his head with a sigh. “Brown drinks make him happy. Pale drinks usually mean fist fights. I have to keep an eye on him when we go out together.”
That meant that Sam should keep an eye on him as well—though if they were the same habits as Dean, it meant that a simple drink order would do wonders for gauging the man’s mood. Sometimes Sam felt like he learned more about his ‘boyfriend’ from talking to Cas than he ever actually got out of Nick.

The little accountant smiled up at Sam, looking oddly pleased in the shared similarity of their big brothers. “It’s good to know what I’m getting myself in for.”

“He’s easy enough to handle. Just cut him off when he starts getting… huggy.”

“Oh.” Castiel looked down at his shoes. “I don’t think I would mind it all that much.”

Sam tried not to grin. “Hey, Cas?”

“Hm?” He looked over his shoulder, hesitating halfway to seeing himself out the door.

“Have you and Dean,” did he really want to know? “Have you kissed?” As soon as the word left his mouth Sam wanted to take it back. It went above and beyond what would qualify as his business. He honestly didn’t even want to even consider the possibility that his brother would have… Dean wouldn’t. He wouldn’t.

It wasn’t like Sam had anything at all against Castiel. The peculiar little man made Sam kind of happy to be honest. He was possibly very good for Dean. But that didn’t mean that Dean was going to swing that way, or that he would even graciously accept any kind of advances from a friend. However, Dean was the kind of guy who let people he cared about get away with practically anything.

“I’m brave, Sam. But I’m not stupid.” Castiel’s cheeks pinked ever so slightly. “Have you… has Nick kissed you?”

That startled Sam.

There was a plan. A whole, huge, gay plan between him and Nick. But Nick had had lunch with his brother that afternoon and he hadn’t even told Cas that they…

“We’ve… um, done a bit more than that actually.”

Cas chuckled and it was a little rough like he wasn’t used to making the noise. “Have you?”

Sam found that it was his turn to feel awkward. And that was fine— it’s not like he was an adult or anything and years past blushing and shuffling his feet like a twelve year old at his first school dance. He managed a small nod and that was acknowledgement enough.

Castiel clapped him on the shoulder before he left, a funny sort of parting, but at the same time very familiar and warm. The same way that Nick liked to kiss Sam’s cheek.

For a while Sam got to just stand there, leaning against the door, listening to Castiel drive away. He lost himself for a moment or two, mulling over what he had agreed to do. The stupid thing that he had agreed to. But Sam had no natural defenses built up for puppy dog expressions and he had said yes long before it really had a chance to sink in what a horrible thing he had agreed to try and do.

And so much for having a day to himself.

It was only a week until Christmas and it didn’t leave much time to try and sweet talk Nick into going somewhere he didn’t want to go, using little to no leverage at all. It was a daunting task.
Putting it off would only mean less time for persuasion.

And Sam would need all the time he could get.

He spent the afternoon making lists. Putting words and idea together and Dean would have laughed if he had known about it. But Sam was who he was, and writing things down always helped him get his thoughts in order. A few hours (and a few breaks) later, and he thought he had come up with a fair argument- or at least as good as he was going to get.

He called Nick’s phone and was disappointed when no one picked up.

He called the shop and the little receptionist said that Nick had already left for the night but would be back in tomorrow around two or three.

Sam could just go to Nick’s apartment… but that felt like a breech in whatever protocol they had never laid down. So he called his cell phone again an hour later and didn’t leave a message because he suddenly felt overly self conscious about looking like a needy girlfriend. For lack of a better direction he stole one of Dean’s beers from the fridge and settled himself down with some X Files reruns.

He was in bed before Dean made it home. Which made it a very late night for his brother. Sam kept his fingers crossed. Hoping that Dean or Cas had managed to do the right thing tonight. Whatever the right thing was.

In the morning he found a sticky note on the fridge for him. Dean’s heavy handwriting crammed into the small yellow square.

‘we need to talk when I get home- be here’

And thank god there wasn’t anything ominous about the note. Though Dean had never had any tact and in all likelihood there was probably nothing at all sinister hidden in those few words. Probably.

It gave Sam something to fret about until that afternoon when he stepped out. No doom and gloom note from his brother would keep him from his self imposed timeframe. Besides, he’d be back before Dean got home.

Sam pulled on his coat and went for a long walk.

As he suspected, the little coffee shop situated to the left of the tattoo parlor knew Nick by name, and knew what he usually ordered, and no, they hadn’t seen him yet this afternoon. Sam purchased two coffees, one with just a bit of cream and the other some kind of nonsense that he just had to trust in the barista for.

The same dark haired receptionist was there to greet Sam when he walked in, lips just as red, shirt just as low, jeans somehow even tighter.

“Well, hello there stranger.” She leaned on the desk in just the right way to give Sam a nice peek down her top, should he choose to. “Am I happy to see you again.”

He smiled right at her face, with a perfectly steady gaze. “Is Nick in yet?”

“Boss man?” She stood a little bit straighter, eyeing not only Sam but also his two coffees. “Yeah. He… had a rough night last night so we were letting him sleep. He’s that lump in the corner.” She kept her eyes on Sam while nodding towards the back of the shop.
Sam easily looked over her head to the far side of the room, seeing at first only a sturdy looking man with closely shaved hair, who as emphatically not Nick, carefully laying out a sprawling design over a young man’s arm. They were both locked in a quiet conversation that was relatively lost behind the buzz of the tattoo needle and the classic rock station that was playing just a bit too loud.

Nick was not literally in the corner of the shop, but he was in the furthest station from the door, and not particularly notable aside from the clutter. He was leaning back, half falling out of a desk chair with a magazine lying over his face. At least, Sam assumed it was Nick. The patterns on his arms looked familiar if nothing else.

“Can I go back?” Sam asked the girl, holding up the coffees.

She smiled at him again, a little crooked this time. “Yeah. Go ahead. He’s uh—he’s got a picture of the two of you on his wall. See if you can talk him into giving me a copy?”

A… picture?

Oh no.

There could be only one picture.

The two of them had gone into a photo booth at the Pier over the weekend. Nick had caused trouble and Sam made him promise to get rid of the evidence resulting there in. He should have known that Nick would keep it.

Sam had an itch on the back of his neck for the whole short walk, convinced that the receptionist was studying every bit of his progress. Ever so carefully he set the drinks down on a desk littered with papers and binders and sketchbooks. It was almost the exact opposite of Nick’s apartment. Clutter covering every surface except for a very comfortable looking dentist-esk chair that Sam could only assume was for customers, and a tall tray on wheels, with little C rings on the side from which hung a pair of tattoo guns.

Despite his initial intentions, Sam found himself taking advantage of the moment to look around. He lightly scooted aside one of the binders, peeking to see it filled with nicely sorted photos of tattoos. He was almost brave enough to look inside one of the sketchbooks, but settled for peering at a few familiar faces in the photos pinned to a cork board, partially hidden behind a half finished painting of crows. A really… really nice painting of crows. Not that Sam was an art expert or anything like that. But they really looked like the birds that they were supposed to be and that had to say something about the quality. Right?

Sam would much rather look at those birds than the other pictures.

One particular picture.

Or four- if you looked at it right. One long set of photos with little white bars between. The first was innocent enough, the two of them both smiling a little awkwardly at the camera. But by the second one Nick had grabbed hold of Sam and done a marvelous job of crushing the younger man into the corner of the booth, kissing him full on the mouth— or at least that was certainly what it looked like. He had managed to get a few fingers between their lips of them on the far side where the camera couldn’t see. But it certainly looked very convincing. The last two pictures were of Sam eyeing Nick in wide eyed terror while the older man laughed until his face was red.

He really should have gotten rid of it. If nothing else, it was at least somewhat hidden in the mess of other photos. There was an upsettingly sweet picture of Nick’s nieces and nephew building a
sandcastle. There was another photo from probably the same day, with Nick and the children burying Gabriel up to the neck beneath a lopsided pile of sand. The older man was in swim trunks and looked slightly sunburned, but fiercely happy.

There were more photos, some of family, some of people that Sam didn’t recognize in the slightest. There was one family photo where everyone looked familiar, except for the addition of an oddly short, man with messy brown hair. It had to be the boys’ father. He had the same almost grey blue eyes that Nick did, the same awkward smile that his sons all seemed to share.

It was a nice peek into Nick’s life. And Sam enjoyed seeing that, despite how Thanksgiving had gone a few weeks ago, there was evidence that at some point all four brothers had been at least willing to smile and lean against each other.

There was one face mixed in with all the others that Sam positively didn’t know, but she looked so familiar at the same time. There had to be at least ten pictures of a young blonde girl with sterling blue eyes and a smear of freckles. She was shown in an array of ages, from toddler to about the same age as Michael’s older kids. Smiling, playing soccer, glairing into the sun, poised just so for a school picture with a painfully unflattering blue background. An odd collection and Sam wondered if she was somehow Gabriel’s daughter and just hadn’t been at Thanksgiving. Or perhaps a sister? A much, much younger sister.

Sam made himself look away, because he wasn’t willing to check the back of the photos in hopes of finding a name. Just as sure as he would still have no idea who she was even if he knew what she was called.

He turned to Nick and was on the verge of waking him in some obnoxious way, right up until he saw the man’s hands. They were folded over his stomach, the last three fingers of his right hand bound up in a series of those little blue medical splints, wrapped in enough tape that it almost hid the purple and black bruising.

“Nick?” Sam leaned down, lightly patting at his knees. It was a gentle movement but obviously enough to startle the man awake.

He sat up alarmingly fast, the magazine sliding to his lap, his eyes wide and unfocused- Sam half expected to see a black eye, but instead was treated to a view of a painfully deep split lip offset with two small black stitches.

“God damn it, Sam.” Nick used his good hand to pick up his magazine and smacked Sam firmly in the stomach. “You can’t go sneaking up on me like that.”

He took the swat because he supposed that he deserved it. “What happened to you?”

“Nice to see you too, Sam.” Nick had a fantastic ability to put an undue amount of sarcasm into those few words. “How have you been?”

“I’m… I’m better than you I guess.” He leaned back against the counter. “Holly hell, Nick.”

“Thanks.” He rubbed at an eye, then touched his lip and winced. He gave Sam a guarded look, slightly on edge and none of his normal humor.

“Are you alright?” He tried a different approach, feeling a bit on edge himself now because this sort of derailed his initial plans -being far more important and immediate than visiting family in a week.

“I’m peachy. How’s your brother?”
Sam blinked. “He’s… fine. How are your brothers?” See, he could ask stupid questions too.

Nick didn’t answer so much as he just watched Sam with that even, cautious expression. Not saying anything at all until things started to feel uncomfortable. “Why are you here, Sam?”

“I just hadn’t seen you in a few days. Wanted to say hi… I brought you a coffee.” He picked up the cardboard cup and handed it over.

There was a moment of quiet suspicion and then Nick read the markings on the side of the cup and his face lit up. “Oh. Oh, you beautiful boy.” He took the offered coffee and suddenly everything was fine. “Thank you.” He sipped and winced, then smiled up at Sam. “How did you know?”

“The guy at the coffee shop said it was what you usually ordered.” Despite the sudden shift Sam still felt uneasy. “I see you, um, kept the pictures from our trip.” He nodded towards the board and its collage of photos.

Nick’s eyes got a little lidded above a smile. “I like them.”

“But they’re… incriminating.”

“Oh god. You’re right. Do you think people might assume that we’re… dating?”

“God, I hope not.” Sam chuckled and hated it. He nudged a foot against Nick’s and was rewarded with a small shuffle back. “People thinking I’m dating some kind of ruffian. How embarrassing.”

“It was not a fight that I started if that counts for anything.”

“Did you at least finish it?”

Nick took a slow breath, agitated little lines on his forehead and the corners of his lips. “No. I don’t think I did.”

“You want me to go find him and break his knees for you or something?”

That made Nick laugh. Hard enough that he had to set down his coffee.

“Is that a no?”

“I think it’s best to let this one go.” He touched his lip and managed not to wince this time. “I said I didn’t start the fight. I never said I didn’t deserve what I got.”

“I leave you alone for a few days and you go pick a fight and get that pretty face of yours broken.” He shook his head. “I’m invested in that face, Nick. At least one whole month of my time and you could at least try and keep it safe.”

Nick turned his head to the side and lightly tapped a finger against his cheek. It took Sam longer than it should have to realize he was asking for a kiss- but there were other people in the room. People who he didn’t know, who could easily see the two of them in the corner. And it was a bit startling to then realize that that alone was the only reason why Sam didn’t just go for it.

As reason went- it was a fairly stupid one.

He leaned down and pressed a small kiss against Nick’s cheek. “You are a trouble maker.” He whispered.

“Only sometimes.” Nick whispered back with a bit of a chuckle. He waited until Sam resituated
himself against the counter, all the space in the world between them, before taking another small sip of his coffee. “And only when it will be the least convenient.”

“I have noticed that.” He played footsie just a little more without a single ounce of shame, kicking away at Nick like they were little kids. “So, Cas came by to visit me yesterday morning.”

Nick tensed, just for a fraction of a second and Sam almost thought he imagined it. “And what did my little baby brother need? Looking for more dating advice?”

“No. He seems to be doing just fine on his own.” Sam smiled to himself. “He actually was re-inviting me and Dean to Christmas.”

He tensed again, showing a bit of teeth this time. “Eww.”

“I’m thinking about going.” He shrugged, hoping it came off as casual. “I mean, Dean’s going. I may as well go too. No sense in staying home alone on Christmas.”

Nick made a face, not at all concerned with hiding his feelings on the subject. “You can always come spend the night with me. I’ll be just as alone. We can both be alone, together.”

Sam smiled and shook his head. “Dean and I have never done much for the holiday season. We’re not really that religious or festive- but he’s the only family I’ve got. It would feel weird not to be with him.”

“Suit yourself. But you’re walking into a house full of crazies. They’ll have you eating ham and singing Christmas songs and you won’t get any sympathy from me.”

Well- so much for Nick offering to go along so Sam wouldn’t be stuck with his family.

“Come with me.” He tried that pitiful look that always worked on Dean.

Nick laughed. “Hell no.”

“Come on. I don’t want to be stuck in a corner while Dean gets tipsy on eggnog and makes very heterosexual passes at Cas.”

“First off, still no booze unless you smuggle it in yourself. Second, I’m sure that Gabriel will keep you company if your brother gets too caught up in making eyes at my brother.”

“Great. You’re just going to let me alone to defend myself against him? I’ll screw up somehow. He’s a lawyer. He’ll know I’m lying.”

“He’ll be too drunk on contraband to even remember who you are- and he’s honestly not that bright to begin with.” Came the calm assurance. “But the offer still stands to come stay with me.” There was absolutely no sympathy to be found. “We can order take out and watch bad movies and they can even be holiday appropriate if you like.”

“Nick,”

“Still no.”

“Then I will take my bribe coffee back.”

“It was a gift.” He held the drink to his chest and smiled up at Sam so sweetly.

“No. It was definitely a bribe.”
Nick looked him square in the eye as he licked the lid of his cup. “Mine.”

“Am I supposed to be afraid of your germs at this point?”

And Nick simply took another drink of his coffee, his eyes shining with the smile that he hid.

“Come on, Nick. Please.”

“I don’t know what Cas offered you to come down here and try and talk me into this- and don’t deny it. I know he did. But whatever he gave you in trade, it wasn’t worth it, because the answer is still no.”

“He didn’t offer me anything.” Sam sighed, marveling at how quickly this had come apart. “He just asked.”

“Did he give you those big eyes of his?” Nick chuckled and nodded when he saw the look on Sam’s face. “Yeah. He seems innocent enough- but he knows how to work the system.”

Sam made sullen work of his coffee. Disappointed in himself and at the great and quick mess he had made of things. But in his defense, he had started this yesterday by telling Cas that he didn’t think he would be able to do it. Simple as that. He didn’t know Nick all that well. Hadn’t known him all that long- not enough know where his soft spots lay.

He could keep picking though. Sam was nothing if not stubborn.

“Nick, why didn’t you tell Cas about us?”

Nick froze, shuttering to an almost perfect stillness. The tip of his tongue darted out, tasting the dark stitches at the corner of his mouth in an unconscious, nervous little gesture. And Sam suddenly realized that, given time, there would be a scar.

What a crime to damage such a perfect set of lips.

What an odd thought to have.

Sam made himself look away, and that must have done the trick because Nick was able to find his words once no one was looking at him.

“Cas- he didn’t need to know.”

“I thought that was the whole point of all this.” Sam set his cup back on the counter, mindful off all the books and papers. “Or are you just going to pick and chose who gets to be part of this sham?”

“Sham? Seriously, who talks like that?”

To which Sam felt no need to justify himself with any kind of response.

“Come on, Sam. Cas doesn’t count.” Nick explained in a way that sounded almost like a whine. “He’s just a little kid.”

“He’s an adult.”

“Yeah, but he’s still my kid brother and I don’t like lying to him.”

Sam looked back at Nick- just really stared him down, and for once it worked. Nick showed an ounce of humanity and shame and cracked slightly under one of Sam’s best bitch faces.
“It’s not like I didn’t tell him some of it. I just left out all those kinky details we worked so hard on.”

“I left those details to you- and they had better not have been… kinky.” He specifically remembered telling Nick that he could fill in all the gory little bit that he needed as long as he didn’t go over the top- and Sam didn’t have to hear about it later. “You must have really wanted to spare Cas, because he asked if you had kissed me yet.”

Nick shrugged with a small, unapologetic kind of smile. “He’s got some idea.”

“Some?”

“Mhnm. I told him how I can’t get over that you’re actually taller than me, and how it puts that damn mouth of yours at eye level and it drives me crazy. I told him how you get those little dimples when you smile- yeah, just like that,” Nick reached up, but let his hand fall back before he actually touched Sam’s cheek. “And how you don’t mind when I get in your personal space, and how you’re so god damned warm it makes me just want to wrap myself around you.”

“You told him all that?” Only one or two of which did Sam find even slightly believable.

“Those are the ones I remember.”

“You’re the worst.” Sam reminded - just in case Nick had forgotten.

“You keep telling me that, but your dimples say otherwise.”

A sigh caught in Sam’s throat and he decided to take the opportunity to look at the walls, at the ceiling, at anything that wasn’t Nick and that smile of his. His smile that had become somewhat lopsided from the stitches.

Sam wanted to hurt whoever had hurt Nick- it was such a strong and irrational feeling. Sam didn’t think of himself as a violent person. Apparently there were exceptions.

“I’ve- I should get headed home. Dean’s expecting me there when he gets back from work.”

Nick didn’t answer to that and if forced Sam to halt his close examination of the ceiling tiles and actually look at the man.

The laughing and teasing was gone from him, no trace behind, not even enough for a good memory.

One last try. Couldn’t hurt, right? “Consider coming with. I’d have more fun with you there and I know at least some of your family would really like to see you.” Honesty was always an option.

“Sam,” Nick said in the most awful of ways, that single syllable said in a way that spoke volumes of horrible things. It was the ‘we need to talk’ tone and it brought only dread.

“Yeah?”

“Come down here so I can talk without shouting.” His eyes drifted over to his coworkers then back up to Sam who was towering as best as he knew how.

So he leaned down, even if he didn’t want to- because Sam found himself suddenly very afraid of what was about to happen. It’s just that Nick wasn’t a serious sort of person. Maybe he could be a little cranky at times, but not serious. Not like this.
It didn’t set well with Sam.

“When we were figuring this all out… back at the restaurant in the beginning,” Nick’s nose wrinkled just a little and he kept his voice so soft it was almost impossible to hear. “We didn’t lay out any ground rules about sex.”

Sam straightened, spine rigid. “We didn’t need to. You said hand holding at most and you’ve already gone way past that.”

“Not with you, you ass.” The little muscle in Nick’s cheek twitched as he ground his teeth. His voice dropped back down. “I mean extracurricular, with real people, other people, not just in the stories I’m swapping with my brother.”

Nick meant…

Three months could be a long dry stretch.

And it was logical. Sam totally got it. It’d been a few months for him since he’d last been with someone, and that someone had been a nameless and very friendly girl that Dean had pushed in his direction. It hadn’t been particularly notable.

There was no good way to know how long it had been for Nick- and it wasn’t Sam’s place to demand that he be celibate for two more months. But fair didn’t enter into it. Sam wanted to say no. Wanted to fold his arms over his chest and tell Nick just how much trouble he was in for even asking.

That feeling alone was enough for him to stop and take stock of what sort of mess he had started to become. But he ignored it. It was too soon. Such feelings were best ignored for at least another few weeks- to come to him painfully in the middle of one night, when it was far too late to do anything about it.

If he had said something right then he might have saved himself from a lot of pain later.

And that was simply not the Winchester way.

“Nick- this is a… a don’t ask, don’t tell kind of thing for me. You’re an adult, alright.” How many tiles did the ceiling have? He’d left off counting at thirty-eight. Thirty-nine. Forty. Forty-one. “You do what you’ve got to. It’s really not my business.”

Nick must have stood, because even while examining all that the world had to offer up above Sam’s head, the blonde suddenly passed into his line of sight.

His good hand found Sam’s cheek and he pulled the younger man down, giving Sam no choice but to look him in the eye. “And that is why you’re very much my favorite.

About the last thing he wanted right now was to be anyone’s favorite. Certainly not Nick’s.

The man leaned in just enough to lay a very light kiss on the end of Sam’s nose.

And that wasn’t what he wanted either.

Though Sam had this sinking feeling that even if he knew exactly what it was that he wanted right then, he wouldn’t have been brave enough to ask for it.

Along the lines of things that Sam didn’t particularly want… or need, Nick gave him a ride back home. All he did was explain that he hadn’t really planned to get any work done today anyhow
(what with his good hand busted) and apparently it was too cold and too far for Sam to walk.

He could have lived with the kindness. It’s not like Nick wanting to take care of him was a terrible thing, but Dean’s car was already in the driveway and Sam knew a bad sign when he saw one. It was too early for Dean to be home- and it’s not like it was a giant dark omen or anything even half as sinister. There was just this growing feeling deep in Sam that he never should have got out of bed today.

“Thanks for the ride.” He gave Nick a gentle nudge before climbing off the bike.

“Oh, we’re not done yet, darlin’.” He killed the engine and clamored off after Sam. “I need to talk to your brother.”

Sam wanted to say ‘not today’ and to send the man back to his own home, but instead he found himself being closely followed, one of Nick’s fingers hooked through one of his belt loops. And god only knew what it was that Nick could possibly have to talk to Dean about- but Sam figured that he would find out soon enough. Curiosity was a dangerous thing.

In the overdramatic way that he had sometimes, Dean had managed to arrange himself in the center of the couch, a terrible centerpiece that clashed with the room’s decor. Which was no easy task on account of none of the furniture matched in the first place, being scavenged from a half a dozen second hand stores over the past few years. But Dean managed. He was good like that. A man of many skills was Sam’s big brother.

One of those skills was how well he was able to pull off a black eye.

“I told you to wait for me to get back, Sammy.” Dean said sourly, his whole body angling in an oddly more aggressive way when he saw that Sam wasn’t alone. “You son of a bitch. I told you to stay the hell away from my brother.”

Not really understanding what was going on, Sam put himself between his brother and his boyfriend and tried his best to use his height in order to hide one from the other. “Dean. Hi.”

Dean got up off the couch and winced at the movement, touching his ribs for a second. “He tell you what happened last night, Sam?”

Not really, but Sam hadn’t asked. Nick had obviously been in a fight, there wasn’t much need for a deeper explanation. Though looking at Dean… maybe… maybe he should have asked. Maybe it was a bit more important than he wanted to believe.

He looked over his shoulder at Nick who didn’t look even vaguely interested in taking the offered shelter. “You didn’t.”

“He started it.”

Dean prickled, angry in that articulate way that he could be at times. “I started it? You – you son of a bitch.”

“You already called me that.” Nick taunted softly.

Dean lunged, and if Sam’s hadn’t been expecting it then he might have actually got a hand on Nick. Instead he caught his brother, wrapping hands very tightly around his shoulders and holding him back.

“I’ll call you a lot worse, you fuck.”
“Whoah, hey.” Sam gave Dean a soft shake, drawing his attention. “Would one of you like to tell me what’s going on or should I just get out of the way so you two can have another slap fight?”

“It was a little more than a slap fight.” Nick said softly.

“I had to spend two hours in the emergency room with your god damned boyfriend last night. Apparently I’ve got bruised ribs and the nurses said I can’t work for a week.”

“Calm your tits. You had Cas to hold your hand.”

“Fuck you.”

Sam still held Dean, very determined that at least one of them remember that he was still here. “Any story at all. Doesn’t even have to be a good one. Doesn’t even have to be true.”

“Cas and I went out for drinks last night after work.” Dean was watching over Sam’s shoulder, gaze steady. “We ran into your boyfriend at the bar and he wasn’t alone.”

“And I already told you that she’s a friend who needed a ride home.”

“Unless the little skank lives in the bar then I ain’t buying it.”

“And I told you that I don’t give a flying fuck what you think because it’s none of your god damned business.” Nick didn’t sound like he had even a fraction of the anger that Dean was clinging to like a lifeline- but it would have been a mistake to consider it a sign of weakness or guilt.

“You screw my brother and a week later you take some chick out for drinks- yes it’s my fucking business. It’s my brother that you’re cheating on and I swear to god that I’ll break more than just your face if you don’t get out of my house.”

Sam’s grip felt weak and he struggled to keep a hold on Dean.

“I told him last night, Sam. I told him that if I saw him again I would kill him.”

“You need to calm down.” Sam urged.

Dean bore his teeth and leaned into Sam’s hands, pushing against him. “You need to be less calm. You didn’t see her and the way they were hanging on each other. She wasn’t a friend and he wasn’t giving her a ride home.”

“You just know everything, don’t you?” Nick leaned into Sam’s back, soft breath along the younger man’s neck.

“I know when I came over to talk to you, just to clarify that you were still dating my brother- she offered for me to join you two. And she wasn’t talking about drinks, Nick.”

“Dean.” Sam gave his brother a shake. “Dean. It’s fine.”

“Fine? It’s not fine. Don’t you dare let this bastard treat you like this, Sammy.”

“I told him it was ok.”

The problems that Sam let himself get dragged into.

The problems that he made for himself.
“It’s not ok.” Dean felt a need to be mad enough for both of them. Hell, he was mad enough for at least sixteen scorned brothers.

“I gave him permission. A while ago. It’s really not a big deal.” It wasn’t a whole lie. Time was really relative anyways and giving permission after the fact was just semantics. At least Nick seemed to think so, and how could Sam be properly mad when less than an hour before he had given his blessing.

He could practically feel the smugness radiating against his back.

It probably would have been better for everyone if Sam wasn’t ever so slightly more than vindictive. He felt tricked. He felt mad. He felt a need to take it out on someone.

“There’s things he can do with a girl that he can’t do with me, Dean. He doesn’t have to be on his hands and knees. He gets to be all manly and on top and all those normal things that guys who don’t have dominant boyfriends get to enjoy.” He couldn’t see the expression on Nick’s face, but Sam could only hope it was half as upset as Dean’s.

It’s not every day that you learn you’re the bottom in a gay relationship.

Certainly, it had shocked Sam when Nick had simply told him that he would be on top simply because he was the one paying for their meals. It was only fair if Sam took the same random opportunity to make such broad and unsubstantial proclamations.

What was Nick going to do, call Sam a liar?

“We’ve only been seeing each other for a few weeks. We’re not in love or anything and if he needs to hop into bed with some girl every now and then so he can still feel manly then he has my blessings.”

Dean ran his hands through his hair, then down his face, agitated and confused little movements as he grimaced. “Are you serious?”

“What I do in bed, what he does in bed- whether together or with other people is actually none of your business.” He let go of Dean, sensing that the danger had passed. “Please try and remember that before you come out swinging.” He made careful eye contact with his big brother, making sure that Dean could hear the unspoken ‘thank you. I know you meant well’ that he felt so deeply right then.

“You know what?” Dean’s hands went up in the air, all kinds of surrender. “I don’t want to be involved in this. You two are weird and gross and just leave me out of it.” He went to the kitchen.

Sam waited about a second before turning on Nick. “You broke his ribs?”

“And you look good on your knees.”

Nick’s eyes were wide and so very pale. “Sam. No.”

It was hard to keep his smile tucked away where it wouldn’t make things worse. “But I thought I was your favorite?”

“A little less now.”

“I could have just let him kill you, you know? He would, and I would’ve happily helped him hide
the body.”

“I think you’re over reacting.”

“I think you’re lucky that I like you.” Sam patted both of Nick’s cheeks, maybe a little too hard. He closed his eyes and scowled. “Are you hoping for an apology or something?”

“You sent my brother to the emergency room and you tricked me. Why should you apologize?”

“I tricked you?” Nick’s arms came up, not so much like a hug as just a means to pull Sam close, close enough that their chests brushed and Sam could smell the coffee on the other man’s breath. “I asked you an honest, straight forward question and you said yes, go ahead. I went ahead.”

“You asked me today. You went ahead last night.” He made almost no noise at all, whispering so that Dean couldn’t hear.

“Look. It’s been weeks since I’ve... she’s a… I did a sugar skull on her a few years back, she’s a derby girl and it’s their logo. She sweet talked me into a ride home, offered to buy me a drink in trade. I said yes. She shows up again every now and then… it’s sort of a standing arrangement now.”

“She’s… she’s a booty call?”

“I’m hers. She doesn’t even let me stay the night.” Nick chuckled and played with his stitches, little pink tip of his tongue. “She’s aggressive, knows what she wants and enjoys taking it. I like giving. Even if I’m a bit sore then next day. So… I give her a ride home when she asks for one.”

Sam shook his head, because he didn’t need to know all this.

“Look. I can’t always take myself home. And I sure as hell am not giving you any rides.” He tightened his arms just a little. “You can’t blame me for wanting a little company. Which I didn’t get, by the way, because your overprotective big brother had to throw and over protective big fit on your behalf.”

Sam wanted to get out of the circle of Nick’s arms. He didn’t feel safe here. “I’m not going to apologize either. You can give her a call, pick up where you left off.”

He managed to look mildly embarrassed. “I don’t actually have her number. Legitimately, she doesn’t want me for anything else.”

“You actually sound happy about that.”

Nick grinned and it tugged the stitches, leaving his lower lip bloodless and pale. “She appreciates me.”

“Not enough to give you her phone number or to let you stay the night.”

“Hey!” Dean came back into the room, somewhere behind Sam, and he didn’t have to see his big brother’s face to know that he was frowning. “Not where I have to see it. This is still my house and I’m still pissed off at both of you.”

Sam nudged Nick off, hands on his stomach, looking over to watch Dean folding himself onto the couch. “Why are you mad at me?”

“Because my pain killers haven’t kicked in yet and you’re kissing the jack ass who punched me in
the face."

“I’ve punched you in the face before.” Sam pointed out.

“You’re my brother, I have to forgive you. He’s a phase and I don’t have to give him the time of
day because he’s still seeing girls on the side and I think he’s a dick.”

“He’s not invited to our wedding.” Nick decided.

“Neither are you.” He pushed the man even further away.

Sam knew that he shouldn’t be happy that Nick was here.

Nick was a giant problem.

So much more trouble than he was worth.

But he was smiling at Sam, and he hadn’t gone off with some girl last night- and that shouldn’t be
a factor into anyone’s happiness other than Nick’s own. The sad fact was that Sam liked Nick.
Considered him a friend. But if this was any other friend then they would be sharing a chuckle
and a nudge over possible conquests and aggressive women.

Sam just felt relieved.

And guilty for feeling relieved.

And stupid for both of those in varying degrees.

He took a few steps towards the stairs. “Nick- come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Upstairs where Dean doesn’t have to watch us.”

Nick’s eyes lit up and that was the whole of his smile. But it was enough.

He ended up staying the night, not because it had been decided on beforehand. Sam had sat on
one end of the bed, Nick on the other and they just started talking. Talking about the dumbest
things. Sam wanted to know if there were any other ladies waiting in the eves that he should be
warned about. The answer was no, but it somehow lead to when was the last time Sam had been
out with a girl, which lead to the ongoing struggle that was going to bars with Dean, which
inevitably lead to a contest between who had the most obnoxious brother.

They just ended up laying in bed talking, talking until they both realized how very late it had
gotten. Too late for Nick to drive himself home. It was a weak excuse and they both bought it and
that probably said more on its own than anything else up until that point.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter originally went all the way through Christmas- but then I looked at the
word count and felt concerned at how long it had gotten.
What am I even doing with my life?
Also I feel really weird about posting Christmas things in March when it's so warm
outside already (in case you haven't figured it out, I live in California and it's all sunshine and sea and 80 degrees in March T_T).

I'm half tempted to wait until it's more seasonably appropriate to post the next chapter, but if I feel this guilty for taking almost 2 weeks to post then I have a feeling that I would drown in guilt if I waited 9 whole months. Plus, y'all wouldn't be my friends anymore at that point. Just promise me that the next time you see a chapter go up that you'll put on a scarf and find something permanent flavored or whatever you need to feel a little festive.

Ok?
You just wanted to be missed

Chapter Notes

merry christmas?? I've managed a spectacular sunburn already and it's too hot here to even wear pants at this point, but I hope that you all can find joy in whatever weather you've been blessed or cursed with.

Y'all are the absolute best.
I think I honestly might be mean to you guys, but you keep coming back and being all lovely to me anyways.
One day I might even thank you proper with a happy story.

see, now, that was a joke.
everything here ends badly.
I'm not good at punch lines, but I can make fictional men miserable.
It's important to play to your strengths.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam didn’t know what it was that he expected to happen when they made the short exodus to Half Moon Bay. It wasn’t like he had celebrated any level of Christmas in years. Him and Dean usually went to the shooting range on Christmas eve and stayed up late watching Die Hard and Gremlins while drinking too much and eating junk food. It was a fine tradition in his opinion. He knew that none of those things that he usually looked forward to each year would be happening tonight. And that was alright, because he and Dean had made promises of making up for lost time later in the week. New Year’s eve had been reserved and dubbed Christmas- the sequel. But tonight…

What do people do as a family if they actually all get along and aren’t trying to pretend that everything was normal and fine?

Or maybe pretending was actually a big part of the holiday season.

Sam got to attempt to unpack his mixed feelings while he was stuck in the back seat again, alone this time and no one to keep him company. Dean had called shotgun and was sitting up there trying to explain baseball to Castiel who seemed honestly puzzled by the sport and just kept asking the oddest questions. Like who picks the team’s colors, and what happens to the used baseballs when the game is over? Sam was just about ready to start shaking his big brother’s seat when they pulled into the driveway of Gabriel’s overly expensive home. The sun had set on the drive down but the house was well lit with what looked to be an entire village’s allotment of holiday lights. Bright white and warm like a super nova, all the light reflecting back oddly against the fog that was coming in from the sea.

Climbing from the little car Sam saw the one, single thing that he hadn’t expected to get out of this Christmas. And it made his breath catch.

Nick’s bike was sitting quiet and unexpected over beside a child’s pink bicycle that still had training wheels attached. The pair looked oddly out of place beside the perfect little trees and all
the grass that was tipped white with frost.

The sight made Sam smile but the startling noise that crawled out of Castiel when he saw the bike made him grin.

Rekha met them at the door, wearing gold jewelry that was expensively offset by a very soft white sweater dress which hugged her curves in pleasant ways. This was only something that Sam took note of because she pulled each of the three men into a warm hug and it was only polite to hug her back. Such a soft sweater. It must have been made of bunnies or clouds or something equally classy. Her hair tickled the underside of Sam’s chin and she smelled like cookies.

Sam was even more happy that he had agreed to come.

Dean’s turn came next and he looked positively ecstatic and held on to the woman for a little longer than necessary.

Castiel was the only one who got a kiss, just a little one of both cheeks and he smiled one of his odd little smiles and carefully adjusted his sister-in-law’s necklace. “You look beautiful.”

She snorted a little laugh “You too.” She looked over at the Winchesters. “It’s nice to see you boys again. Come inside. Come inside.”

They were brought in from the cold, and apparently it wasn’t just Rekha that smelled like cookies. The whole house did and she must have just been marinated in the scent.

From the corner of his eye, Sam could see Dean looking towards the kitchen and he knew that look. That longing. He elbowed his big brother before he had a chance to ask when they were going to eat, and Dean looked up at Sam, all wide eyed and innocent.

“What?”

“What for dinner.” Sam hissed, following their hostess deeper into the house, in the wrong direction from the food, towards what definitely sounded like Christmas music. The rest of Castiel’s family was packed into the living room. Michel and Gabriel on the couch along with Anna tucked comfortably against her husband’s chest, his arm around her and a hand resting on her rounded belly. Nick was sitting on the floor in the shadow of the room dominating Christmas tree, sucking on a candy cane and arguing with his smallest niece over what color they should be making the bear in the coloring book that they were sharing. The nephew, Isaac, was playing a very quiet game boy while his other sister sat beside him with round eyes, watching everything on the tiny screen.

The majority of the adults took notice of the company and there were pleasantries exchanged. Michael stayed seated while his wife came over and gave each of them a considerably fiercer hug than the other woman had given. Castiel took the affection with ease, just as Dean did. Sam still felt a little awkward, but apparently they were just a very demonstrative family and if he was going to be here then he would have to pay the toll.

Anna tugged him down and Sam braced for a kiss on his cheek- but was left waiting.

“Thank you.” She said softly against his jaw.

“For what?”

“For Nick. He didn’t tell us he was coming. He just showed up. When I asked what made him change his mind he said it was because you were coming and he was worried what we might do to you if he wasn’t here to keep you safe.” She smiled so brightly up at him. “So thank you.”
Sam looked over her head, watching Nick trading his candy cane for one of his niece’s pigtails, making soft growling noises while she giggled and colored the bear a striking, yet very unnatural shade of blue.

“I…” Sam didn’t really know what to say. Nick had looked up, still eating the little girl’s hair while he smiled at him from the other side of the room and Sam made himself look away, down at the delicate woman who was still gripping his sides with surprisingly strong little hands.”You’re welcome.” He finally managed.

She seemed to have forgotten about kissing him and simply let go, placing her hands on her stomach and going back to the couch where Michael was waiting for her. Sam accidently made eye contact with the man and so they traded small, polite nods. Unfortunately he also caught Gabriel’s gaze and the smallest brother grinned at him, all teeth and cheerful welcome.

Sam made a slight attempt to separate himself from his Dean, wanting to just go and sit down beside Nick, to tell him thank you and maybe steal his candy cane (it had been years since he’d had one and he suddenly found himself with a craving), but he was cut off by a running child. The littlest girl had finally batted Nick away and threw down her crayons, getting up and running towards them with open arms.

She completely ignored the extra men and flung herself at Castiel. “Uncle Cas! Did you leave my pony outside? What is her name?” She demanded as she was lifted up into his arms, the man wearing an absolutely baffled expression while he hugged his niece.

“What pony?”

“Uncle Nick told me. He said that you were getting me a pony for Christmas. Is she pink? Can I name her Daisy?”

“He was teasing you, Hannah.” Castiel sounded exasperated by the bombardment of questions as he gave Nick an accusatory look. “There was no room in my car for the pony this year. Maybe I will bring it for your birthday.”

She pouted at him, her fat little cheeks sort of taking the menace out of it.

“I did bring you candy though.” Castiel offered and it was hard to tell if the child or Dean looked more happy at the news.

Sam shook his head and went over to the coffee table, stepping around the other two children who hadn’t really taken notice of the new guests. He settled himself down carefully beside Nick, folding his legs as best as he could beneath the low table.

“Hey.”

“Hello.” Nick answered back with a ghost of a smile.

“I didn’t think you were coming.”

Nick’s smile widened to include a glimpse of teeth. “No. That one’s too easy.”

Sam considered what he had just said and if there was any innuendo to be found- and then he had to roll his eyes. “How’s your-” He nodded to Nick’s lip and his hand.

“I’ve got to keep the stitches for another two weeks and I’m not allowed to eat any spicy food. And my fingers still hurt. I can’t work with them wrapped. Otherwise I feel fantastic.
‘I’m sorry.’ Sam sighed and Nick just shrugged, offering him a red crayon.

“I had to reschedule a bunch of appointments at the shop, but I guess that it doesn’t hurt to have a bit of an extended vacation. I probably needed it.”

“You do.” Gabriel waggled a bare foot in their direction. “You work too hard and it makes you a pain in the … butt.” He grinned over at Anna.

Nick just shook his head and nudged his coloring book towards Sam. “Gabriel thinks it’s real funny that I got in a fight with my boyfriend’s brother.”

“But it’s hilarious.” Gabriel pointed out.

And Sam took definite note of the sour expression that Michael wore as soon as the word ‘boyfriend’ entered the conversation. Sam did his best to look as innocent and nonthreatening as he knew how. He scribbled lightly in the book and let his knee touch Nick’s below the table.

They scribbled together and talked quietly of unimportant things while the other adults carried on fairly mundane conversations while waiting for a little egg timed on the arm of the couch to go off.

“Hey—” Sam poked Nick’s wrist with his crayon. “I like the bracelets.”

And Nick chuckled softly, holding up his arm so that Sam could better see the plastic beads that came in every color of the rainbow and then some. It was a mess of shapes, some of which looked rather pointy and not at all suited for jewelry, others were small and white and black, spelling out ‘NICK’ very proudly. Sam reached out, touching the beads, turning the bracelets to see if the others said anything. One said ‘jeRk FacE’, one said ‘miS Luci leggs 4 daYs’, one simply said ‘ass’ and one last one just that had oddly chalky feeling beads of all roughly the same size.

“Sarah made this one for me.” He pointed to the first with his name on it.

“And the rest?” Sam touched the varied and yet fairly accurate descriptors.

“My beautiful sisters made them for me.”

“I helped.” Gabriel shook his foot again, apparently very interested in the conversation going on over there and wanting to be part of it. “I made the one about his legs.”

Nick ignored his brother as easily as breathing. “And Hannah gave me this one- which was a mighty sacrifice on her part.” He tugged on the simplest one, holding it up to Sam. “It’s candy. And girls have it so much better than we ever did. They get to wear their candy. My snacks were never this convenient.”

Sam laughed and had to look away because nothing good could come from watching Nick quietly nibble two of the beads from this bracelet.

The tree was a nice safe place to look. It was kind of obvious that it had been decorated by Gabriel’s wife and comfortingly reiterated that they were a family with no children. All the decorations actually matched, none of them had been made by small clumsy children’s hands, and they were all glass. Much like art, Sam didn’t really have much basis for his judgment on the tree, but there was something aesthetically pleasing about the teal and gold decorations and their very careful placement, so he liked it.

Nick’s hand came to rest against his leg beneath the table and Sam jumped a little. He looked back and was treated to an unsettlingly innocent expression.
“You _behave_ yourself.” He hissed, doing his best to sit still because Nick was tickling him, whether intentional or accidental, and he knew if he acknowledged it even for a second it would only make things worse for him.

“What _behave_? I am a perfect angel.”

“An angel who seems to be trying to measure my inseam.”

“I’m, uh, fitting you for a suit.”

“Do I get to wear it to your funeral?” Sam smiled hopefully.

Nick chuckled, his eyes closing just enough that they lost their color. He leaned into Sam, touching their shoulders and temples together. It was far more affectionate than he usually was, alone or with other people, and Sam had a feeling that Nick had decided to play the whole ‘gay thing’ up for his family.

Aside from learning that he was ticklish, Sam wasn’t entirely sure that he really minded.

“You _behave._” He still warned, even knowing that he wasn’t being listened to.

“You _behave._” Nick repeated into his cheek.

Sam whispered, not wanting to get the man in trouble but at the same time… “Are you drunk?”

“I am as dry as the day is long.” He pressed a little kiss right near the corner of Sam’s mouth, right about where his dimple must have been. “I’m just happy you didn’t stand me up. I was worried you wouldn’t show and I’d be stuck by myself in the lonely corner.”

“You didn’t need me. You’ve got a lovely little redhead to keep you company.”

“I can’t compete with Cas though.” Nick leaned back, retracting his long fingers to his own lap where they should have been all from the start. “He keeps candy in his pockets, you know.”

“Maybe that’s why Dean likes him so much.” Sam mused to himself, which set Nick chuckling again and Sam had no choice but to join in.

The little timer sitting on the edge of the couch went off and Gabriel was the first one to start running for the far side of the house. The rest of the family followed at a slightly more sedate pace.

Now, Sam had eaten Thanksgiving at this table, with this very company- and he supposed that he suspected much of the same. In a way it was. Someone said grace, hands were held (or Nick’s wrist was held at least because his little finger splints kept him from anything more complicated). The food was incredible, and Sam ate far too much. Which was to say he ate almost as much as Dean who had to be storing it somewhere, but it was anyone’s guess as to where.

Nick kept sneaking food off Sam’s plate, even though he easily could have served himself from one of the dishes. He just insisted that this was easier and continued spearing vegetables and bits of meat despite any protests.

It felt like he had fallen into one of those sickeningly perfect Christmas movies.

And Sam loved every second of it.

Right up until Gabriel threw a green bean at Nick to get his attention. That marked the turning point of the meal.
“Luci, remind me before you leave. I’ve got letters from The Spawn.”

Nick went from annoyed at the airborne vegetable to anxious, his voice dropping a bit. “Yeah?”

“Mhm. She made you a card and everything, and she likes the earrings you sent her.”

“Don’t read my mail.” He said with a sigh even as he shifted in his seat, eyes a little bright.

“Hey, it was addressed to me, not you.” Gabriel said in defense, grinning in that wild way that he had.

“I know. I know.” Nick tugged at his lip, careful of the stitches. “Is she doing alright?”

“The kido is doing fantastic.” He assured.

And Sam whished he knew who they were talking about but he wasn’t brave enough to ask, though he had a weird suspicion about who she could be.

“Who are you two talking about?” Michael asked loudly in a way that sounded an awful lot like he already knew the answer and the rest of the table grew quiet which only made the noise from the little kid’s table in the corner seem that much louder.

Nick got this sickening smile. “Your mother.”

“She likes to check in now and then.” Gabriel joined in without losing a single watt of his grin. “Wants to see if we’ve managed to find anyone willing to take you off our hands. She gets a finder’s fee you know.”

“Unfortunately the gypsy’s asking price is too high, but if we keep pooling our money we’re hoping to relocate you by next summer.”

“There’s a nice farm out in the country that might be interested.”

“You’ll love it.” Nick looked so sincere. “It’s got lots of trees and room to run around.”

Michael set down his fork, his back rigid. “You two are childish.”

“Only a little-ish.” Gabriel waved his hand back and forth in a so-so gesture.

“And Gabe is really too little to even be entitled to an ish.”

“It’s true.” The considerably shorter brother nodded enthusiastically. “I’m thee inches shy of ish.”

Rehka leaned over and nodded to Anna. “He’s actually about four and a half inches shy of ish—but you know how men like to round their measurements.”

The redheaded woman hid a startled laugh behind a hand.

Michael only sighed like he was disappointed in all of them, even those who hadn’t contributed to the teasing, but he had been derailed and the conversation moved on to other things.

Sam picked at what was left on his plate, watching Nick from the corner of his eye, the way that the man was rocking just a little in his seat, smiling to himself.

He leaned into his friend, taking a chance. “Whose ‘the spawn’?”

Nick’s grin faltered and he looked down at his plate, suddenly subdued.
“Never mind.” Sam said quickly, not at all liking what he had accomplished by asking.

Nick reclaimed part of his smile though it looked a little strained. He leaned in, talking low enough that it was just for them. “Ask me later when I’m too drunk to remember why we don’t talk about her. Alright?”

“Alright.” He repeated while crossing his fingers and hoping that Nick wasn’t serious and didn’t somehow plan on drinking tonight. There weren’t really all that many rules and if the man had any plans of driving himself home tonight then it gave him double reasons to keep clean.

Anna got up, wobbling slightly and catching herself on her husband’s chair. Every man at the table was suddenly half standing- even Sam rose and out of the corner of his eye he saw Dean getting up as well- even if the small woman didn’t belong to them.

Anna just looked annoyed. “Calm down. I lost my balance is all.” She started collecting dishes and shaking her head.

“Sit. I’ll take care of these.” Michael said gently, putting a hand on her back before taking the dishes from her.

“I’m pregnant, not invalid.”

Michael simply kissed his wife’s head and collected the dishes without much more argument. It signaled the end of the meal and most of the adults managed to take their own dishes into the kitchen.

And the problem came from the fact that Sam really didn’t know his way around this house. It was a lot of house. Two of his own could have easily fit in here- with room for a pool. It equated to him just sort of following the flow of traffic, trailing after people who looked slightly more informed than he was. He kept close to Nick who was carefully herding his littlest niece who had insisted on carrying her own plate. She was so focused on what she was doing, not letting her leftover vegetables slide to the floor, that they took the long way around the hall.

“Monster,” Nick said softly, leaning down to be closer to her level, his back almost parallel to the floor. “Do you know where we are?”

She hesitated, looking up. “We are in the hallway.”

“Yeah, but we’re also are under the mistletoe.”

Her big eyes went up to the doorframe that would have taken into the kitchen. She grinned and took two little steps back. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No. No. No.” she giggled and Nick clumsily scooped her up, noisily kissing her cheeks while she shrieked in delight.

Sam did his part, carefully taking the dishes from the two so that Nick and Hannah didn’t drop and break anything.

“Happy Christmas, monster.” Nick finally set her back down and she took off running, wiping her cheeks and looking over her shoulder to see if she was being chased. She wasn’t, but that didn’t stop her from scampering off out of sight.

“You know,” Sam found himself smiling, “she’s aggressively adorable.”
“She is my favorite.” Nick smiled back. “Even if she’s a little sticky sometimes.” He rubbed at one cheek and stood aside so that Sam could get in through the wrong door to the kitchen with his dishes.

“I think most kids are a bit sticky.” Sam said as he shuffled past, setting the plates down beside the sink.

“All the best ones definitely are.” He leaned in the doorway, being of no help to anyone at all.

Sam smiled and shook his head- strangely amused by how much affection Nick had for his little nieces. The evidence there in writing over his wrist in bright plastic and candy beads. The blond man was just about as cute as the little redheaded child who could still be heard giggling somewhere in the house.

“Are we on dishes duty tonight?” He came over, perfectly willing to accept the chore because it felt like a fairly fair payment for the delicious meal.

“I was kind of hoping to avoid it if possible.” He folded his arms over his chest. “I even helped cook tonight. It keeps me off KP duty.”

“You helped?”

“I stirred the jello.” He said proudly then huffed a little when he saw the look Sam was giving him. Nick held up both hands, waggling his splinted fingers awkwardly. “Hey, I’ve got a broken wing. I can’t do much other than stir.”

“You’re a good man.”

“I’m an insufferable ass.” He held out his wrist. “I’ve even got a bracelet to prove it.”

“You’re also under the mistletoe.” Rehka pointed out gently as she drifted by with a collection of cups.

“…oh.” Nick looked up at the offending doorway, eyes going just as wide as his niece’s had.

Sam almost laughed, but he was standing right there with Nick and it wasn’t quite as funny as he initially thought.

“Well?” Rehka raised an eyebrow, expectantly.

“Well what?” Nick looked about ready to vanish back into the safety of the hall.

“I provided the dinner. You could at least provide the entertainment.”

Nick looked up at Sam, then deeper into the kitchen where Michael was watching them with an incredibly stern scowl.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Nick said carefully, barely loud enough that Sam could make out the words and it was hard to tell exactly who the man thought he was talking to.

Rehka rolled her eyes and went about arranging dishes on the counter, obviously no intention of actually cleaning them, but doing a nice job of lining them up for whoever was going to wash. “He gets shy.” She explained to Sam in a way that more teasing than sympathetic.

“I’m not shy.”
Gabriel came to stand beside his wife. “Oh, Nick, you gunna kiss him?”

“Well I’m not going to kiss you.”

And Gabriel got that horrible grin of his again. “If you you’re not going to kiss him, can I?”

“No.” Nick said almost as quickly as Sam did.

“Come on- this is a waste of mistletoe and bad timing.”

“This is very inappropriate.” Michael condemned the whole thing quite loudly.

Nick made a face.

“They’re dating.” Rehka argued. “And we’ve all seen Nick do far worse things than kissing another man.”

“I would prefer to unsee all those things, not add to them.” Michael bore his teeth- and that’s where Nick got the expression from. The family resemblance was unsettling.

With pale, terrible eyes, Nick looked up at Sam again, accompanied by a little twitch of his lips which was more a question than anything else.

Sam felt his eyebrows go down. He almost shook his head but managed the smallest of shrugs in its place. He felt defensive for Nick. Protective. Which was stupid, but the way that Michael spoke just rubbed him wrong.

He couldn’t tell if Michael was afflicted with just general homophobia or if it was his broad, comprehensive dislike of his brother that was just coming through so clearly.

So Sam shrugged.

Lord have mercy on his soul.

He shrugged.

Quiet thanks as well as a healthy amount of anxiety passed over Nick and he shuffled close enough, leaning in and leaning up. But they both went the same way and bumped noses like two idiots who had never actually kissed before- which was fair, because in all honesty they hadn’t. Hadn’t even planned on it. Despite whatever storied that Nick had told his family, and whatever it was that Dean kept thinking that he was walking in on them doing. This had never been in the plans.

But Nick was comfortably physical with his family, and it’s not like he hadn’t been slowly conditioning Sam over the past few weeks to be completely ok with being kissed on the cheek. This really wasn’t any different. Right?

Except it was different, because Sam tried to tilt his head to the left instead only to notice quite quickly that Nick had the same idea. It was clumsy and awkward, their noses bumping. And this was not a problem that they had ever had before.

Hell, this wasn’t a problem that anyone outside of the sixth grade ever had.

“Damn it, Nick.” And Sam put a hand on either of the man’s cheeks and turned him one way so that he could go the other, and he fit their mouths together as easily as two jigsaw pieces. It should have been just that. A quick press of lips, only long enough for Sam to remember that he should
have been more careful because Nick still had stitches. Hardly that long at all, maybe two seconds, tops. And then they could step back, receive their well earned cat calls and applause and disapproving slurs and it would be consider a job well done.

Except that, for whatever reason, Sam had sort of expected Nick to just stand there calmly and take it- like a normal straight man who suddenly finds himself kissing his very normal straight friend would do. It should have been a joke. Just a quick, noncommittal press of lips to appease the people watching who assumed that the two men had done this roughly a hundred times together over the past few weeks.

Very rapidly Sam realized that that was not what was happening.

For some unspeakable reason Nick had closed his eyes, pressing against Sam, breathing him in deeply with one slow, long, inhale. His tongue teased the seam of Sam’s lips as he breathed out a low sigh.

He tasted… like apple juice, and for whatever damning reason that could be thought up, whatever flimsy excuse that could be made and not upheld later, Sam opened his mouth. Felt Nick’s teeth graze his lower lip, just as light and innocent as the fingers that were now resting against Sam’s hip.

God, but it had been far too long since Sam had kissed someone if something so small and meaningless could make it so hard to think straight. It was just warm skin and the scratch of stitches and the sweet after taste of apple juice. A horrible feeling started in his chest, a trembling that bled all the way to his hands and he was grateful that he was pressing his fingertips so tightly to the bones in Nick’s cheeks for the other man to feel the treachery that had leeched into his body.

But Nick, bless his bitter, depraved heart, went ahead and blew the moment, his hand slipping to Sam’s ass to give him a rough squeeze.

He pushed Nick off. Half laughing, half mortified because he might have made some kind of emasculated noise when he had been grabbed. “You are literally the worst.”

Nick was laughing too, a loose fist covering his mouth as he turned his face away, his cheeks unmistakably pink.

“You two are adorable.” Rehka informed them even though there was nothing adorable about what they were doing as far as Sam was concerned.

Sam glanced over and wished that he hadn’t. Michael looked about a heartbeat away from armageddon. His wife’s face was almost as red as her hair. Gabriel and his wife, on the other hand, looked like two different versions of pleased- one more smug, one more charmed. Castiel was in the other doorway to the kitchen, just looking about as pleased as a puppy with a new shoe.

Nick waved to his family before taking a modest bow. “Thank you. Thank you. And for my next trick I will need a female member from the audience.”

“Oh, pick me. Pick me.” Gabriel raised his hands, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“You’re all degenerates.” Michael growled and pushed past Castiel and a startled looking Dean as he left the room.

The older Winchester brother looked annoyed then confused as he turned back to Sam. “What the hell did I miss?”
Although there was a small amount of protesting from both Nick and Dean (they had an upsetting amount of similarities sometimes), once everyone calmed down and everything was cleaned up, the family plus two recongregated in the living room and Christmas songs were sung. The three little children, as well as their uncle Cas and Gabriel really seemed to get into the whole festive mood. Sam let himself get dragged along, too content to fight it right now. The amount of eggnog that was consumed helped a little. It helped a lot actually. It was… strong nog, considering that there was a ban on liquor in this house.

By the time that they made it through a handful of songs and a very gentle and lovely retelling of the nativity story by Anna to her children, Sam found that he was embarrassingly tipsy. Looking around the room, he was fairly certain that with the exception of the three kids and their mother, that he was not alone in his inebriation.

Even Michael seemed to have pulled that stick out of his ass, smiling easily as he helped his youngest pick out a few good cookies to leave for Santa. He and his wife gently herded their children down to a room in the back of the house where apparently was the guest room that they were staying in for their visit.

Nick put his head on Sam’s shoulder, slouched down low on the couch beside him. “I feel like I swallowed the sun.” He rumbled happily.

“You’re definitely warm enough for it.” He answered back, letting his own head fall back so he could look at the patterns that the Christmas lights were making on the ceiling. Nick felt hot for the first time since Sam had met him, toasty warm from alcohol and pressed close enough to Sam that there was a bit of sweat prickling and pooling down at the base of the younger man’s spine. It was almost too warm.

Sam didn’t mind as much as he should have.

“You do know that you’re not allowed to drive yourself home tonight, right?”

“Hey, I know my limit.” Nick snorted. “I don’t pay much attention to it, but I know it.”

“You going to get a ride home with us?”

Nick snorted again. “There is no way that Cas is going to be able to drive anywhere for at least a few hours.”

Sam looked over and almost started laughing when he saw that the dark haired man had already fallen asleep. Knees tucked to his chest, face mostly hidden in his folded arms. He looked like a little kid. A little kid who definitely wouldn’t be driving. Unfortunately Dean didn’t look much better, sitting on the floor at Castiel’s feet, fingers laced together over his stomach and his eyes lidded, cheeks rosy.

“Great.” Sam chuckled and let his head fall back.

Rehka threw a pillow at them from the far side of the room and she missed spectacularly, hitting the wall behind the couch instead, but it got their attention. “You kids can stay the night. If you promise no hanky panky.”

“I’m not promising you shi- anything.” Nick clumsily corrected himself.

“Don’t promise her anything.” Gabriel begged, slurring just a bit around the edges. “If you… if
you kiss him again Michael might have a... a coronary and we could watch his head explode.”

“A coronary is a heart attack.” Rehka patted Gabriel’s leg. “You mean aneurysm.”

“Fine. Aneurysm. And then we can watch his head explode.”

Nick sat up, a spark of hope in his glassy eyes. “Sam?”

“No.” He laughed and caught Nick by the shoulders as the man attempted to lean in anyways. “I told you to behave yourself tonight.”

“You are no fun at all.”

Rehka rose up, managing to stand much taller and straighter than Sam thought possible. “Nick, love, you need someone who is no fun. He will help balance you.”

“Our Nick needs all the help that he can get.” Gabriel nodded and dragged himself to his feet and stretching. “We’ve got floor and couch down here- more floor and couch upstairs.” And his train of thought left without him and Gabriel blinked wide, owlish eyes and turned to look up at his wife for more help.

“And you boys can sort yourselves out however you need to.” Rehka finished. “I will go find some blankets and Gabriel is going to try and remember where the backdoor is so while you boys argue over who sleeps where he and me can go out and have a smoke.”

“Oh, I like that.” Gabriel nodded as he wandered off, glancing back over his shoulder. “Having a ‘smoke’ means that we are going to sit on the swing and kiss.”

Nick gave his little brother a thumbs up before chuckling quietly and putting his face back against Sam’s shoulder. “I like them better when I’m not sober.”

“I’m proud of you for not getting into a fight with anyone yet.”

“I did that before you got here.” He confessed softly. “And I will probably do it again tomorrow before I leave. It’s tradition, you know.”

Sam sighed and pressed his mouth against the surprisingly coarse fluff of Nick’s hair.

“If I’m going to come all this way I’m not going to not punch the bastard in the face at least once.”

Cas raised his head just enough from his knees to blink at them with wide, sleepy eyes. “We’re all bastards, you know. Dad never married any one of our mothers.”

Leaving a warm patch in his wake, Nick managed to sit up and survey the room rather evenly before finding his brother on the far end of the couch. “Cassy, you want to sleep down here with Dean or upstairs with me?”

Dean finally opened his eyes, hearing his name. “What?”

“We’re staying the night.” Sam explained gently, feeling like it was his job as seemingly the most clear headed and least drunk person in the room.

His big brother eyed the abandoned plate of cookies with a hungry expression. “If we stay do you think that Santa will bring us presents?”

Sam sighed. “Not for you- you’re a bad person.”
Which made his brother laugh warmly. “True, but that fat jerk has always had it in for me.” And he took one of the cookies from the plate, stuffing it in his mouth without remorse.

“Cassy.” Nick tried again, undaunted by the interruption. “Where do you want to sleep?”

Castiel frowned and put his head back down, grumbling something that sounded like ‘here is fine’, which was pleasantly vague because it gave no indication of his preferred company.

And it was a bad time for Sam to make a decision for the four of them, but someone needed to.

“You two can have the couch.” Sam nodded to his brother and the accountant, knowing that he himself would be fine and safe sleeping beside Nick, because he’d done it many times before and come out relatively unscathed.

Dean might not be so lucky. But he was supposedly an adult and looked mostly asleep at this point. Castiel was already at least eighty percent unconscious and between the two they should be able to manage a quiet, well behaved night’s sleep. It also meant that Sam would have a good portion of house between him and his brother- who tended to snore rather like a wounded hog when he’d been drinking and it would be nice to have the distance.

With a somewhat confused look, Dean kind of nodded, climbing up off the floor and examining the couch, assessing the best way to fit on it with Castiel.

Sam dragged Nick up, holding both his wrists and gently pulling him towards where he thought that the stairs might be. With a glance back he saw that Dean was sitting beside Cas, quietly talking to him while he untied the man’s shoes for him.

Sam had no idea if it was a good or a bad sign that he’d been doing the same thing for Nick about a week ago. Maybe it just spoke to the fact that Dean had raised him right, or perhaps the brothers had simply gotten themselves involved with the same sort of guy. Someone they could take care of.

As if to help reiterate that thought, Nick crashed into him, rutting his face between Sam’s shoulders and grumbling. “I don’t think I can do stairs.” Mouth hot against Sam’s spine.

“You can make it.”

“Cary me.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” Sam laughed and began dragging once more. He was able to take the stairs upright, though he had to keep a firm hold on the banister the whole way to manage such a feat. Nick made it by holding the stairs in front of him with his hands- but you know, sometimes dignity had to be sacrificed for a lower center of gravity.

Sam wouldn’t bring it up later.

He’d crawled his own fair share of stairs over the years.

It soon became obvious why Nick had wanted to sleep up here. It wasn’t that he was sparing his brother the navigation of the stairwell, it was that the couch up here in the tv room was one of those big ‘L’ shaped ones and far superior for sharing. However there was also the recliner that Dean had fallen asleep in last time they were here… but Sam wasn’t going to go down and let his brother know about it.

He would rather have the room to just him and Nick, and that was probably wrong.
While he tried to help Nick back to his feet, and then to detangle himself from a very warm, nice smelling hug, Rehka came down the hall with an armful of blankets.

She gave them both an amused smile as she set half the blankets on the couch. “Remember, I don’t have sex on your couch, don’t have sex on mine.”

There were very few things that he knew for sure- the fact that he wouldn’t be having sex with Nick tonight was one of those things. “We won’t.” Sam promised very easily.

“Unless you want to come to my place next week, Rehka.” Nick still had his arms around Sam’s shoulders even as he spoke to his sister, seeming not at all interested in letting go and it was hard to tell if he was just being difficult or if it was just that this was the only way he could keep standing. “We can arrange a bit of a trade.”

“Don’t say that where Gabriel can hear. He might actually take you up on an offer like that.” She said wisely and walked off, back down stairs.

“I like her. She tells you no.” Sam decided out loud as he steered Nick to the couch and forcibly shoved him off once he was sure that there would be a soft landing.

Nick made a soft oof noise and managed to look up at Sam with a fairly affronted expression as though he felt that he somehow didn’t deserve being thrown down onto the couch. “I am injured you know. You could be a bit more gentle.”

“I thought you liked forceful women.” Sam tried to tease, but he was sure it came out a little weird. Very sure that it came out weird by the startled look on Nick’s face.

So Sam did the adult thing and pretended that he hadn’t said anything at all, and instead busied himself with getting off his shoes and unbuttoning his flannel. Not undressing mind you. He had on a tshirt underneath. He also had a very clear understanding of his own body and he knew that he would get way too warm while he slept if he didn’t shed at least one layer.

It would have been a little less weird if he couldn’t feel the other man’s eyes following every little move that he was making.

“You want me to get the light?” He wasn’t sure if Nick intended to sleep how he was, but do you know what? Sam wasn’t going to help the man out of any shirt or shoes tonight, so if Nick was going to take anything off he was on his own.

No response came, so Sam just went ahead and doused the lights, and as he turned back to the couch he wished that there wasn’t a bit of light coming in from the hall because he could still see Nick sitting there exactly where he had been dropped.

Eyes just as drunk and wide and pale. He looked stricken. Stunned.

“You ok?”

No answer.

“Did you get stuck, honey?”

“You have really broad shoulders.” Was Nick’s answer as he finally shook his head and leaned forward so he could watch himself in the darkness, trying to toe his shoes off.

Sam took a slow breath and came back to the couch, feeling braver than he thought that he would, but that might have had a lot more to do with the consumption of eggnog than any real courage on
his part.

To be honest, Nick wasn’t all that scary on his own.

It was more like… Sam tried not to drink himself to this point because right now he was loose enough to do something really easy and stupid, but not drunk enough to not understand the consequences or forget things when the morning came. This was the perfect caliber of drunk where he could talk himself into doing something awful because he could definitely get away with it. Definitely.

This was the same reckless feeling that usually stayed at bay until after midnight.

It was only eleven.

Why had he had a third glass of eggnog?

He didn’t even like eggnog.

The couch gave gently as he stretched out on one side of the L, putting his head near the bend so that he was closer to Nick.

“I… I didn’t hurt you earlier, did I?”

Nick blinked down at him and shook his head again. “It’s just a couch. I may not have much of an ass to cushion my fall, but I’m fine.”

“No. I mean earlier, back in the kitchen when … I grabbed you.”

The edge of his mouth twitched in an almost smile. “You can say kiss. It’s not a bad word.”

“I didn’t kiss you.” Sam felt heat prickle up his neck, his throat tightened, and all kinds of other awkward reactions that were thankfully mostly hidden by the dark. “A kiss is- it needs meaning and passion and… wanting. That was just a way to say that I think Michael is a dick and I don’t like how you look when he talks to you. I just did it to bother him.” He took a hard breath. “It wasn’t a kiss.”

Nick didn’t say anything, but Sam could see the man look off at the far wall, reaching up to tug at his lip even if it made him wince.

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“I think it would have worked just as well if you didn’t grab my ass, by the way.”

That drew a small chuckle out of Nick, warm and half hearted. “I couldn’t resist.”

“I think I already threatened that if you went for it I would bite your face.”

“That sounds about right.” He glanced down. “But I believe I offered up my neck for such punishment. My face has already been injured by a Winchester recently.”

Sam had gone as far as pushing himself up to his elbows before a little voice in the back of his mind started yelling ‘abort’ and he realized what he was about to do. He lay back down, pointedly not looking at Nick’s beautifully unprotected throat.

He felt the man settle down eventually, lying so that his head was near Sam’s, still warm and thankfully quiet.

Something in Sam couldn’t just let it go. That something was, again, the eggnog. And as convenient a scapegoat at it way, he couldn’t keep blaming it for everything.
"I can’t believe that you just went for it though."

"You really don’t know me well enough then."

"You’re like the little kid who is offered a lick of someone else’s ice-cream cone and you go ahead and try and shove the whole thing in your mouth."

"In this analogy what part of your body gets to be the ice-cream cone?"

Sam reached back behind his head and thunked his hands against Nick’s face. This was not graciously accepted as a punishment like it was meant, but as an offer to engage in a clumsy head pushing contest. Nick won, but only because he managed to catch one of Sam’s hands and lace their fingers together in a way that felt almost permanent- or at least far too nice to ruin. So Sam lay there with one arm over his head, quietly holding Nick’s hand in his, trying to catch his breath and keep from smiling, even if no one could see him doing it.

Easier than it should have been, Sam pulled Nick’s arm down closer, looking through the dark at the mess of plastic beads that the man was still wearing.

"Why do they keep calling you Luci?"

Nick sighed and brushed the top of his head against Sam’s. “Bedtime story time?"

“Sure?” Sam was unaware that he was getting himself in for a whole story. He would have settled for a sentence.

“My mother- she was a few chicken nuggets shy of a Happy Meal and when I was born she named me Lucifer.”

A laugh died in Sam’s throat when he realized that the man was serious.

“It’s not a great name. But I was too young to argue at the time and my father was already on the other side of the country where he belonged. When I was six, she packed me up a backpack with candy bars, coloring books, and my birth certificate, and she left me on a greyhound bus headed out to California. A note pinned to my jacket with my father’s name written on it.” Nick’s hand was warm in Sam’s. “My dad let me legally change my name when I got older but Gabriel and Michael apparently liked Lucifer better. So they still call me Luci- when they feel like reminding me why I don’t like to visit.”

And Sam didn’t have much of anything good to say to that.

He opted to drag Nick’s wrist over his mouth, teeth searching for and finding the beads that were made of candy. He bit off two and they tasted chalky and sweet.

“Hey. Are you eating my jewelry?”

“Nope.” He said between crunches.

“You’re a monster.”

Sam ate another bead.

Nick didn’t take his arm back.

“So out of any name in the world you chose Nick?”
“I chose Nicola.”

Sam hesitated with his mouth pressed to the soft pulse in Nick’s wrist. “Nicola… like as in Nicola Tesla?”

“I was eight.”

“You knew who Tesla was when you were eight?”

“We watched a lot of PBS.” Nick bumped their heads again. “For a man with suddenly three sons and no paternal instinct, Dad did the best he could.”

“Are you still in contact with your mom?” Sam asked and immediately regretted it. He was too close to Nick to miss the slight flinch.

“She overdosed on heroin the same night she sent me to California.”

“My mom died when I was a few months old. Apparently there was a house fire.” He didn’t know if he offered that up as a consolation or what- he just needed to say something.

Nick didn’t loosen his grip on Sam, but he tugged their wrists over his side and took a few bites of bracelet for himself. His stubble scratched along the younger man’s wrist, possibly followed by a hint of teeth, but there was no proof. And Sam really didn’t want to know.

Somewhere deeper in the house came the distinct sound of Dean snoring.

How lovely to be so far away from that familiar noise.

“What was in the eggnog?” Sam asked out of curiosity.

“Tasted like rum.” Nick took another bite- of the bracelet, not of Sam. “I prefer scotch, but it’s not as good for mixing. Besides, Gabriel only buys the best stuff, which is just as easy to get drunk off of, but you get to feel posh while doing it.”

“I made sure to keep my pinky up the whole time.”

“Good man. I knew you wouldn’t embarrass me.” Crunch. Crunch.

Sam tugged their arms back over so he could mouth his way back over the bracelets. Hoping he wasn’t too late. It took a bit of searching, but eventually the plastic gave way to sweetness and he found the last few beads.

“Nick?” He asked between bites.

“Yo?”

What had he wanted to ask? Every question that came to mind was a bad idea.

“Never mind.”

“Never mind?”

“I don’t drink rum.” He tried to explain.

“Ok?”

Sam closed his eyes, tasting the slight tang of salt on Nick’s skin between the beads. “Nick, what
if… if we had a normal first kiss like normal people who actually date and like each other and that sort of thing- that didn’t involve mistletoe or you trying to make Dean really freak out… how would it have gone?”

For a while Nick didn’t say anything at all, and if it hadn’t been from the slight tension in the curl of his fingers then Sam would have started to wonder if the man had fallen asleep.

“Do you mean ideally, or do you mean if we weren’t both so damn straight and you didn’t think I was such a gross old man, how would it have gone?”

“Nick, I don’t think you’re gross. I know you are.”

Nick’s laugh was too loud, competing with the relative quiet of the house, and it tapered off into a quiet chuckle as he squeezed Sam’s hand.

“So you mean ideally then?”

“Never mind.” Sam repeated and turned his face towards the back of the couch. “I just had a bit too much to drink. Dean says that I ask stupid questions when I’ve had too much.”

“You do.” Nick assured and carefully took his hand back, leaving a cold empty feeling in its place. “But stupid questions deserve stupid answers. So, it would have happened… carefully.”

“Carefully?” Which had to be true, but at the same time was such a strange way to answer.

“Mhmmm. I would have been terrified of acting too soon and getting my clock cleaned.”

“ You were afraid to kiss me?” Sam felt like he was getting some of his words mixed up, but Nick still answered like he understood, so most of what was being said must have been in the right place.

“Yes. You’ve got that impressive right hook and I don’t like having my nose broken.” The quiet threatened them again, but Nick managed to keep it at bay. “I would have waited until we were deciding to call it a night, when you were already half asleep and too tired looking to do much damage.”

“I’m twice as dangerous when I’m half asleep.” Sam tried to look back at Nick, but they were too close and it was too dark and all he managed to see was a bit of blonde.

“I’ve noticed that- but only after we started dating, so if this was early on then your violence wouldn’t have entered into my giant mistake.”

“I’m a mistake?”

Nick didn’t answer that one at all- but the universe heard it, and every rum soaked nerve ending of Sam recoiled and knew the answer anyways.

“I would have said goodnight and kissed your cheek.” Nick picked back up after an incriminating pause. “And I would have missed on purpose and if you didn’t take a swing at me I would have missed even better a second time.”

“You would have… what do you mean, you would have missed?”

The couch dipped and Nick sat up on his elbows, looming like a dark threat over Sam. “It’s not complicated, mister college.” He swayed just a bit. “God. You’re dense when you want to be.”
Sam bore his teeth.

Nick just sighed. “It’s not hard to miss. Now, ideally the room wouldn’t be spinning and you
wouldn’t be upside-down, but...”

Sam’s spine went rigid, even tired and even being more than just a little drunk, he knew enough to
brace himself.

Clumsily, Nick’s good hand came up to Sam’s face and the man came down, placing such a
small, innocent little kiss to Sam opposite cheek. Except, true to his words, he missed. His lips
brushed feather light just along the corner of the younger man’s mouth. And if there hadn’t been
any forewarning it would have felt like an accident. Straying just a few centimeters too far to the
left.

“Like that.” He said so matter of factly, smug and concise and lacking in any real intent other than
proving a point. But then he didn’t pull back, he stayed close, inches between them but no light to
make out any of the fine details. His thumb strayed from Sam’s cheek, edge of a fingernail tracing
his lower lip.

“And then I would have waited like this to see if you were going to hit me… except more right
side up, because this is a terrible angle to wait at.” The apple juice smell had faded from his breath,
overwhelmed by the sweet mix of rum and nutmeg. “Even if you didn’t take a swing I would
have waited- because the lack of a negative isn’t the same as a positive and we have established us
being tired, not drunk or suicidal during this ideal and fictitious night many weeks back.” He
rambled along, obviously getting just as lost himself.

Sam felt that same horrible shaking from earlier in the night coming back to him and he dug his
fingers into his blanket, doing his best to explain to his body that there was literally nothing to be
so upset about right now. He was safe and warm and Nick wasn’t actually going to-

“I could have stayed like this forever, just waiting for you to close your eyes… or lean in… or just
smile at me.” Nick whispered even if the rest of the house was sleeping. He whispered because
right then it was just the two of them, so close together that anything louder than a sigh would
have been too much to share.

“And I would let you decide when you wanted to let me kiss you.” Nick swallowed thickly and let
go, retracting his hand and body, leaving Sam staring up at the flat, featureless ceiling.

The man settled back into the couch, rustling his blankets and taking his time to get comfortable.

“What Christmas, Sam.” He said softly and when he didn’t get an answer back right away he
added on a very soft and not entirely honest sounding, “sorry about grabbing your ass.”

Sam wanted so badly to fill his mouth with Nick’s name, but he had realized too quickly that
couldn’t be that kind of brave right now. And the liquor wasn’t ever meant to last but without rum
for an accomplice Sam was left curled on his side staring into the night, trying to find meaning in
the clumsy shadows and shapes while he listened to his friend slowly trying to find sleep.

It took a subjective eternity for Sam to reach out, searching for Nick’s hand again, but by that
point the man was already gone.

With a feeling somewhere between regret and relief, Sam pressed his face into the cushions.
“Merry Christmas.” He told no one in particular, wondering to himself why he hadn’t just stayed
at home tonight where things were safe and familiar and far less confusing.
What kind of presents do you think that the boys would get for each other?
Best suggestion gets wrapped up with a bow and given in the morning.
Rub salt in your wounds

Chapter Notes

I always post these at o'dark am- and that is probably one of the key contributors to the weird typos that I'll be picking out of this chapter for the next few days. And this chapter was meant to have a bit more PLOT but it ended up being more fluff and then just a bit of bad that inevitably reflects the great upheaval that my life has gone through in the past few weeks. (Don't worry about me though, on monday I leave for a much needed vacation to Disneyland with 3 of the best people I know, and I'm sure I'll be human again by the time I get home). I can't thank you guys enough for the support while I sit in my quiet corner and don't really update much.

We get to mark the halfway point in the boy's relationship with this chapter. Hopefully well past the halfway point of this story, because holy crap it's almost 100k words at this point and what am I even doing with my life?? Almost 200 pages of boys pointedly not kissing. I have no idea why you guys put up with this nonsense. But I love you for it.

There were probably very heterosexual ways to share a couch with another guy while watching a movie. However, this was not one of those ways. And in part, that saddened Sam, that a month and a half into this fake relationship all pretenses of normality had been pushed aside in favor of embracing their collectively fabricated gayness- even when no one was around to witness it.

But another part of him was just plain comfortable. This was the part that craved human contact. The part of him that instigated wrestling matches with Dean. That insisted that he pull his uncle Bobby into rib crushing hugs every time he saw him. That made it ok that he and Nick kissed each other on the cheek more often than they told each other goodbye.

He understood that this friendship was running under different rules than a friendship typically would. It was ok though. It was 'normal' in its abnormality. If only because they started off this dance on the wrong foot, it felt right to keep going with the same jarring, unnatural rhythm.

Sam was stretched out, long as he could be, toes dangling over the far arm of Nick’s couch. He was on his side, partially so he could see the tablet propped up on the battered coffee table, partially because it was the only way that he and Nick could both fit.

Nick was on his back, his side molded to Sam’s chest, bone and sinew and muscles, pressing together as close as they could be... because it made it easier for them to both fit on the couch... He kept one hand on his stomach and one hand up over his head where he could play with Sam’s hair while they watched a teenage girl running through an abandoned mine from an ax wielding maniac.

The movie wasn’t doing much for Sam. Most of the slasher flicks that Nick picked for them fell a bit flat. But he wasn’t here because he liked the cinematic choices. He was here because he had intended to go home three hours ago but the rain was coming down outside like it was the end of
days, complete with flood warnings and thunder and hail that beat against the windows like
gunshots. Sam had chosen life over being pelted with ice and drowned in the streets.

“If she has claustrophobia then why did she go down the mine in the first place?” Sam felt like
he’d been asking roughly the same overly obvious questions for the past hour’s worth of movie.
But there was little to no logic in this particular film.

“She’s got to prove herself, because chicks are just as strong and brave as men. It’s supposed to be
empowering.”

“Then why is she dressed like that?”

“Because it would be a shame to cover those fantastic breasts of hers anymore than we have to-
especially after she spent so much money on them.”

“You’re an ass.” He pointed out even if they both already knew it.

Nick only chuckled and tugged on Sam’s hair.

Now, for the record, Sam had no inclination that he would enjoy having someone play with his
hair as much as he did. It had been a stunning realization to him on Christmas day. He and Nick
had taken a post-present nap on the couch, and true to form, Nick had made a point to stay tucked
as close as humanly possible once they had woken, most likely to make his family uncomfortable.
Or to make Sam uncomfortable. It was hard to tell. Either way he had been successful. If it hadn’t
been for the way those fingers felt digging into Sam’s scalp, or the almost anesthesia like quality
of the slow touching, he was positive he would have slipped out from the shelter of Nick’s arm,
escaped the warmth of his chest and neck. But it had been a good show for the family members
who came and went from the living room. The two of them tucked against each other, whispering
and touching. Well worth the sacrifice.

It was an Oscar worth performance.

Too bad Sam was a method actor and Nick had caught on to just how into it the younger man had
been.

For the two weeks following Christmas he had taken almost any opportunity in their down time to
get his good hand tangled in the hair at the nape of Sam’s neck, just leaning close and touching
and tugging while they talked. And they always talked about stupid things. The same sorts of
stupid things that they had been using to occupy their mouths for the last six weeks. Just now with
added petting.

And Sam was positive that every time Dean walked in on them, his brother was convinced that he
was interrupting something far more intimate and indecent then he actually was.

Sam could only guess what they must look like.

He let his eyes droop, resting his head on the armrest, listening to the movie more than watching it.
But it was all dramatic swells of music and feeble screams and gasps. He didn’t really need to see
what was going on to follow the story.

Nick coaxed the girl in the movie, telling her to run faster, or look behind her, but it all carried a
mocking undertone and they both knew that she probably wouldn’t survive to see the end credits.
But this is how he was with movies. So encouraging. So hopeful. So sarcastic.

With the arm that wasn’t trapped beneath him, Sam raised a hand and touched Nick’s wrist pulling
it away from where the sharp plastic of the beaded bracelets were knocking against his jaw. Now,
Sam thought that it was absolutely adorable that Nick would still wear the jewelry that his nieces made for him weeks later, especially considering the sheer amount of pink that had been used— but that didn’t mean that he had to enjoy the molded edges repeatedly nudging into his skin.

Nick hesitated, stopping halfway through saying “Don’t hide in there, you dumb broad,” the words sort of trailing off. He shrugged a bit, his shoulder bone rolling slick against Sam’s chest, before he twisted his fingers just a little tighter into the younger man’s hair, tugging hard enough to haul his head to the side.

“There’s got to be better things for her to hide behind.” Nick informed with his calm, low voice. “It’s a fucking stalagmite.”

“Stalactite.” Sam corrected, letting his eyes close all the way as Nick pulled even harder. “Stalagmites are the ones that go up.” Sam kept on, because he was also an ass and didn’t care if Nick didn’t like being corrected.

“Whatever you say, Mister College.” He loosened up just a bit and went back to his slow petting.

Sam kept his eyes closed and let his fingers trace the beads, clicking them together softly. It was a much more pleasant sound than the girl in the movie getting a pick ax driven into her with a moist thwack. He counted the beads, and then followed the clean line of muscle down Nick’s forearm, tracing slow lines and feeling the soft hairs beneath his fingertips. It seemed strange to him that, knowing there was a mess of lines and colors dug into the flesh, that it would be so smooth.

Around the soft inside bend of Nick’s elbow Sam found an imperfection. A round, slick, piece of devastation, that had to be a scar of some kind. He discovered two more, slow and carefully investigating each one without ever seeing them.

“Chickenpox scars?” He asked after a bit, thinking of the one that Dean had on the back of his left shoulder.

“Cigarette burns.” Nick answered without any feeling.

Sam lifted his fingers, feeling his body recoil in response.

“Calm down.” Nick chuckled in a way that felt horribly inappropriate for the situation. “They’re not the product of an abusive childhood or anything. Just mementos from a psycho ex.”

Sam opened his eyes and sat up just a bit on an elbow, actually looking at the man’s arm. It was hard to find the scars amidst all the tattoos, just holes in the grand design, glossy circles that were just a little too pink.

“Oh my god, Nick.”

“It was like, a hundred years ago.” He turned his head to look up at Sam. “It’s not a big deal. But if you want to see some scars, I’ve got much better ones with better stories than just some crazy bitch I accidently married who liked to get my attention in bad ways.”

His chest suddenly hurt. Sam didn’t want to trade scar stories. Instead he lay his head back down and stubbornly closed his eyes. “Pick a new movie.”

Nick’s hand left his hair and the ending credit music from the last movie died instantly, replaced by the white noise of the storm outside as Nick browsed Netflix in search of the next something awful for them to watch.

“Lesbian film syndicate movie?” He suggested.
“I think I’ll pass.” Sam tried not to smile, because this wasn’t the first time that Nick had suggested a similar type of movie.

“Haunted house?”

“Can we do something that doesn’t involve ghosts or demons or monsters or ax murderers?”

“Romantic comedy about a middle aged man who takes up ballroom dancing?”

Sam made a face.

“Documentary about Joan of Arc?”

“You do know that these movies are all suggested based on your watch history- and I’m really worried about you.”

Nick laughed, and Sam could feel it rumbling between them. He started laughing too, pulling his free arm around Nick’s middle and hiding his face in the man’s shoulder.

“Documentary on black holes?” The blonde finally suggested.

Sam felt suspicious as the prospect. “Is that just another one of your lesbian movies?”

Nick started laughing again, shoulders shaking quietly.

Sam opened an eye to peer at the small screen. “Groundhog’s Day.” He decided for them. It was technically his turn to pick anyhow.

“As you wish.” Nick selected the little icon and settled back against the younger man, hand immediately coming up to find Sam’s hair.

“How are you this cold?” Sam shied away from the touch, somewhat horrified that Nick could have lost his contact warmth so quickly.

“We’ve had this conversation.” Nick dug his fingers in, stealing as much warmth from Sam as he could. “Poor circulation.”

“Where’s the blanket I got you?” Sam winced as he tried to force his body to accept the cold of Nick’s skin along his cheek and neck and shoulder.

“On my bed…” His tone turned a little lecherous, but at the same time still light and joking. “You want to take this back to the bedroom?”

“No. but it’d be nice if you used the blanket I got you for Christmas instead of leeching warmth from me with your corpse hands.” Sam had been particularly proud of the electric blanket that he’d found for Nick. It was fleecy, red, king sized, and it went all the way up to ten.

“Go get it for me.” Nick suggested, even though he was one half of what was pinning Sam down.

He considered telling his friend to take a long walk down a short road- but Nick wouldn’t go and then Sam would be stuck here with the meat popsicle, left to suffer each frigid touch until they reached some kind of median in temperature that would be just on the wrong side of comfortable considering the ambient cold from the storm that kept eking through the windows despite the little wall heater that was trying as hard as it could.

He rolled Nick away, just enough that he could free himself to climb over the man, all long limbs
and no grace as he struggled to find his footing. And now, he had never actually been in Nick’s room. The only time he’d stayed the night it had been out here on the couch. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting.

The light switch was against the wall beside the door, as most light switches were. He flipped the switch and saw the usual things that one suspects, a dresser, a pile of cloths consuming a lonely chair, a bed that was ninety percent blankets.

Apparently Nick was not the kind of guy who made his bed, and that was ok in the grand scheme of things. It just meant that all Sam had to do was push the folds around until he found the right color. He tugged free the blanket he’d bought for Nick to help combat his upsettingly low body temperature.

The cord got unplugged from the wall, and the blanket tossed over a shoulder. Sam reached for the light, but hesitated with his hand against the switch.

Sitting on the dresser, beside Nick’s reading glasses, was a framed picture of the man grinning at the camera with his arms around a very young, very blonde little girl. And Sam recognized her almost at once. She was the extra kid in all the photos at Nick’s work. She had to be somewhere between six and eight in the picture (because Sam wasn’t practiced at judging the ages of kids and really that was his best guess). All he could tell for sure was that she was small, fitting almost perfectly against Nick’s chest. Just as pale and just as blonde as he was. Her grin just as wide.

She had to be a little sister. They looked so much alike.

In the back of his mind, he remember a snatch of conversation from a few weeks ago, sitting around the dinner table and Gabriel mentioning getting letters from someone, then Nick going from elated to bristling and evasive and Sam had been told not to ask about her. He remembered that much at least.

He turned off the light and came back to the living room and to his surprise he saw that Nick had gotten up off the couch. The man couldn’t be bothered to go get his own blanket, but he could get up to pour himself a scotch.

Nick was all easy lines, leaning against the kitchen counter and sipping on his short glass of dark amber.

Sam tossed the blanket onto the couch and sighed. “Really?”

“Want one?” Nick nodded to the very nice looking bottle on the counter that Sam recognized as a Christmas present given him by his sister-in-law.

“I’m not good with scotch.” Honestly, Sam wasn’t too good at holding anything other than about a beer and a half.

“I can teach you.”

“You just want to get me drunk.” Sam accused and started looking for an outlet to plug in the blanket.

Nick chuckled and got a second glass down from the cupboard. “You’re not making it home tonight. You may as well settle in.” He brought the two drinks over, as well as the still mostly full bottle, setting them beside the tablet and waiting for Sam to get back on the couch.

And Sam didn’t want to stand to fight about this one, so he sat himself down, tossing the blanket over Nick and smiling as the man struggled for a second to resurface.
When Nick finally emerged he had a bit of a smile, like he found the antics only *slightly* amusing. “You’re lucky I like this blanket so much.”

“I knew you would.” Sam leaned back, arms behind his head, still rather pleased with himself.

“Just like I knew you’d like your Christmas present.” Nick said almost slyly as he started settling himself in, curling his legs beneath him, pulling the blanket around so his flank wouldn’t be exposed to the cold.

Sam shook his head and put his feet up on the table, comfortable enough in just jeans and a flannel now that Nick wasn’t sapping his warmth from him.

Nick smoothed imaginary wrinkles from his blanket before grabbing his drink. “Do you want to use your present tonight? It doesn’t have an expiration date, but at the same time there’s no real point in saving it.”

Though he tried to fight it, Sam found himself smiling and trying rather unsuccessfully to hold in a chuckle. He still had the very tasteful present in his wallet, a homemade coupon for what promised to be borderline illegal sex, complete with very illustrative stick figures.

“I thought I would wait until my birthday to cash it in.”

Nick’s throat bobbed as he took a slow swallow of scotch. “That might be a little awkward. Isn’t your birthday in May?”

Sam nodded, oddly pleased that the man remembered something like that.

“Well, we break up in February...”

“Hey, it specifically says that it’s good *forever*. I reserve the right to show up years from now, on your wedding night to the perfect woman, to slap that bit of paper down and demand you spread ‘em.”

Nick choked on his scotch, so Sam awarded himself one point.

Once he recovered, getting his soft coughing and throat clearing under control, Nick managed to give Sam an inscrutable look as he passed a glass over.

Sam took it, even if he really had no intention of drinking. He was already tired. Tired plus alcohol was going to equally a very sloppy Sam. Sloppy Sam wasn’t responsible for his actions, and Sober Sam hated cleaning up after him.

“Oh, my wedding night?”

“Or during your youngest kid’s high school graduation. Just there on one of the chairs in front of all the other parents.” Sam said so calmly. “I plan on getting the most out of this.”

And that coaxed a smile out of the other man, even if he did his best to hide it behind his drink. He cleared his throat again. “So... along those lines, I’ve been reading.”

“Reading?” Sam looked up from his own drink.

“Less for fun, more for research.”

“Research?”
“Look, if you’re going to play the echo game it’s going to make this take a lot longer and one of us is going to start feeling real stupid.”

It was Sam’s turn to hide a smile in his drink. And it was very likely that this was *good scotch*, but it flayed his throat raw and burned all the way down, settling like a dying star somewhere in his stomach.

Nick nodded before continuing. “My basic understanding on sex between two guys was fairly… anatomical. Like, insert ‘tab A’ into ‘slot B’, and just keep repeating until someone says ‘oh god’ and his knees buckle.”

Sam started coughing on his drink, unprepared for the less than gentle reminder that this, this glorious creature right here was the man that he was supposed to be dating. So full of tack and class and charm.

“And I couldn’t just tell Gabriel ‘yep, I put it in him’- so I did some research.”

“You’ve been reading porn.” Sam clarified to the couch and the tablet, just in case they were a bit slow.

Nick showed a bit of teeth in what could have been mistaken as a grin. “It’s called *erotica*.”

“You’ve been reading gay porn.” Sam refused to call it anything other than what it inevitably was. “Why not just watch a video like a normal person? I’m sure that the internet is full of them.”

“First off, downloading porn is a great way to get a virus on my computer, and second I really don’t want to watch two guys going at it.”

“So you read about it?”

“I close my eyes during the scary parts.” Nick assured and took another drink, finishing the last few drops.

Sam just sighed. “So…” He waited for the rest of it to come and hit him, sure that the man would have brought it up for a good reason and not just because he liked to share his hobbies.

“So there are tons of books out there.” He poured himself a little more to drink, hands still steady and that was a good sign. “I started with this one that had these two cowboys, but there was a lot of tying each other up- the rodeo was involved in the story somehow and so the one guy had a lasso- and anyway, I didn’t want to tell my brother that my first forays into the more fabulous side of sex involved tying someone up. Plus I’m sure that there would be rope burns involved and I had a feeling that you wouldn’t be game to try and fake them.”

Sam took another drink because this whole conversation was suddenly walking a very weird line.

“So I found this other one and, Sam, it’s perfect. All the sex that we’ve had until tonight has been straight from this book. I just take notes and basically retell Gabe all the steamy parts but change the names around.”

Did he even want to ask? “What have we been getting up to?”

“Nothing too scary. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.” Nick waved the question off. “The main character’s this demon hunter-”

And Sam should have guessed that it couldn’t have been anything normal, Nick enjoyed his scary movies too much to not have something weird going on. “And the other guy’s a demon?”
Nick showed teeth again. “That’s what he thinks at first, but his exorcisms don’t work and he comes to realize that they aren’t strong enough because the other guy isn’t just a demon, he’s the devil himself.”

“Of course he is.” Sam nodded and inclined his glass, motioning that Nick should keep going.

“And the Devil is just fascinated by this human and starts following him around.” Nick tossed back his scotch and closed his eyes for a second. Even Sam knew that that wasn’t how you were supposed to do this. You don’t do shots of scotch. It must have hurt like hell, but Nick was pouring himself a third drink, a little slower, a lot more carefully.

“And at some point they start… having sex?” This was definitely leaning towards one of the stranger conversations that they had had since meeting.

“The Devil decides that he wants the guy’s body for a vessel, but he needs the guy to give his premisison. And the demon hunter is like ‘fuck that’, so the Devil decides that if he can’t have the guy’s body one way, he’ll take it another. It’s all kinds of slow, uncomfortable seduction because the human is still saying ‘fuck that’ the whole time but slowly starts to give in.”

“And this is the ‘perfect book’?”

“I can read you part of it-”

“No thanks.”

“The Devil’s never actually had sex, being the personification of evil, but not used to having a physical body. So once they get past the general seduction part he’s a bit lost and it’s kind of… exploratory.”

“You’ve given yourself the part of the Devil, haven’t you?”

“Naturally.” Nick scoffed as if it even needed to be asked. “I thought it was the most accurate part I could play.”

Sam had to kind of nod in agreement, trying another sip of his drink, feeling it coat his teeth and tongue. “And why exactly are you telling me all this? I thought we agreed that you would fill in all the messy details and I wouldn’t have to hear about them.”

“We did, and I did, and I’d like to point that I’m not telling you about how you talk real dirty and pull my hair when I’m going down on you.” Only Nick could manage to say something like that with such a remarkably straight face. “I just told you that story so I could tell you another.”

Sam finished his drink, because the burn helped to take his mind off of that mental image of Nick kneeling on the floor between his knees while Sam arched into the couch, begging incoherently as that warm mouth slid down his-

He set his glass on the table and pointedly didn’t pour himself a second, instead focusing on the movie that had been left to run its course. Bill Murray slowly going insane as the day he found himself in repeated itself for the eighth time.

“I read a few books before I found that one, and none of them were very good, but they all had the same kind of things in common.”

“Are you going to tell me that we’re doing this wrong somehow because you read about how gay relationships work in some trashy porno?” That almost came out as a joke, but it went a bit odd in the middle and Sam wasn’t sure how to fix it.
“I’m saying that I’ve compiled my own experiences with what I’ve read about to discover that gay relationships are almost exactly like straight ones except for the extra helping of cock.”

It was almost nice to see the rough deterioration in Nick’s speaking patterns as he got himself into that third scotch. Sam appreciated knowing where the benchmarks were, mostly so that he could keep the man from going further than two drinks the next time.

“And?” They may as well get it over with. Whatever slightly less than lucid thing that Nick had been working himself up to needed to just get out in the open.

“We don’t fight.” He said plainly. The buildup left the overly simple statement rather stunning.

“I think Dean took care of that for me.” Sam nodded towards Nick’s bad hand that even after the splints had been removed seemed a bit stiff.

“I mean we don’t argue.”

Sam struggled to put together what Nick meant and not what he was saying. “You’re saying that we get along too well.”

“People who are actually dating disagree on things.”

“Only if there’s something to disagree on.”

“There’s always something to disagree on. Where to go for dinner. What movie to see. I hate your brother. Who’s going to drive. Why don’t we see each other more often. Why are we spending so much time together- I need my space. Were you checking out that girl?” He looked away from Sam for a second, a small frown forming between his eyebrows. “There’s a million little things that come up, stuff about another person that just rub you the wrong way and eventually you’re going to argue.”

“Have you considered that we might accidently just perfect for each other and there’s nothing to argue about?”

“We’re fucking far from perfect for each other.” And that held an odd emotion that Sam couldn’t put a name to, nor did he want to try.

He took his feet off the coffee table and tried to look at this as logically as he could, again, suffering to find what Nick meant and not focus too hard on what he was saying because what he was saying wasn’t good. “You want to add a fight to our relationship because in the long run it will make the whole thing look more believable.”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Nick looked slightly confused, and Sam sighed an oddly relieved little sigh.

“So what do we argue about?”

“How would I know?” Nick set his half empty glass down and rubbed a hand over his mouth.

Sam sighed again, but it was more frustrated now. What to argue about? He could write a book on how to pick a fight with Dean, he even thought he might know how to pull one out of Nick if he really had to. Over the past few weeks Sam had seen some of the little loose threads that he shouldn’t pull. But Nick didn’t want a real fight. He wanted something he could tell his brother about to make this whole mess look more authentic to the casual observer.
“You drink too much.” Sam suggested.

Nick sucked softly on his teeth, little tip of his tongue showing. “I drink as much as I need to. It’s a coping mechanism.” He sounded dismissive, not at all willing for this to be a point of conflict between them, but Sam dug his nails in, because if he had to say one thing that he honestly thought that they would one day fight about if they decided to stay friends once this was over- it would be the fact that Nick drank too much.

“What the hell are you ‘coping’ with? It’s a Thursday night at home with a friend- no coping needed.”

“Look, I’m an adult, and I know what I need to feel ok. And this is what I need. It’s not a dependency, it’s just a little help to keep all the bad things quiet.”

Sam had heard almost the exact same argument before. It was one of the things that had solidified his decision to leave Kansas two years ago. “Yeah, my dad says something similar. He’s just drowning his demons. But his wife died twenty years ago and he’s not coping anymore, he’s just an alcoholic with a failing liver and kids who moved two thousand miles away just so they don’t have to watch him slowly killing himself.”

Nick, stubborn as you like, picked his glass back up from the table and watched Sam with an unsettlingly steady gaze as he took a slow drink. “I don’t know shit about your dad- but I’m going to go ahead and assume that he loved your mom something terrible. She was probably the love of his life and when she died he realized how god damned cruel the world can be, to take from him the thing that meant to most. The person who got him out of bed in the morning. The person that he thought about a million times a day. Who he ached for when she went as far as the next room.”

He finished his drink and Sam found himself at a loss for words.

“You dad is trying to dampen the pain of only having a few, very limited years to spend with the other half of his soul. Twenty years sounds about right, and maybe if he needs to he can take another twenty- because you don’t get over shit like that.” He took a rough breath, his eyes narrowing slightly, but he didn’t look mad, he looked pained. “I fell in love with someone I’d never even met. My daughter was the light of my life before I’d even had a chance to see her face or hear her laugh. And I lost her. I didn’t get to hold her, I didn’t get to find out if I’d be a good father to her or if I’d fuck it up like my family was so sure that I would. I didn’t get the few years that your dad did. I had seven months and three days. But if your dad gets twenty years to try and dull the pain with liquor then I can at least have a few more years without everyone who comes along riding my ass, telling me that they know what’s best for me.”

He licked his teeth and pressed his lips together in a thin, firm line. “I drink as much as I need to, and you can fucking keep your opinions to the contrary to yourself.”

Sam looked at his hands, at the bit of dirt beneath his nails, and he wondered how someone who had never met his father, who had never even heard anyone talk about him, could describe the man to absolute perfection. Nick had a slightly different kind of pain in him than John- he certainly showed it a little differently. Or maybe it was exactly the same and Sam just couldn’t understand it because he’d never lost anyone like they had.

He knew enough to realize that this was something that he should just leave alone.

“So, what do you want to have a fight about?” Nick asked again after giving the bit of unease a chance to settle in between the sounds of the movie and the rain.
And hadn’t they just sort of had one? But Sam supposed that that little disagreement wasn’t the sort of thing that Nick had intentions of sharing with his brother and whoever else in his family that was keeping tabs on their relationship.

“I… I lied when I said I was ok with you sleeping around.” Of all the things that Sam could have suggested, that was what popped into his mind. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to be making something up or if it had to be valid point of contention.

Nick perked up just a bit, his eyes coming alive. “That can work. Your brother still seemed pretty pissed about it.”

“He is.” Sam assured, a little unease in his stomach because it was a perfectly perfect thing to have a fight about. It would even lead quite nicely into the breakup fight that they had promised to have at the end of all this, if they wanted to bring it back. But unlike the majority of the things that were going on in this faux romance, this one felt a little too honest. “He thinks I should dump you.”

“He’s right.” Nick shrugged easily. “Even if you gave me permission- which is fantastically generous of you by the way- you deserve better than some ass who would risk losing you just for some pussy.”

“I think that that was supposed to be a complement- but it’s real hard to tell. You do know that you get significantly more rough around the edges when you drink, right?”

“It’s part of my charm.” Nick shrugged as if this was not at all news to him. “But you changing your mind is perfect.” He leaned forward, carefully pouring another drink for himself and just a little splash for Sam. “Knew I could count on you to be the smart one. You get to be the bad guy, but at the same time wholly justified in my actions. As misunderstandings go it’ll work well.” He nudged Sam’s glass over to him and commanded, “drink”.

Sam could have pointed out that he still wasn’t all that big on drinking, or that the longer he knew Nick the less he trusted himself and what he might do to this man if given a leave of his better sense. He honestly wasn’t sure if he wanted to hug him or just arm wrestle him and either way felt illogical and reckless.

“I’m not trying to get you drunk, you lightweight, pansy ass, sequoia. I’m teaching you how to drink scotch and at the same time, toasting you on a brilliant solution.”

Sam reluctantly took his glass, running a thumb along the rim and looking at the mouthful of scotch that wouldn’t be enough to do any real damage.

So they drank a more, and then a little more, and Sam agreed that they would take about a week off where they could both brood and suffer their way through this ‘misunderstanding’ before deciding that they missed each other too much, and it wasn’t such a big deal, and they could move on. Somehow, in the midst of this conversation Sam ended up laying back down again, sandwiched once more between the back of the couch and a now very warm Nick.

Sam drifted quickly to the edge of sleep, and it wasn’t his fault because it had to be almost midnight by now. The only thing keeping him awake was that he was sweating. Too hot to sleep, and it was an odd problem to have in the dead of winter. He blamed the blanket which had been set to eight, or maybe it was Nick’s hand that had found its way back into his hair, a little more clumsy than before, fingers loose along the back of his neck.

At some point he realized that Nick had changed movies, but he couldn’t tell if it was because Groundhog’s Day had ended, or if the man had just needed the familiarity of screaming fools being terrorized to get some real rest in this late hour. There would have been deeper thoughts and
analysis to the whole change if Sam could still open his eyes, but that window of wakefulness had
closed, and he simply listened to the movie going on without him. If it weren’t for the damp heat
he could feel collecting at the base of his spine he would have passed easily into unconsciousness.

Instead, he found himself being dragged back to half lucid by the rumble of Nick’s voice.

“Sam?” His breath warm as it ghosted over Sam’s neck. “You still awake?”

The answer was yes, but Sam was too far gone to remember the word.

“Sam?” He dragged the single syllable out.

And even mostly asleep, Sam recognized the slight slurring of speech. Apparently five small
glasses of scotch was a bit much even for Nick. It would have been enough to lay Sam completely
out for the night and well into tomorrow, but the older man was a bit sturdier when it came to
alcohol.

With a hand still tangled in Sam’s hair, Nick gently nosed against his cheek, whispering some
nonsense along his jaw. A bit more affectionate, or hungry, than was usual- even for them. “We
can’t sleep out here. We’re too big for the couch.” Which was followed by considerably less
sensible things.

It was still asking too much of Sam to open his eyes or to give any kind of clean and logical
response to Nick’s mutterings about the couch’s surface area, and something about starfish. He
grunted instead and hoped that it was understood as a ‘shut up and go away, I’m fine here’.

But it wasn’t good enough because apparently Nick didn’t speak delirious college boy. With what
felt like deliberate purpose, he pressed his mouth to Sam’s cheek in something that was too wide
and clumsy to be a kiss and more closely resembled a nuzzle with teeth.

Definitely hungry.

Sam yawned and turned his face away, managing to grumble out a half audible “don’t be weird”.

This was either ignored or simple not understood as Nick’s fingers slid through his hair, tugging
his head just a touch further to the side as he yawned into the soft underside of Sam’s jaw. Deep,
slow breaths that he managed to draw without his mouth ever leaving Sam’s skin and it was a
peculiar feeling.

Nick kissed him, gentle as any goodbye kiss on the cheek up until this point, except this one was
on the sensitive, kind of raw feeling skin of Sam’s neck, so soft that he almost missed it.

“Don’t be weird.” Sam repeated a little less coherently than last time. Because if felt strange, but
not in a bad way. And he kind of liked the scratch of Nick’s stubble along his throat but definitely
not in a good way.

And maybe Nick understood this time because he muttered about the couch again before shifting
like he was going to get up, then abandoning the motion. The two of them sort of started to settle
back down against each other, sleep edging in despite the ambient noises and the lights that were
still on.

It was far too warm to manage any real sleep, but at the same time too comfortable to disrupt any
of it.

A few more minutes passed before Nick weakly fist ed a hand in his hair and made a soft, tired
kind of noise that tapered off into another yawn. Sam grunted in response and managed to reach
up and pat the man’s arm in what he hoped was an affectionate way. Something that meant agreement, or surrender, because the two of them could just pass out here despite the fact that there wasn’t enough room and they would inevitably wake up sore from their cramped position.

Even though his voice was muffled by Sam’s throat, Nick kept talking. Confused little things and somewhere in that mix of words the younger man thought he heard ‘I want to keep you.’

Which sounded pretty nice to Sam actually.

Nick could keep him, he could keep Nick.

“You’re too warm.” He complained instead because it felt like a better idea than agreeing.

“You’re never happy.” Nick pointed out even as he pushed his blanket off, letting it pool on the floor. A quiet sacrifice evident in the way that he shivered and drew closer, little prickles of goose bumps running up his arm beneath Sam’s hand.

“And you’re a martyr.”

Nick made a noise of agreement even as his teeth grazed Sam’s throat. A sharp feeling that could have been an accident. Gone too fast to tell. And Sam knew, he knew that he should have slapped at Nick, or pinched him or something. Anything. Instead he slid his hand over Nick’s, tangling fingers and hair, thinking quietly that he could sleep like this and it might just be perfect.

Nick made a confused, lost kind of noise at Sam’s touch. Finger’s twisting as he turned his face away, hiding against the younger man’s shoulder. “Not enough room on the couch.” He insisted with what was definitely a bite this time, tugging at the collar of Sam’s shirt.

“Then go to bed, you weirdo.” Sam felt himself say even while he hoped that Nick wouldn’t listen to him.

“Come with me.”

“Hell no.” That was literally the worst idea that he’d heard in ages because there was no way he could see that ending well for them.

Like he agreed and wanted to drive that thought home, Nick turned his face back to Sam’s throat, agonizingly slow, hesitation in every centimeter. And Sam would like to say that he didn’t know what the man was doing. He couldn’t see if after all, but he could feel it.

Even through the haze of sleep and scotch he could feel it.

His toes curled and his skin prickled with a shiver that had nothing to do with any kind of cold.

The damp heat of Nick’s mouth, the wet press of his tongue. There was a hint of teeth against the skin of Sam’s throat, nerves tender from the rough brush of the older man’s stubble.

And when Sam should have felt apprehension, all he managed was anticipation.

Long fingers tightened in his hair and Nick drew a sharp breath before blowing hard, managing to make a surprisingly rude noise in just the same way that Sam used to do into his own elbow when he and Dean were kids and blowing raspberries because they sounded like farts was one of the funniest things imaginable. But that was about fifteen years ago, and this was now, and this was on his neck. It was loud and kind of moist and it would have tickled if it wasn’t so unexpected and disappointing.
“Damn it, Nick!”

“Are you awake?” He looked up at Sam, bright blue eyes holding his innocent smile captive. “Can we go to bed now?”

Sam wiped furiously at his neck. “That’s disgusting.”

Nick giggled. God almightily, he giggled.

“How drunk are you?” Sam demanded, curling away as much as the couch would allow- which wasn’t far enough.

“I’m not drunk.” Nick argued. “I’m plastered.”

“I can see that.” He eyed Nick distrustfully and the man just kept laughing, his cheeks turning red, his eyes watering. “Can we have our fight be about you motorboating my neck instead?”

“Aw, you’re fine. You big baby.” He stretched out with his arms long over his head, still grinning at Sam, looking for all the world like a little kid. “Carry me to bed?”

Sam pushed Nick off the couch and relished in the awful noise the man made when he hit the floor. He also enjoyed the subsequent wrestling match, and to a lesser extent, the few hours of sleep that he had there on the floor under Nick and a tangle of blanket.

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“I can’t do this, Dean.” Sam pressed his thumbs to his eyes, seeing quiet starbursts. “I can’t fucking do this.” He could feel his throat closing up, his hands shaking, his knees weak- and it was wonderful that he was sitting because he sure as hell hadn’t been doing all that good a job at standing a few minutes ago.

“You want me to tell him to leave?” It wasn’t a real offer, it was incredulous and offended and everything that Dean was so good at being when he needed to be. “Sure, Sammy. I’ll just go out there and tell Dad that now’s not a good time for you.”

Sam looked up at his brother, pleading.

“No.” Dean found a sturdy looking mug and filled it with coffee that was probably strong enough that it could have walked itself out to the living room. “It’s fine. I’ll talk to him, you don’t have to.”

“You can’t talk to him. It’s not even noon and the man’s drunk off his ass. I don’t even know how he managed to give the taxi driver our address.” His stomach churned. “I don’t even know how he has our address in the first place.”

To that Dean managed to look ever so slightly guilty.

Such a look might one day kill Sam. “You didn’t.”

“I’ve been… sending him money. He didn’t ask for it or anything, but most of the house bills were in my name when we left so I was the one who kept getting notifications that they weren’t being paid.”
“Dean.” Sam put his face back in his hands and made no move to resurface.

Maybe he had a full ride scholarship for school which gave him a little bit of money for living expenses after tuition and books. And Dean worked full time and then some- but it wasn’t like they had money to throw around. Certainly not enough to pay for a house out here in California as well as one in Kansas. Or maybe they would if his big brother wasn’t sending a chunk of their earnings it to their father.

“He took care of us, Sammy. Now it’s my turn to take care of him.” Dean stubbornly took the coffee out to the living room where they had left John.

“But that’s not how it’s supposed to work.” Sam mumbled into his hands before using them to muffle a quiet scream of frustration.

He hid in the kitchen as long as he could. Wishing that the house had an exit on this side- but he was trapped, ever more so when John finally sobered up a bit, and despite Dean’s protests, came looking for his younger son.

Sam didn’t even hear most of what was being said to him, all he knew was that he found himself sitting so rigid in his chair that his spine felt fused, and he could hear himself repeating ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, sir’ in the same dead tone that he hadn’t had to use for years.

Dean stayed somewhere in the doorway, looking like a man watching a train wreck, standing back with the woeful knowledge in his eyes that there was nothing he could do at this point.

Somewhere in there Sam ‘yesed’ when he should have ‘noed’ and John’s head was clear enough by this point for the insubordination to make him annoyed. He thunked a fist down on the table, shifting the whole piece of furniture just a bit and despite a lifetime of this, Sam still flinched. John saw it and latched on to the reaction, raising his voice and hitting the table again. But then Dean was there, coming between them as best as he could, talking to Dad in that long-suffering way that usually ended so badly for him. He distracted John and got him another coffee while Sam sat there and played out in his mind just how much trouble he would make if he just got up and left.

It wouldn’t be fair to leave Dean like this.

But it also wasn’t fair that Dean had somehow given their father permission to just reinsert himself in their lives.

The old man had said something about simply missing his boys, but Sam hadn’t been listening. He was too busy looking at the deeper age lines around his father’s eyes, at the hair on his temples that had changed to far more salt than pepper. The last two years didn’t look like they had been gentle ones, but John wasn’t the kind of man who asked for gentleness. He took from life exactly what he put in- which was to say that he was as hard as he was mean, though only when he’d been drinking, but to be fair, Sam hadn’t seen his father fully sober or not hung over for more than a few hours all together over the past decade.

Maybe if John had shown up last week Sam would have had some fire in him to yell back. Around the time he’d hit puberty he’d had his hackles up anytime dad came around. Ready to go ten rounds if necessary. And he probably could have, could have taken the man down if Dean hadn’t always gotten between them and dragged them apart as soon as one of them took a swing- but right now he was just tired, honestly a little gloomy, and doing his best to stay as still and as quiet as possible because he’d always viewed the old man as something like a T-Rex. He couldn’t see you if you weren’t moving. He wouldn’t raise a hand if you didn’t show you were afraid.

After all these years, Sam still couldn’t tell if he was still afraid of his father or just angry. Neither
would help him now, and so he just took small, slow breaths and made tight fists while he watched Dean do what he did best.

Sam was so focused on his self imposed task, he hardly noticed when John started asking what all that damned noise was.

And listening had never really been one of Sam’s strong suits but it was loud enough, persistent enough, that it finally ate its way through to him. It was a motorcycle. Not a particularly notable noise unto itself, but it took on a bit of importance when it was heard so close to home. Just as Sam began to wonder what the neighbors were up to, the noise died- only to be replaced a few seconds later with a loud knocking on the front door.

Dean looked suddenly like the air had been let out of him, relief clear on his face as his shoulders slumped. “Sammy, go get the door.”

Sam didn’t get up.

“It’s probably Nick. You guys were going to go to school and buy textbooks or something today, right?”

Very wrong.

Dean had literally taken Sam to school yesterday to get the books that he would need in a week when school started back up. And he couldn’t have developed amnesia so suddenly. That- and the fact that Sam and Nick were suffering still only a few days after their ‘fight’, not back on speaking terms yet, and Dean was loving every minute of it. The same day that Sam had told his brother about the argument, Dean had taken him out for lunch and bought him the biggest salad on the menu in celebration.

There were absolutely no plans at all even slightly close to what Dean was suggesting.

But the man put his cell phone on the table beside Sam, the screen showing just a glimpse of a conversation. Sam could make out

-just come get him

and a reply of

-give me 5min

Something that might have been Nick’s name may have been at the top of the screen, but it went dark before Sam could tell for sure. He looked up at his brother and had the clear thought that now was not an appropriate time to hug the man, but he could save a rough embrace for later. He mouthed ‘thank you’ and quickly made his way to the front of the house, hearing Dean making quiet excuses behind him.

And Nick stood there on the porch, eyes shadowed and dark with the memory of interrupted sleep, a confused, but somewhat sincere expression on his face. He shrugged at Sam, looking like he wanted an explanation but wasn’t particularly expecting one. He was here and it was more than enough.

Sam pulled his shoes on and grabbed a jacket, yelling some sort of non specific goodbye to his sacrificial brother before running away with the promise of salvation.

Surprisingly, Nick didn’t ask. He had to have wanted to know, but he didn’t ask. Instead, he stopped at the coffee shop by his work and got them both breakfast even if they were coming up
on lunch time. His first words directed at Sam were “I missed you.”

“It’s been six days.”

“But we usually text or call in between.”

Sam excavated a blueberry from his muffin, mortified that his hands were still shaking just a bit. “We had a fight.”

“I remember.” Nick yawned, rubbing at an eye before taking another drink of coffee, still looking mostly asleep. “Isn’t that even more of a reason to miss you?”

Sam found another berry, eating it before looking at how stained his fingers were getting.

“I couldn’t have been out for more than three hours before your brother texted me. I’m not entirely sure that this is actually happening right now- you’ve got to give me something, Sam, or I’ll just assume I’m still sleeping.”

“Thanks… for the muffin, and for coming and getting me.”

Nick only nodded and tipped his cup to Sam, so casual and modest, like he hadn’t stopped a war by simply answering a desperate text sent by a man who might actually hate him. He still didn’t ask. He just let Sam butcher his pastry in peace and then he took Sam back to his place.

Sam stood there, a few feet from the door, feeling very lost. This wasn’t where he belonged. He should be back at home, standing beside Dean, giving his brother whatever strength he could. Instead he’d run away and hid.

“Hey,” Nick had snuck upsettingly close, “what do you need?” And it wasn’t a demand, there was only gentleness there. An offer for what sounded like anything in the world that Sam could ever want.

“What do you have anything to drink?”

“Water, milk, coffee?” Nick was already in the kitchen, getting down a glass.

“What do you have anything stronger?”

That made him skip a beat, pausing to look over his shoulder, even more confused than he had been on Sam’s doorstep only half an hour ago. “How strong do you want it?”

He rubbed at his face, feeling anxious and on edge and his damn hands were still shaking. “I’d like to be unconscious by the time Dean calls me to say it’s safe to come back home.”

Nick stared at him for a heartbeat, the expression he wore making him almost a complete stranger. “Can I offer you a glass of checkers then?”

As it turned out a ‘glass of checkers’ was presented on a traditional game board, but instead of little black and red pieces there were shot glasses filled with either whisky or vodka. Sam sat on the couch, Nick sat on the floor across from him.

They played.

And they drank.

And Sam didn’t remember much after that.
Standing trial for your sins

Chapter Notes

about 9000 words to get through a few minutes here and a single night there- and this is why we have such a long story on our hands.
Brevity is the wit of soul?
Well, then call me witless and have another unreasonably long chapter.

Thank you to those people who always comment and thank you to those people who don't really comment all that often, or at all- because yall still hang around. Which is just mind blowing to me.
The fact that anyone reads this nonsense is still staggering. I'm such a quiet kid who spent years writing stories that I never shared, I never let people look at my sketchbooks, and I wont play my ukulele when my roommates are home because I'm terrified that they'll hear me singing. But I was brave enough to put these stories out there and you all were wonderful enough to read them.
It's still just a feeling of WOW every time someone comments. Especially when they tell me that they shared one of my stories with someone else, or posted about it on their tumblr
oh goodness
I can't even
just, ugh
and many other inarticulate noises

thank you guys.

I tried to get a little bit of fluff in at the end, just for you. This might be the last of it for this story, so savor it.

He'd only eaten a muffin. Just one single muffin.

He'd thrown up just about every breakfast that he'd eaten in the past year.

At least that's what it felt like.

Sam pressed his forehead against the tile alongside the bathtub and tried to will the hangover away with very little success.

God, but if he survived the next few hours he would never drink again. Which was probably a lie, but not the first one that he'd told himself since waking up in the empty, dark apartment. No shoes. No sock. No idea what had happened before he found himself alone in Nick's bed. And for whatever it was worth, Nick had left him a big glass of water and a handful of painkillers- unfortunately, Sam had thrown them up along with everything else.

Now he was just alone in an unfamiliar bathroom and miserable, little thoughts other than how much he hated himself for willfully doing this when he'd sworn years ago to never get this drunk again.
Everything was quiet and dark.

That’s really all he had going for himself at this point.

He almost wished that Nick was still here, honestly not even sure where the man had disappeared to in the first place. But it didn’t really matter all that much… except eventually his stomach would settle down and he would be able to take pills without his body rejecting them and Nick was the only one who knew where said pills were.

Heaving himself to his feet, using the edge of the sink for leverage, Sam caught a dim glimpse of himself in the mirror over the sink. Glassy eyed and waxy pale. He looked away, down at the counter and the note that Nick had left beside the now empty glass.

It wasn’t a particularly helpful note.

Sam,

*Drink a fuck-ton of water and try to sleep it off.*

*I’ll be back around ten.*

-Nick

XXoxX

The glass got refilled with water from the tap and Sam sipped on it until he was certain he wasn’t going to end up hunched over the toilet again. His head was still pounding along with each deafening beat of his heart- but his stomach held. Two more glasses of water later and Sam was crawling back into a foreign bed that smelled comfortingly familiar.

About two years later (no one could convince Sam’s headache otherwise) Nick came home. Rattling fumble of the front door, a distant light switching on that didn’t make it all the way down the short hall. Little noises that lent the dark and the pain a homier feel. Another year passed and the edge of the bed dipped down, creaking softly under the additional weight.

“No.” Sam groaned and even that little noise made the pounding worse.

“Did you drink water?”

Sam curled away from Nick’s voice, pulling a pillow around his head.

“Did you take the pills?” He sighed when he didn’t get an answer, gently taking Sam’s shoulder and rolling him back over. “Oh, hey there, sunshine.”

Sam pried one eye open and glared up at Nick. “I threw up the pills. Couldn’t find more. Please let me die in peace.”

Nick’s hands were cool, his skin smelling faintly of soap as he touched Sam’s cheek then forehead. He *hmmed* softly, a deep baritone kind of noise before leaning down and kissed the younger man between the eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“How do you think I’m feeling?”

“You kicked off all the blankets.”

“Don’t talk so loud.”
“You’re sweating.”

“I’m hungover.”

“You’ve got a fever.

“I’m hungover.”

“Open your mouth.” Nick instructed softly and Sam started to tell him to go away, but that involved opening his mouth, and that was invitation enough for the man to push a couple pills past his lips. “Swallow. Shower. I got you a change of clothes… and your toothbrush. Then go back to sleep. When you wake up there will be some tomato-rice soup.”

“My toothbrush?”

“Rescued from your very own house.”

“You… went to my house?” The idea made his head hurt worse.

“Dean made a care package and told me to keep you for a few days.” Nick carefully brushed hair from his eyes. “He said to keep an eye on you, said you look like you might be coming down with something… sorry for letting you get college-girl-drunk this morning. I’m a bad helper.”

There was only one reason that Dean would tell a man he didn’t particularly like to take care of his baby brother. John wasn’t leaving and this was the only safe place to store Sam for the time being. He would have argued, but that actually sounded exactly like one of Dean’s less than good plans. But Sam wouldn’t argue. He’d rather be here and hung over than home and breathing the same air as his father.

“Tomato-rice soup?”

How did Dean know that Sam was getting sick? Sam didn’t even know he was getting sick.

“I’m a fucking awful cook, but luckily your brother made some soup this afternoon and I’m real good at microwaving.” He got off the bed, backlit from the hall and featureless in the dark of the room. “Shower and change. If you’re going to be living in my bed for the next few days I’d like you not to smell like sweat and whisky.”

Nick was a charmer.

Sam kind of didn’t like him.

Sam also kind of wanted to pull him into bed and curl around him until the pills kicked in.

He settled for somewhere between the two feeling. Showering, changing into clean sweats and a tshirt, before crawling back into bed with a bowl of soup and then sleeping like he was getting paid for it. When he woke a few hours later he was somewhat horrified to realize that it hadn’t all been hangover. Dean was right. He was getting sick. The next day blurred into something of a mess as a beautiful fever took hold. Little moments were punctuated with Nick bringing him pills or soup or tea. Blankets on, blankets off. NyQuil. More sleep.

As far as he could tell, Nick lived on the couch for the first while. Keeping some small and intermittent distance from the chest cold that had snuck up on Sam, a makeshift quarantine that didn’t hold- and by day three, right when Sam was considering feeling human again, he found Nick curled up in a miserable ball beside him, stealing the majority of the blankets and coughing to the point that it sounded painful.
And even if it wasn’t right, Sam debated leaving the man to his suffering and getting back home. He missed Dean even if he and his brother had spent the past few days texting each other, a careful combination of worry and dad-updates. He’d be getting shipped back to Kansas soon enough, and Dean thought it would be nice if Sam came home and said goodbye to the old man, but at the same time he’d made it clear that he wouldn’t give Sam too much grief if he stayed away until it was safe.

So Sam weighted his options and in the end he made soup for Nick (not even half as good as Dean’s, but it came from a can, so what can you do?) and kept the man tucked in even when he whined about being too hot, and gave him cough syrup even when he complained about the taste.

“I’m dying.” Nick muttered, his eyes bright, gaslight shine to the blue.

“You’re not dying.” Sam told him gently, shaking the little plastic cup filled with cherry red medicine.

“You don’t know that.” He pulled the blanket up past his nose, eyeing the cup.

“I do know. Now take it before you hack up a lung.”

“Why can’t you just let me die?”

“Because you didn’t let me and payback is a bitch.”

Nick took his medicine, though he whined and moaned about it the whole time. However, he’d bought the damned evil tasting stuff and Sam felt that he’d earned his punishment.

“I am an adult you know.” Nick mumbled, smacking his lips and sticking his tongue out. It was colored cherry red just like the medicine. “I can take care of myself. It’s just a cold.”

“I know. I got to spend two days right there where you are.” He cleared his throat, by no means over his own coughing and hacking and wheezing. He poured himself a little shot glass worth of medicine and tossed it back. “And you took care of me through the fever part of it so I’m returning the favor.” He pulled the blanket back up over Nick’s head. “You’re welcome.”

“I promised to be your fake boyfriend. Not the incubator for your plague.” He interjected from somewhere beneath his shelter, all muffled but still bitter.

“And I didn’t whine nearly half this much as you, you big baby.” Sam pointed out.

“Are you coming to bed or not?”

He sighed through a smile even as he curled up, pulling the blankets over his head as well and positioning the tablet so they could both see its lovely glow. He turned back on the movie they’d been watching and didn’t even complain when Nick fell asleep against his chest shortly afterwards.

Maybe Sam could have gone back home. He was probably over the brunt of his cold at this point. It hadn’t been anything too incapacitating and he was sure that he was over the worst of it. But this here with Nick was nice and his body wasn’t complaining about all the extra sleep. School started back up next week and he was most likely just looking for any excuse to avoid thinking about the inevitable stress that it would spell for him.

Nick was clammy, sweating even though he was shivering. Unlike Sam, he wasn’t over the worst of it. Not even close. He had only just started, and it was kind of all Sam’s fault.
So he stayed.

He let the movie to run its course, a soft lullaby to keep Nick deep in the sleep that he obviously needed, and Sam emerged from the mess of blankets to find his phone.

“Hey, Dean.” He said in soft surprise when his brother picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Sammy.” All warmth and affection. “You sound like hell.”

“Believe it or not, I’m doing better.” Which naturally was followed up by a rough chorus of moist coughing.

“Sure you are.” Dean chuckled and Sam hadn’t heard his brother’s laugh in almost four days. It was a beautiful noise even if it had no right to be. “Is that jackass taking good care of you?”

“He was- up until he came down with a fever too and now he’s pretty high on NyQuil and just trying to sleep it off.”

“You two are useless.” He sighed. “You, uh, want me to come get you. Let you suffer in the familiarity of your own room?”

Sam looked over at the lump in Nick’s bed. “Dad still there?” He asked softly, not sure if the blonde was awake and could hear him, but really wanting to keep the awkwardness of family life to himself.

“His flight leaves tomorrow at three.” Dean said just as soft, like they were kids again and sharing secrets, though Sam had a feeling that his brother was trying to be just as careful about who could hear them.

“Then I’ll be home late tomorrow night, if Nick’s feeling well enough to be left on his own.”

“Dude, the guy can take care of himself.”

“I know…” Sam smoothed a hand over the blankets and the warm lump beneath. “But he gave me soup. I can’t just leave him.”

“I made that soup and he’d better not be taking credit for it. That’s treason.”

“I know you made it.” Sam soothed and ended up coughing again, clearing his throat and having to go all the way to the kitchen to get himself some water.

“You ok?”

“’m fine. ’m fine. Thank you… for the soup I mean. It was perfect.”

“Of course it was. I made it.” Dean was all mock offence, bristling over the phone. “That soup’s got god damned magic al restorative properties.”

“It’s probably all the drugs you put in it.”

“Damn it, Sam. It’s a secret recipe.”

They shared a warm laugh and if felt like home. But the laughter turned into another bought of coughing and by the time he recovered Dean had grown quiet.

“I’ve never not been there when you’ve been sick.” He said hesitantly and after a bit of
consideration he added on, “I don’t like it.”

“I’m alright.” Sam promised before clearing his throat. “Or, I will be.”

“Go get some sleep, Sammy. I’ll see you tomorrow night. I can come pick you up after I drop dad off at the air port.”

“Ok.” He agreed to all of the above, his throat feeling a little raw.

They said their goodbyes and Sam got himself another glass of water before laying himself back down in bed, careful of Nick’s sprawling limbs. The man groaned softly, peering out from his blankets with eyes that were slightly more focused.

Sam put a hand to the man’s forehead, shadowing his pale eyes from the light. “Meds must be kicking in. You feeling a bit better?”

“I don’t feel better.” He contradicted so easily, leaning into Sam’s hand and sighing.

“You will.”

“If you really loved me you would just put me out of my misery.” He begged.

“Sleep it off.” Sam instructed with whatever authority that he could muster.

For once someone listened to him. Nick managed to roll himself over, coughing quietly and making other pitiful noises before drifting back to what could almost pass for sleep.

It had been a little strange at first using another man’s shower. But it sort of went hand in hand with the fact that he was also sleeping in someone else’s bed. Smelling like Nick’s shampoo and soap sort of completed the whole odd experience.

He turned off the water and clumsily grabbed one of the soft blue towels, scrubbing his face and briefly considering stealing a towel to take home with him. They were certainly nicer than the ones he and Dean had. And Nick wouldn’t miss just one towel… but that was probably the cough medicine talking. Codeine in his blood whispering to him gently of theft and vandalism.

Looking back over the last few days all Sam had was a confusing, fevered jumble of sleeping, marathoning Netflix, and sitting in the bottom of Nick’s shower while trying to let the steam clear his head. It was a reassuring cycle. All comfortable and quiet and good.

He tossed the towel over the top of the shower curtain and got dressed. Clean boxers and jeans, but his shirt wasn’t in the pile of clothes that he’d brought with him to the bathroom. He must have dropped it when he was fumbling in the dark, trying not to wake Nick who was still wallowing in the midway point of his cold and needed all the sleep he could get.

Sam padded back down the hall, quiet at first, then giving up with a sigh when he saw that the light had been turned on, warm glow coming out from the crack beneath the door.

“Oh my god. You take the longest showers.” Nick called out, voice a little uneven from all the coughing he’d been doing the past few days. It wasn’t much more than a raspy whisper, his voice almost gone all together by this point.

“That’s what Dean says- but you’re both short, with short hair. There’s a lot less of you to wash.” He pushed the door open, smiling softly at the man. “How you feeling?”
He didn’t get a smile in return.

The tablet was laying awkwardly on Nick’s knees, abandoned, distant voices yelling and cheering, completely ignored. The man’s eyes had gone round and intense the moment he saw Sam. An almost wild look to him with too much white showing. He didn’t say anything. He just stared at Sam in a way that one feral animal would look at another who had suddenly wandered across his path.

And just like that- Sam felt defensive, wary, taking a small step back out into the hall. “Nick?”

It took a few seconds but he finally blinked, dragging his pale, pale eyes down Sam’s body and grounding his gaze on the floorboards. “I wanna …” He glanced back up and the intensity had only gone down by the smallest of degrees, undermined by the fevered red in his cheeks and neck. “W-what was that?”

“Are you feeling alright, Nick?”

He swallowed roughly, watching every little shift Sam made. “Yeah. I, uh, can I ask something possibly very offensive?”

“Go ahead. I don’t see how it will be any different from anything else you’ve said recently.”

Sam braced himself, because Nick hadn’t spoken much since getting sick other than to whine or say borderline deliriously confusing things when he was teetering on the brink between cough syrup and sleep.

Nick wet his lips and glanced away again with a shrug this time, studying the floor. “Hot damn.”

“Ok. Not actually a question.”

“Well I … I’ve never wanted to lick another man before. Cut me some slack.”

Sam took a moment to process, for the sudden shock to wear off, to realize that the man was teasing him. And he rolled his eyes and pursed his lips, shaking his head before laughing. There was no point in getting angry at Nick for simply being… for being Nick.

“I’m serious. Look at you.” He flapped a hand in Sam’s general direction. “How is it that you don’t have yourself a girlfriend?”

Self-conscious for the first time in what felt like forever, Sam looked away, face a little warm, but still chuckling to himself. He went and found his shirt where it had fallen on the floor beside the dresser and pulled it on over his head.

“And you just finish getting dressed and turn back into a giant, awkward nerd with a choir boy smile. It’s a great disguise.”

“Yep. I’m just like Superman and Clark Kent- only without the glasses.”

Nick cleared his throat, looked like he was going to say something, then just sort of doubled over in a fit of painful sounding coughs. Hiding his face against his shoulder, back bowing as he curled in on himself.

Without being asked, Sam went and got the man a glass of water. He sat quietly on the edge of the bed, waiting for the spell to pass before he could catch one of Nick’s hands and wrap it around the drink. Blue eyes flashed up gratefully and the man took small sips between coughs until he could breathe with only a little wheeze and grumble.
“Superman is an ass with no internalized set of morals. No compass.” Nick took another drink. “He only behaves and doesn’t use his powers for evil because people expect him to do good. That’s not you.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. *Internalized set of morals?*

“No one here is going to tell you to behave and look at you being all nice and sweet and honorable.” He finished his water and clumsily set the glass on his nightstand.

“Did you take more NyQuil while I was in the shower?”

Nick shrugged.

“How much did you take?”

He laid back in his mess of blankets and pillows, looking very helpless and more than a little tired. Even if his cheeks were still a little red and his eyes a bit too bright. “I don’t know. I just drank from the bottle. A few swallows I guess?”

Sam eyed the bottle on the nightstand, trying hard to remember how much had been there before he left to take his shower. “It’s not whisky, Nick. You can’t just take a few shots.”

“It’s got alcohol in it… I think. Isn’t that why they have the little ‘don’t leave out where your kids will find it’ label?”

“It’s got a lot of things in it. Things that you aren’t supposed to take in large quantities, you idiot.”

“Hey. No name calling. I’m sick.”

“You’re dangerous when left unsupervised is what you are.” Sam grabbed the medicine and took it over to the far side of the room, setting it down beside the little pile of clothes that his brother had sent along for him. Beside Nick’s glasses, accidently knocking the bottle into the framed picture of Nick and his very happy looking, fair haired companion.

“Nick?” Sam straightened the photo, clearing his throat, feeling a little muddle headed but brave. The man only hummed softly from down in his nest of blankets.

“Who’s the kid?”

“Kid?”

“The little girl.” He lifted the frame and held it up so Nick could see what he was talking about. “I’ve seen her picture in your shop too. Who is she?”

Nick sat up on his elbows and looked confused. “Oh… that’s … that’s my June.” He laid back, half vanishing into the mess of blankets and pillows. “She came out to visit me two years back. Took the plane all by herself. My little unaccompanied minor. God, she’s beautiful though, isn’t she?”

And Sam couldn’t disagree so he didn’t. Just kind of shrugging and nodding.

“You should have seen Lilith when she finally showed up. Fury like a hurricane. Madder than hell. She called the cops. Had me arrested for kidnapping. Fuck. I didn’t even know I had a daughter. How was I supposed to kidnap her? She’s the one who took three days to even notice June was gone- but somehow I’m the one who got in trouble for it.”
Now, Sam’s brain felt a little slow and he knew that he wasn’t back to firing on all cylinders, but…

“I thought that… that your wife… you said that she lost the baby.” It hurt something deep down inside Sam to say such a thing, then he saw the look that passed over Nick’s face and the hurt grew worse.

“Come over here. I don’t like having to talk so loud.”

Reluctantly, and almost reverently, Sam set the photo back down- taking a second too long to look again at those round, freckled cheeks and that wide, reckless grin. She was beautiful. Happy smiling kid, the kind that you’d expect to see in a commercial for Disneyland or reasonably priced unicorns.

Sam came back to the bed, reclaiming his side, right where he had spent the last few days.

“Long story, or short story?”

Sam shrugged, but Nick’s eyes were closed so he probably wouldn’t have considered it much of an answer.

“You don’t have to tell me anything.” He offered instead, because this seemed like one of those things that might be better left alone. Nick had kind of lied to Sam, but the younger man realized that he couldn’t find it in himself to be mad about that fact. It felt like self preservation from Nick more than malicious dishonesty.

“I dropped out of school when Lilith told me she was pregnant.” He started in his distant sounding whisper. “I got a fulltime job because it would let me take care of them better than shoving all my money into college classes. Michael was pissed. Wasn’t his god damned business, but he made sure I knew what a fuck up he thought I was. Deciding to take care of that crazy bitch and her kid that couldn’t possibly be mine. Said that I was throwing away my life.”

He opened his eyes, pupils a little too wide. “She left when she was seven months along. Told me she lost the baby. And I believed it. I believed it for years. And then one day June comes into my shop, dragging Gabriel with her.” He cleared his throat, and it seemingly had little to do with his cough. “She’d found his name on the divorce papers… called him asking to see if he knew where her dad was. Gabriel never told me she existed, but then she was in California and he couldn’t do it anymore.

“I got to keep her for three days. Thee fucking perfect days- and then there came Lilith. Michael… he’d been paying her for years. Paid her to leave in the first place. Paid her to stay away. And she wasn’t mad that her kid had gone missing. No. She was mad that she wasn’t going to be getting those checks from my brother anymore. But I guess it worked out for her anyway because now I send her child support and I’m not allowed to see either of them.” He laughed, but it wasn’t particularly happy sounding. “She got a restraining order. Pulled up some old domestic abuse charges from back when we were just out of high school and moved in together. Told the judge that she was afraid of me. Fucking bitch. I never raised a hand to her. I swear to god. Not even once. I’ve got the scars to prove it. But there’s no such thing as battered husband syndrome. And the neighbors would always hear us yelling and throwing things and then she would cry when the cops showed up and I had to be the bad guy.” The line of his mouth had gone sharp and painful. “I mean, look at me. Obviously I’m the bad guy.”

Sam wanted nothing more than to just curl around Nick, and it was a stupid response that he resisted.
Nick huffed softly and rubbed a hand over his eyes before looking back up. “Sorry. I guess that was the long version.”

“I’m so, so sorry, Nick.” And that felt grossly underwhelming as a response, but it was all Sam had to offer up.

“Don’t be. We send each other letters. Me and June. Pass ‘em back and forth between Gabriel because he’s not part of the restraining order. She’s the most fucking gorgeous little girl and I’m so proud of her.” He cleared his throat again. “Can I have a drink?”

“S-sure. You want some water or tea?”

“Whisky.”

“You’re not drinking whisky and cough syrup.”

“No, but I will be when you bring me back the bottle.”

“No.” He said with a bit more force before settling lower into bed, scooting over until his shoulder and hip and knee brushed against Nick’s through the blankets. Close and closer. He expected some kind of argument, but instead Nick grunted softly and adjusted, pulling one of Sam’s arms around his shoulder and resting his head on the younger man’s chest.

“Leprechaun one through four are on Netflix.” He whispered. “In the fourth one he goes into space.”

“The Leprechaun goes… into space?”

“To marry a space princess.” Nick nudged the tablet over to Sam’s stomach, not so subtly making a suggestion.

It was better than letting the man drink. If his wide, dark pupils were any indication Nick was already higher than a kite, and should more than definitely be kept away from alcohol.

They got almost the whole way through the first movie before Nick’s breathing evened out, soft, warm little puffs against Sam’s chest. And even though he really wanted to escape the awfulness of the movie he didn’t want to move. Too afraid of waking Nick who needed this. He probably needed a drink too. Sam didn’t have to approve, but he could still understand.

Nick had spent years thinking he’d lost his unborn child, only to find out that his family had conspired to keep her out of his life. And that was pretty messed up, though not as much as the fact that he still couldn’t see her. Legally wasn’t allowed near her. And Sam thought to himself that maybe that was part of the reason that Nick didn’t get along with Michael.

It was a pretty good reason.

The curtain in Nick’s room had been drawn tight, making it very hard to tell what time of day or night it was. The fact that the two of them had spent nearly most of every day sleeping didn’t help matters any- and Sam thought that his internal clock must have come unwound because he found himself waking up with the distinct feeling that it had to be about two in the morning, but that couldn’t be right.

He couldn’t even remember falling asleep in the first place. But there he was, opening his eyes to the dark room, not sure when the light had been switched off. Skewed shadows flickering over their corner of the room from the hesitant glow of Nick’s tablet.
“Nick?” Sam groaned, mouth dry and unpleasant.

“Hmn?” He didn’t even look up from where he was still resting against Sam’s chest, the curve of his jaw fit perfect along the arch of ribs. Like they were made to lay like this.

“Why are you looking at pictures of naked people?” The screen was at an odd angle, but he could see enough to know that whereas it wasn’t exactly porn- there was still an undue amount of skin showing.

“Not people. Men. Specifically their asses. You want to help?” He offered without even looking up.

If Sam didn’t know any better he would assume that the man had downed the rest of the cold medicine, but the bottle was still a vague suggestion on the far side of the room. Half full and untouched.

“Why?”

“Because I figured that you would be an expert on your own ass, where as I’ve never really looked at it and have no real basis for comparison.”

Sam pressed a knuckle to his left eye, rubbing away sleep and confusion as he took a slow breath.

“Ok. That’s fair. But again, one might ask why?”

And Nick explained. Sounding so logical with his rough, and torn voice. “Because Gabriel thinks it’s weird that we don’t sext, or at least weird that I’m not saving picture of you on my phone and he wants me to send him a picture of your hips, or ass, or… you know? I don’t think he’s actually all that picky.”

Sam pressed a little harder against his eyelid, seeing stars, and the next pointedly slow breath that he took left him coughing weakly. He cleared his throat and risked looking down at Nick. “So you want to send him a picture of someone else’s… else’s and tell him they’re mine?”

“He keeps asking.” Nick patted around in the blankets and found his phone, passing it to Sam. Indeed, there were texts with some fairly interesting requests. But Sam had only just woken up and it was too soon for something so strange. He felt a touch warm as he read the texts, because these couldn’t be normal things to ask from your brother. Lord knew that Dean had never asked Sam to send him dirty pictures of anyone he’d ever dated.

“Your brother…”

“He’s a dirty little pervert who wants to touch you. Or at least look at pictures of you while he touches himself. But don’t worry, he doesn’t mean anything by it.”

Sam handed back the phone and once more considered the merits of just getting up and walking out.

“You, Sam, are a new toy and I’m not sharing with him.” Nick said delicately, squinting at his phone before tossing it back down to be lost once more amidst the blankets.

“But you’ve been telling him about all the fake sex that we’re not having.” Sam knew this. He didn’t like it, but he knew it. Those stories were far more than enough sharing to go around.

“That’s like telling someone how awesome your new ten speed bike is and all the places that you ride it, and that it’s great to take on sick jumps or whatever the hell kids with bikes do- but never
“Why is it that in all these weird analogies I end up being something that’s either ridden, played with, or eaten?”

Nick glanced up, eyes lidded and sleepy, a little too bright and his fever had probably come back. “It’s all in your head. I’ve always respected you as a woman and would never suggest otherwise.”

“I’ve figured it out,” he jostled Nick slightly, but was too tired to put any real force behind it. “This isn’t actually happening. This is a dream.”

He glanced up, curious. “Is it my dream or yours?”

“If it’s mine then there’s probably a velociraptor in the kitchen.”

And they both grew quiet for a moment, Nick raising his head just a little to peer down the hall with a look between worry and interest. But there came not tell tale clicking or chuffing of long extinct monsters.

“Must be my dream then.” Nick said nuzzling back down against him, curling closer, tucking one leg between Sam’s. “How about this one?”

Sam glanced down and quickly looked back away. “No. Definitely not.” Yeah… this was definitely one of those weird dreams that he’d been having since he came to stay here. Fever dreams were the worst - even when they didn’t include dinosaurs.

“I like this one.” Nick held up the tablet.

“Oh my god. Nick. Stop.”

“So that’s a no.” He shrugged one shoulder and returned to his quest, undaunted. He gave a few more suggestions, holding each one up in turn for Sam to groan at, negate and ignore as best as he could.

Very quickly the whole thing lost any sense of pornography or indecent-ness… and it just turned into more of a museum tour. A horrible kind of museum where every exhibit was nothing but bare asses as far as the eye could see. But it was just as sterile and non illicit as any fieldtrip that Sam had taken back in school.

“Just… god, Nick. Just send him that one,” he pointed vaguely, “and be done with it.”

Nick looked up, aghast at the suggestion. “No. That ass has no soul to it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Whomever took that was a bastard, an unfeeling nothing. Just snapping a shot of some underage teen with low self esteem and a perky ass.” He shook his head. “I would never, ever treat your ass so callously.”

Sam snorted softly, not sure how to take that one.

“Like I said. I respect you.”

“So what kind of picture are we looking for then?” He settled down a little, peering at the screen in earnest for the first time.

“Ideally? Well, I’m not hoping for perfection, I mean- this is a Google search after all and we’re
“Ideally? Well, I’m not hoping for perfection, I mean—this is a Google search after all and we’re well into the no man’s land of page twenty.” He tilted his head up, eyes closing halfway in deep though. He went on to describe an oddly specific picture, complete with the exact over the shoulder angle he wanted, the best lighting, how he’d crop it turned on a sharp diagonal to create a stronger composition.

“You’ve put some real thought into this, and I feel like I should be worried.” Sam interrupted.

“I’m an artist. I think about these things.”

“You tattoo people.” Which, in Sam’s opinion, wasn’t exactly the same thing.

“I paint too.”

“You paint?”

“Hell yeah, I paint. You’ve been in my shop. You’ve seen my work.” He coughed softly, little barking noises.

Sam had only the smallest recollection of those paintings, of thinking that they were… they were really good. “You did those?”

“I did those. Most of them anyways. And I won’t settle for some half assed picture of your ass. If I’m going as far as to send my brother fake pictures of you then they’ve got to be good.”

And Sam considered the odd dream that he was in. That in all fairness it wasn’t any stranger than the one he’d had last night that involved Muppets and Dean owning a plane named Sharon that he kept in the kitchen.

This one felt almost real.

Almost plausible in its weirdness.

He nudged Nick. “Up.”

Nick *hmmd* and opened his eyes a little more.

“Up.” He repeated.

So, like the confused, still slightly ill man that he was, Nick sat up. Unfocused gaze in the half-light of the room.

Sam sat up, patting around in the blankets until he found Nick’s phone and handed it over. “How do you want me?”

“I- how do I … what?” And he was blinking at roughly the same rate that a humming bird flaps his wings. “What?”

“If I have to pick between watching your awful movies or watching you searching for the perfect naked man’s ass- I’d like to go back to the movies.”

Nick made a soft clicking noise in the back of his throat.

“So take your picture and let’s move on.”

Now, Nick was a grade A troublemaker at best. But the worst thing that he’d ever done to Sam was pretending to kiss him with no forewarning for the sake of upsetting Dean. Despite the occasional lapse in his understanding of personal space and his best protests to the contrary- Nick
was, for all accounts and purposes, a gentleman. A cuddly teddy bear of a man hiding behind his tattoos and bad manners. And Sam trusted him.

“Do you need me to turn on the light?” He had already swung a leg off the bed.

“No. I’ve, um, the light on my phone’ll be fine.” He looked down at the thing in his hand for some kind of clarification, then back up at Sam. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah, just don’t be weird about it, and promise me that once you send it you’ll delete it off your phone.”

“I can’t promise that Gabriel will.”

“I trust that you’ll take care of it next time you see him.”

Nick looked to be deeply considering this proposition, pressing his phone from hand to hand almost nervously. “Ok. Yeah. Ok. Come ‘ere.”

And Sam did, laughing awkwardly as Nick sat back against the headboard and pulled him in close.

“Hey, I said take a picture, not take me.”

“It’s got to look good.” He pointed out with his very rough voice, and leaning against Nick’s chest Sam could feel the words rumble down though him, settling somewhere low in his stomach. “Like a candid shot. Over your shoulder so we can get the long line of your back, your shirt pushed up to show your Venus dimples and just the littlest curve of…”

“My Venus dimples?”

“Your lumbar indentations… the little dips over your sacroiliac joints.” Nick looked at him, half startled by the interruption to his train of though.

A few hours ago he’d been waxing philosophical about Superman’s moral compass, now he was talking about sacroiliac joints?

“Who are you?”

“A man who’s taken too many biology classes to still appreciate the human body aside from the analytical. And you’ve got back dimples.” His hand slid up Sam’s lower back, tugging up his tshirt, the beads of his stupid bracelets scratching gently along Sam’s bared skin. “Here and here.” He turned his phone with his other hand to shine a pleasantly blue tinted light over the little dips.

Sam looked awkwardly over his shoulder and could see the smallest little shadows that Nick was pointing to.

“Well I’ll be damned. Venus dimples?”

“Venus dimples.” Nick assured, his bracelets clacking as he hooked two fingers through Sam’s belt loops and pulled his hip sideways, crashing the younger man against the inside of his left knee. He held his phone up above his head where Sam could see it too.

Through the camera Sam could watch the pale stretch of his own skin, the strange arch that his lower back was making as he knelt between Nick’s crooked knees. It looked very much like many of the photos that they had been browsing for the past half hour or so.
Nick was still holding his belt loops, still tugging. And like it was happening to someone else, like watching a movie, Sam could see in the camera just a hint of boxers, colorless in the odd lighting. The firm curve of muscles hugging the base of his spine. His skin looked bleached white against the dark flannel of Nick’s pajama bottoms.

And even through the oddly detached feeling, Sam felt his nerve start to slip. He was just about to tell Nick to stop. To start laughing and shying away because every day couldn’t be the day that they set a new benchmark for the weirdest, most uncomfortable thing that two guys can do together.

“Hold it.” Nick warned. His voice gone so sharp that Sam dared not budge for fear of somehow ruining everything.

And just like that- the picture was taken. Then Nick was tugging Sam’s jeans back up the whole suggestive little inch and a half that they had been displaced- giving him a firm little pat on the rump to signal the end of it all.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Nick wore a pleased little smile, lowering the phone so they could both see it without gazing up towards the ceiling.

Sam turned, sitting down instead of kneeling, leaning back into the warmth of Nick’s chest and trying not to smile too as he felt an arm settle around his waist. “It’s… it’s not much.”

Mostly just Sam’s back, the arc of his spine, those surprising little dimples, the press of his skin against Nick’s thigh, the little shadow cast by his knee, the obnoxiously colored beads of the man’s bracelet, the sharp curve of his wrist where he’d twisted his hand to tug down Sam’s jeans- just the smallest, teasing peek of firm muscle.

“It’s subtle.” Nick said proudly. “Suggestive. What were you expecting?”

“Something more like what we were looking at. A lot more ass in a picture of my ass… but that’s why we ended up twenty pages deep in Google- because you wanted something more like this.” He chuckled, slowly understanding the deliberateness of it all. “You really are weird. You know that?”

“Yep.” Nick agreed easily and sent the text to his brother. “But if I’m going to be sending a real picture of your real body to my gross little brother, it’s going to be tasteful. Not you spread out and X rated.”

“Thank you… I think.”

Nick hummed again, turning his head away as he coughed quietly. And Sam watched the man delete the only slightly incriminating photo from his phone.

Like it had never happened.

Sitting there, feeling Nick’s fever warm skin against his, Sam wasn’t sure that he hadn’t imagined the whole thing. Like he was waking just now, opening his eyes for the first time to find himself settled against his friend in nearly the same comfortable position that they’d spent the last few days in.

Nick was a very good big spoon.

Sam was ok admitting this, if only to himself, because maybe it had been just what he needed
while he struggled to get back to wellness. And he felt better than he had in days. Good enough to go home with Dean when his brother came to fetch him tomorrow night.

But for now he liked it right here. Where his thoughts could be simple and everything was warm and nice, and good. With Nick gently kissing the top of his head. Nick kissing his temple. Kissing right behind his ear…

the side of his neck…

“Nick?”

And the man leaned back, rigid, silent for a few breaths. “Yeah?”

Sam reached up and touched his neck, feeling the little spot where he could have sworn Nick’s lips had just been. “How are you feeling?”

“Warm.” He cleared his throat. “Chest is a little tight and my eyes hurt.”

“Want some more NyQuil?”

“No. That stuff knocks me loopy and it’s not actually as fun as I thought it would be.”

Sam half turned, trailing his hand from his own throat up to Nick’s cheeks, his forehead. “Your fever’s back. Let me go get you something.” And he crawled out of bed, his back immediately growing cold without the contact, and he went to go find something a bit more innocent and less habit forming.

But before Sam found any medication, he found himself sitting alone at the table with his face in his hands.

Just breathing.

Breathing a little too hard. Enough to make himself light headed- and that was part of the reason that he was holding his face, somewhere down near his knees. Because someone had once told him that if he was going to have a panic attack that sitting like this would help somehow.

It wasn’t helping.

His heart as still racing.

His stomach was still up in his throat.

Fluttering with butterflies. Squirming with something far less pleasant.

He touched his throat again, trying to find any lingering traces of warmth left from Nick’s mouth.

What was he even doing?

He should be back at home, regardless of whether or not his dad was still lurking around. He should be home in his own bed. Safe and sound.

And this wasn’t safe.

This was oh so far from safe.

What was he even doing here?
He should be sleeping.

He should be doing literally anything other than what he’d just been doing with Nick. Rolling around in bed, playing grab ass, laughing and joking- and they were friends for god’s sake.

You don’t do that with friends.

You don’t suggest that your friend take an indecent picture of you to send to their unsettling brother for who knew what purpose. But Sam had. And what was worst, he’d enjoyed the feel of kneeling between Nick’s knees, leaning into his chest, of the man’s hand sliding along his bare skin.

And Sam hadn’t had any of that dangerous cough medicine in hours. He didn’t have a fever anymore. He couldn’t blame anything other than his own body running treacherously after impulses that he hadn’t given it permission to have. Looking for something that Nick wasn’t offering.

The man was tired. He was fevered and had been borderline delirious for the past few days.

So what? So he’d kissed Sam’s neck. It didn’t mean anything- at least it didn’t mean what Sam’s dizzy head was telling him that it could mean. What he wanted it to mean.

Oh no. No, no, no.

NO

What was wrong with him?

Nick was his friend. A strange friend, yes. But a good friend. A good man. Even if he tried not to show it.

It had just been a while. Too long of a while. And Sam was young with a body that didn’t always listen to his head, to logic and reason. It just felt another warm body in proximity and reacted in encouraging ways.

Stupid body.

Stupid hormones.

Stupid Sam.

Slow, shaking breaths were forced out between his teeth as Sam tried to calm himself down. Tried to talk himself down. To talk himself out of the idea of going back to the bedroom and crawling back into Nick’s arms. Kissing his fevered lips. Tasting the salt on his skin.

Sam felt very broken.

What was he even doing here?

This was nowhere near safe and sound.

He choked down the last few hiccoughs of his panic attack and went to find those damn pills. Nick took them without complaint or comment as to why it had been nearly ten minutes since Sam left on such a simple task.

Sam got back in bed, though he didn’t let himself lay as close as he had been lately. Nick didn’t have anything to say to that either. He just pulled up Netflix on his computer and settled it where
They would both be able to watch, pushing play. His arm came to rest in the space between them, fingers gently brushing against the back of Sam’s hand.

They weren’t really worried about germs at this point. They both had the same sick. It was fine if they touched- couldn’t really make it any worse, right?

Nick’s phone chimed somewhere in the midst of the bad 80’s horror movie. He looked up from where his head had come to rest on the pillow beside Sam’s. “It’s Gabe.” His arms slapped around on the bed, looking for the phone that had gone silent again.

Sam found it first, holding it up victoriously.

“What’s he say?”

And for a second Sam almost pointed out that he had absolutely no way of knowing, but then he saw that Nick’s phone wasn’t locked. Who even does that?

“He, um... sent a picture of him and his lovely wife. They’re in bed and I’m not sure I should be seeing this. He says ‘you have our attention’ smiley face.”

“Let me see.” Nick made grabby hands at the phone until Sam turned it so he could see the picture of Gabriel sitting in bed beside his wife. Gabriel was wearing an ear to ear grin, his small frame enveloped in a college sweatshirt nearly three sizes too big, looking like an eager little kid. Rehka was glancing sideways at the camera phone and her husband, open book in her lap, obviously not really part of this.

Nick might have laughed, but it sounded like just more coughing. “Tell him no.”

So Sam did. Simple little text before he set the phone down between them.

The phone chimed again within seconds and Nick kicked his feet beneath the blankets in a small tantrum. “He always interrupts the best parts.” He said despite the fact that all that was happening was a Leprechaun was tormenting a bunch of teens on the computer screen, the same as he had been doing for quite some time now. Nick took the phone and held it up above his face as he squinted at the screen and sent a few more quick, aggressive messages to his brother.

“You did start it.” Sam pointed out gently.

“That’s what he’s saying- but it was just one picture. Not an invitation- or me volunteering us for a competition.”

“Competition?”

“Yeah. I send a bit of you, he sends a bit of his wife. We try to one up each other.”

“Is this a normal game for you guys?”

“Not for a long time. No.”

“Here.” Sam took the phone without permission, but also without any resistance. He turned the camera on and held it up, finding himself in the screen, scooting closer until his cheek touched Nick’s. “Smile.” He instructed then laughed. “No. Not like that.”

“Like what?” Nick turned to peek at him.

Sam could see it on the camera. Nick’s pale eyes looking over at him curiously, his nose brushing
Sam’s cheek. And without little thought to all the thundering reason why he shouldn’t, Sam turned too, looking away from the camera and whatever quickly abandoned intention he’d had there. He looked instead at Nick, from only inches away. He let their noses bump clumsily. He could practically taste the faint combination of minty toothpaste and cherry cough syrup on Nick’s breath, all that the man had come in contact with over the past few hours.

“Like what?” Nick repeated his question, much more softly.

“Like you’re happy. Not like you’re about to bite someone, you lunatic.”

“But that is my happy smile.”

Sam thought that Nick was probably one of the few people on the planet who could manage to look more attractive when sick. His expression was sleepy like normal but his skin was flushed and eyes dancing fever bright. Beautiful and tousled like he’d just woken up from a particularly good dream.

Forcibly, Sam looked back up at the camera, back somewhere far safer than at Nick. Though he could still feel the man breathing soft fire against his cheek. Could still see him on the phone that he held above them.

“Nick,”

“Take your picture. Tell him that we’re busy. Tell him that we’re going to sleep. It’s got to be almost four in the fucking morning after all.”

Sam tried not to wince, or shiver, or whatever weird reaction that his body was determined to have in response to Nick whispering into his ear.

“Why are they still awake so late?”

“Why are we?”

Sam shrugged and tried to take a picture of the two of them, all sleepy beside each other, but Nick kissed his cheek (or more accurately licked it) and the picture ended up being of Sam dropping the phone as he rolled away laughing.

“You’re like a little kid.” Sam half lectured, half laughed while curling away from Nick, who was slowly but surely wrapping his arms around the younger man.

“Yes.” He agreed easily as he rested his head against Sam’s.

“You’re supposed to be sick. We’re supposed to be resting.”

“I am. We are.” He promised, voice just as soft, still whispering against Sam’s ear, and oh, but that did funny things to Sam’s insides. “But I feel like we should get a more accurate picture to send.”

“This is accurate?” Sam was on his stomach, Nick clinging to his back like some kind of sea creature, body too warm, arms too long.

“Yep.” He fumbled the phone that he’d retrieved somewhere during the rolling around and took an easy picture of Sam laughing, hiding his face in a pillow. “ ‘hmm. I’m telling him that he’s too late. We only do one show a night. Sorry he missed it.”

Sam rolled Nick off of him, still laughing a little, and very pleased that whatever awkwardness he’d brought back to the room with him had been so easily dispatched. This was them. Yes, it was
a little more physical and a lot more inappropriate than any other friendship that Sam had ever experienced. But it was still good, even if it rattled his cage from time to time.

It was a cage that needed rattling.

Just not by Nick. Sam reminded himself firmly.

“He has sent back a sad face.” Nick turned the phone for Sam to see an overly emoting Gabriel with a full blown pout and big puppy eyes.

“Just tell him goodnight.”

Nick took a picture of himself blowing a kiss and sent it to Gabriel with the gentle parting of ‘go the fuck to sleep’.

“You’re so classy.”

“Classy as fuck-all.” Nick agreed before gently kissing Sam’s cheek and going back to his movie, rewinding it a little so that he wouldn’t miss anything.

And Sam watched Nick instead of the movie. Memorizing the gentle planes of his face and neck, the slope of his shoulders, watching the rise and fall of his chest until they both fell asleep.

But there was no harm in it, right?

No sin in that quiet study.

In all those unreconciled daydreams.

Right?

…right?
And you can tell me how vile I already know that I am

Chapter Notes

so... it's been about a month... how've you been?

I got a bit lost when I first wrote this chapter. Everything was suddenly going in an unexpected and frankly bad direction and I just didn't like it. Didn't want to look at it or work on it or think about it.

My solution was to save the first few paragraphs and just start over. Now I've got almost 7k words of unusable text and fallen weeks behind my internal schedule for this story (so sorry, guys), but I finally like what I've got to give you.

There ended up being just a smidgen more fluff snuck into the middle of this beast, because I need that soft buffer between myself and the bad things coming in the next chapter.

essh, I hope that doesn't sound as ominous as I think it does.

but let's be honest.
I love writing horrible things
I love it SO MUCH

ah haha

ha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam could hear music. It was an almost poetic way to wake up. Gentle and slow and he’d never had much of an ear for classical music- he had nothing against it mind you, it was just that Dean had raised him on a comfortably steady diet of rock and roll since he was old enough to clumsily say things like ‘White Snake’ and ‘Metallica’ and ‘CCR’ (Credence Clearwater Revival had proved too challenging for many, many years).

He sleepily sat up in bed, rubbing the heel of a hand against his eye, blinking into the dark. The curtains were still drawn and he had no way to tell what time it actually was. And even knowing that it would be vacant he reached out to the spot beside him, feeling the cold sheets where Nick should have been. He must have gotten up. Gone and put some music on out in the living room…? It wouldn’t be the strangest thing that he’d done in the midst of his fever.

Nick wasn’t all that good at being sick. He kept trying to fight it, and somehow that only made it worse.

Bare feet hitting the cold floor, Sam couldn’t help but hiss out a startled breath. He didn’t want to shrug off the pile of blankets, but he did, letting the chill of the house surround him in the possibly the most unwelcoming way imaginable. All for the simple sake of dragging Nick back to bed.
The things that Sam was willing to do for that man.

He eyed the bottle of NyQuil over on the dresser. Saw that it was almost empty. It hadn’t looked that way last night. He was sure of it. And Nick was supposed to be an adult, but maybe Sam should exorcise a bit more caution when it came to fun things like medication.

He stumbled out of the room, body waking slowly, feet shuffling in time to the melancholy song that drifted softly through the door. It shouldn’t have surprised Sam like it did to see that Nick hadn’t turned on some music, but was the actual source thereof.

Standing there beside the kitchen table, Nick was swaying, slowly rocking from the balls of his feet to his heels as he dragged each slow, sweet note from his violin. He made it weep like a wounded thing - the instrument crying as he danced with it, holding it as tender as a parent would hold their child.

Sam watched and felt almost ill.

That wasn’t the right word.

But there was a wrenching sort of tug in his stomach and it felt hard to breath. Of that much he was sure.

Nick’s cheeks were flushed, his eyes closed tight and even from the far side of the room Sam could see that he was sweating. A glass sat on the table beside a mostly empty liquor bottle. The drink he’d poured for himself was too red to be just whisky, too watered down to be just NyQuil. It didn’t look like he’d drank all that much of it, and that was a bit of a comfort. As mixed drinks go, he had definitely seen more appetizing.

“Hey,” Sam kind of croaked, his throat still raw from so much sleep paired with too many days of coughing.

The bow sort of jittered for a second in Nick’s hand, the note wavering like a question and he opened an eye, but didn’t stop playing.

“Hey.” Nick repeated softly.

Sam glanced at the clock above the stove, squinting to read the little numbers from so far off. Nine. It was only nine AM. They’d slept for a handful of hours at most. It was quite obvious that the man had no idea how to be properly sick.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” Nick didn’t stop playing, though he closed his eyes again, leaning into each slow, sad note.

“It’s alright.” Sam came over, touching a hand to the back of Nick’s neck, wincing just a little. “You’re burning up. Come on, you need to go back to bed.”

“Do you ever get a song in your head that you just can’t shake?”

Sam sighed, letting his hand slide to Nick’s shoulder, rubbing softly. “It’s… it’s a beautiful song. What’s it from?” He asked, assuming that it was one of those tragic laments that come at the end of an opera. Something meant to be sung in a foreign tongue right before the curtains fell over a beautiful corpse.

“From my head.” Nick answered simply before dragging out one last note and letting his whole body sag in what looked like exhaustion.
“From your…”

“It was just there when I woke up.” He let the bow and the violin hang down heavy, one in each hand. “It’s gone now.”

Sam’s head felt tight and he really just looked at Nick. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“What do you mean?”

Sam realized that he actually had no idea what he meant.

Sometimes… sometimes if just felt like Nick was two separate people. One was easy, kind of unsettlingly smart and awkward, with a rough laugh and a shy smile. The other was this bitter, broken creature, with a sharp tongue and wicked words. And the thing was… neither of them felt real and even now and then Sam was afraid that neither of them were and this man beside him, that he considered to be one of his closest friends despite their short acquaintance, might just be another lie. A façade hiding something much worse or much better and there was no way to tell.

How do you explain something like that to your friend?

He didn’t have a clue how to put it into words, or what sort of damage that kind of assessment might do if spoken out loud. So instead he shrugged one shoulder and shook his head.

Nick’s eyes narrowed a touch and it was obvious from the opalescent sheen over the blue that his fever was taking him far, far from here. His right hand flicked in an agitated gesture, his bow whipping around in a windmill motion, dancing through his fingers before settling again.

A small bit of quiet settled between them and Nick looked away first.

“It’s lucky your brother didn’t break my left hand. I mean, I am right handed. I use it for work and it’s kind of my go to hand for when I want to touch myself. Two fingers in a splint for a few weeks- it was awkward… but my left hand? It might have hurt my playing. I would have had to kill Dean.”

“It’s, uh, good thing that it was your right hand then.” Sam smoothed his own hands back over Nick’s shoulders the best way he knew how, trying to gently steer him away from the table and back to bed. “Come on, you need sleep.”

Boy, but Nick needed sleep.

“I can’t sleep.” He whispered, his voice going a bit horse. “I keep thinking about June.”

Last night was a lot better than this. Lots of laughing and smiling and rolling around. This was… this was a subject that unsettled Sam in a way that he hadn’t had time to make full sense of yet, and seeing what it did to Nick was far worse than that.

Sam’s gut clenched again and he didn’t have any comforting words right then.

Nick didn’t seem to be looking for any though, just sort of rambling after a rather derailed train of thought. “I always kind of doubted that my little June-bug would actually mine. I mean, they’ll probably have to bury Lilith in a Y shaped coffin at this point. I’m not saying she’s a whore…it’s just that she rarely ever slept in our bed… But when I saw June I knew. Poor kid looks just like me.” He sighed in a way that sounded almost like a laugh. “I hope she grows out of it.”

Sam gently dug his thumbs into the tight cords running down the back of his friend’s neck. “How much did you have to drink, Nick?”
“NyQuil and whisky taste like fuck-all if you mix ‘em and I couldn’t get the second one down. I figured I would play instead.” He whipped the bow around again but with considerably less force this time. “Sometimes it makes me feel better.”

In Sam’s humble opinion, playing his violin was an absolutely perfect alternative to drinking down the somewhat horrific concoction that Nick had made for himself.

Wait… second one?

God, but Sam couldn’t leave the man alone for longer than about five seconds. One horrifying drink hadn’t done anything good for the man’s mood obviously- but considering how sick he was, alcohol was possibly one of the last things that he needed.

“Come on.” Sam tugged gently, pulling Nick ever so slightly by his shoulder. “Back to bed. Now. You can watch a movie. I’ll make you something to eat.” And he wasn’t used to taking care of people. Dean was the pathological caregiver, not Sam. But he could still try.

He really wanted to try.

“You ever loved someone, Sam?”

“I love my brother.” He offered, fingers scratching at the short hairs on the back of Nick’s neck, not sure how to help his friend right now. “And I love you?”

Nick snorted softly in response. “You can just say no.”

Sam took a little half step, putting himself behind Nick, pulling his arms around the man’s chest. Hugging him because it was the only thing that he could think to do. “I’m not sayin’ I’d help you hide a body, Nick.” Sam laughed. “But I wouldn’t necessarily call the cops on you either.”

“That might be the sweetest thing anyone’s ever told me.” He whispered, letting his head fall back against Sam’s shoulder.

Skin so hot.

It was like standing too close to a campfire.

“You’re my friend, Nick. I wouldn’t put up with half the shit you try to get away with unless I was.” Sam thought again of a few hours ago, of cuddling against Nick, letting the man take a picture of his ass to send to his brother, and all the odd other little moments that they had shared over the past two months. “For better or worse. And right now we’re in the ‘worse’ part of things. Come on. Let me take you back to bed.”

Nick clumsily slid his violin and bow onto the table with a hollow sounding clatter before settling his hands against Sam’s arms, palms sweaty and clammy in a way that wasn’t particularly pleasant. It wasn’t much like a hug, but it was probably the closest that he could manage with Sam on the wrong side of him. And he was leaning into Sam, pressing back as much as he could with what had to be around two hundred pounds of sturdy blonde man. It was such a staggeringly trusting gesture.

“I miss my baby girl.”

“I know.”

“You don’t fucking know.” But it wasn’t angry. Just a simple statement colored with something kind of painful. His left hand came up to tangle in Sam’s hair, twisting and knotting so tight it
almost hurt. “If I promise to go to bed can I have a drink?”

“It won’t make you feel any better.” Sam whispered against Nick’s cheek.

“It will.” He argued stubbornly, leaning back. Forcing Sam to take all his weight or let them both topple to the floor.

Like the obnoxious and well educated college boy that he was, Sam refused to give in. Relying on logic like it would salvage this somehow. “Alcohol is a mood enhancer. When you’re already feeling good, it makes you feel better- but you’re not in your happy place right now. And drinking is only going to make it worse.”

“Don’t try to get all…all smart at me. I’ll be dead in a few hours. I deserve a last meal. And that last meal should be at least seventy proof and roughly enough of it to drop a rhino.”

“You’re not dying.” He promised, eyeing the alcohol and cough medicine cocktail on the table. “And you’re not drinking any more today.” He was almost certain that he could physically drag Nick back to bed if needed. “Come on.”

“Do you think she’s ok?”

Sam grunted and he pulled Nick a little bit closer, squeezing the breath out of his friend for just a moment. “Come on.” He said for what felt like the hundredth time and it wasn’t an answer to Nick’s question, because Sam didn’t have one. He had no idea how the man’s daughter was doing. He didn’t even want to think about it because it made his heart ache in ways that he couldn’t put words to. Instead he held his friend a little tighter and hoped that it made a difference.

“She tells me she’s ok. In all the letters that she sends me… she says everything’s ok. Good grades. No more monsters under the bed. A boy tried to kiss her and she punched him.” Nick was breathing funny- thought it was probably just all the congestion from his cold and not from any kind of emotion that shouldn’t be shared. “She… she’s almost ten and I can’t even remember what her voice sounds like.”

“She punched him?” Sam wasn’t willing to let that be glazed over.

A hint of a smile crept into Nick’s voice. “She told me there was a boy in her class going around, paying the girls five bucks if they’d let him kiss them. She wanted to know what she should do if he asked her. So I sent her twenty bucks and told her to tell him to fuck off. It was the best advice I had. She happened to translate my advice to punch him in the face, but I’m ok with that.”

“You-” Sam laughed, rocking Nick just a little, finding it easier than it should have been to move him. “She’s lucky to have a dad like you.”

Nick made an odd little sound that broke and turned into a cough. Sam gently let go, moving to rub the man’s back as he doubled over making weak, rough noises.

“I take it back. Maybe you are dying.” Sam decided as his friend blearily straightened, face red, eyes miserable. “Now get your ass in bed. I am going to bring you medicine without hard liquor in it and you’re going to take it without arguing for once. Then you’re going to eat some crackers, watch a decent movie that I will pick. You will fall asleep before we get to the good part, and you will snore like a wounded hog, and it will be beautiful.”

Nick looked at him, quiet and contemplative, little arguments running over his face before he finally asked, “are they graham crackers?”

“I’ll see what I can find.” Sam promised before gently tugging Nick along, dragging him back to
bed where he belonged. Where he never should have left.

For the next half hour or so Sam played nurse. It would have gone on longer, but Nick passed out with all the grace of a hibernating bear. Soft chuffing noises as he tossed fitfully from time to time. But even that settled down as the medicine took hold and the fever started to ebb.

Sam sat on the edge of the bed for longer than was really appropriate and just watched Nick. Watched as his breaths evened out, the angry lines at the corners of his mouth fade. In a moment of stunning lucidity, Sam realized that he had leaned over and was kissing Nick’s forehead. He had no recollection of moving down there, but there he was all the same. The man’s skin cool beneath his lips.

“God, you’re a wreck.” And Sam sat back up, not entirely sure if he was talking to himself or the mess of a man sprawled out over the majority of the bed. He managed to look adorable more than anything else, which was really impressive for such a big, grumpy guy. All arms and legs and pale skin. His shirt rucked up just enough to show a thin line of pale hair trailing down from his belly button to disappear into his flannel jammie pants. The belly of the great white whale. Sam had never seen a stomach so pale and…and…and he wanted to press his mouth to it. It was a horrifying idea and for a brief second Sam had a flashback to last night’s panic attack. Hurriedly he reached over, tugging Nick’s shirt down, tugging the blankets up. Smoothing his hands over the man’s stomach, up his chest, neck, cheek. So easily derailed from one second to the next, all his thoughts flying apart.

Nick needed a shave- he’d needed one since Sam had met him, cheeks and jaw rough like sandpaper. His mouth was soft though, and Sam spent a few moments running his thumb lightly over the man’s lips. But apparently his inquisitive fingers were a bit much and Nick’s eyes fluttered open, pupils blow wide in the dim light, deep under the sedation of cough medicine and illness. “Wha?”

“Nothin’.” Sam collected his hands back in his lap where they would be less harmful. Oh, but he had a problem. Such a problem did he have. “I was just checking on you.”

“Am I ok?” He sounded honestly concerned somewhere in his ruined voice.

“Yeah. You’ll be alright. Just go back to sleep.”

Nick made a noise of surrender as he rolled onto his stomach, graffitied arms coming up to hug a pillow tightly to his face. His shoulders rolling beneath his tshirt, backside waggling a bit in an effort to reestablish comfort. And just like that he was asleep again.

Sam refused to change his mind on this one. He also refused to acknowledge that he’d just been stroking his friend in any manner that could be considered inappropriate. Mostly because Nick didn’t have a single ‘appropriate’ physical boundary to speak of. Sam could do pretty much whatever he wanted and his friend wouldn’t have batted an eye.

And yet he was now wringing his hands in his lap, fretting over having almost gotten caught. A distraction.

That’s what Sam needed.

He retrieved the tablet from the many blanket folds, swinging his legs up onto the bed, settling
against the headboard. He’d picked the movie so for once it wasn’t one of Nick’s abominations on screen, and for whatever it was worth, that little movie did its very best to keep Sam’s attention. It was actually going ok until Nick snuffled and woke himself enough to scoot over, pushing his forehead into Sam’s hip and grumbling something beautifully incoherent.

So, perhaps Sam watched his movie after that with a hand in Nick’s hair, fingers not so much petting as just twitching now and then. It was completely heterosexual and had everything to do with his mild concern for his friend’s wellbeing and nothing whatsoever to do with that awful inside out and upside down feeling that danced through Sam each time he glanced down.

It was possible that Nick woke again at some point, because one of his big hands came and settled on Sam’s knee, thumb notching bellow the curve of bone.

How did they always end up like this?

How could Sam’s body not read into it?

And it was time for a new distraction because the movie wasn’t doing it for him anymore.

Going back to sleep would be fantastic.

He turned off the movie and muscled a pillow of safety between him and Nick before curling up with his back to the great big, softly snoring monster.

One of the problems with sleeping aside someone with a fever is that they are warm. In the winter this might not be such a big problem for a normal person, and Sam was many things but none of them felt even close to something resembling normal at this point.

He’d always run a bit warm. Maybe it was high blood pressure. Maybe his ancestors were just built for arctic climates and his genes had never adjusted. He had no idea. All he did know was that California, with very few exceptions, was ever cool enough to keep him from sweating. And tucked up beside a fairly cuddly, six foot plus man with a wildly fluctuating temperature had risen the ambient heat in the room to something damn near uncomfortable.

Supposedly it was good that Nick had passed back out, either from the bit of NyQuil and whisky he’d managed to get down before Sam interrupted him (or simply because he was just really dealing poorly with being ill)- but the only good thing that Sam could take out of it was that the man beside him was pleasantly unaware of just how sweaty and restless he was getting.

There came a point that he kicked off all the blankets and no amount of trying to put a few inches of space between him and Nick could help. So Sam got back up. Restless. He went and took a shower. Maybe it was an excuse. He wasn’t that sweaty after all… he just needed to not be next to Nick right now and any excuse was good enough.

All the way in the bathroom with tepid water running over his head and his eyes closed tight, he couldn’t see Nick’s chapped lips or his slightly grumpy eyebrows that never fully relaxed even in sleep. Sam couldn’t hear Nick’s soft huffing breaths, or the way that he never really talked in his sleep so much as just mumbled odd little things that were not meant to be deciphered.

Sam thunked his head against the tiles and thought of the classes that would be starting in a week’s time. He thought about where he and Dean might go for dinner tonight. He thought about produce and weather patterns and soccer.

These were safer, less conflicting thoughts.

Sam liked them.
He felt better after a while.

And it was going super well up until the point that he came out of the bathroom and heard Nick talking.

Not the man’s usual sleep laden grumbles but an actual conversation- at least half of one. Sharp, annoyed words that were bit off clean. Things like “god damn it, Gabriel,” and “stop it, you little fuck”. Just, you know… normal things.

Sam hid out in the bathroom for a little longer, trying not to smile as he used a towel to squeeze water from his hair. It was nice to be reminded now and then that Nick was someone’s brother, and as such he had to suffer like all brothers were made to. It was a good thing to have in common. Mutual torment.

Eventually there was no more sense in trying to dry his hair. This was about as good as it was going to get. So Sam left the safety of the bathroom, assuming that Nick would be about done with his phone call by now- only he was a poor judge of things.

Nick had never been on the phone.

Gabriel had just been too quiet to hear.

The two brothers were not actually in the bedroom at all, but were in fact in the dinning room, beneath the table, in a gloriously constructed blanket fort.

Sam stood in the hall, looking at the two pairs of feet sticking out from the fort.

He’d seen stranger things.

But yeah. He hadn’t really mentally prepared himself for this kind of weird.

How do you prepare yourself to find your boyfriend and his brother hiding in a blanket fort? Two adult, grown ass men… in a blanket fort.

Reluctantly Sam came closer. Close enough that he could hear Gabriel quietly singing, his toes waggling just a little in time to his slightly tone deaf words.

Sam knocked on the tabletop. “Can I get you kids anything?”

The singing stopped and Gabriel’s feet vanished, pulled inside with a scrambling noise. Possibly Nick was just too tall, too much leg to pull them in as well. Maybe he just didn’t feel a need to hide.

A hush settled over the fort and Sam thought for a second that maybe they really did think that they were hiding in there.

“Anything at all?” He tried to coax.

“Cake?” Gabriel asked slowly, reluctantly.

“We don’t have cake.” He told the table. “Also, Nick is sick and sick people don’t get cake.”

“That’s fucking prejudice.” Nick grumbled.

“Agreed.” Gabriel seconded.
Sam took a slow breath. “We don’t have any cake.”

“Juice?”

“Burbon.”

Came the two requests, though Nick’s sounded less like a question and more like hope.

“Sure.” Sam went to the fridge.

“Yay.” Nick’s feet wiggled because he didn’t seem to understand that Sam had only agreed to the juice and not the liquor. And all the joy seemed to go right out of his toes when Sam passed the two glasses of orange juice down beneath the blankets.

Task finished, he went to sit on the couch but saw that it was missing all its cushions. They must have been scavenged for the fort interior because he certainly couldn’t see them anywhere. Arm of the couch it was then. Not the most comfortable place to sit, however it was the only place to sit so he took it.

Sam found himself looking sideways at the table not really trusting it for some reason. Or maybe it was just the table’s occupants that he didn’t trust.

Almost two full moments passed and Sam heard the singing start back up, muffled faintly by what had to be about six blankets.

“No.” Nick said stubbornly, which only made Gabriel sing a bit louder.

Loud enough that Sam could just barely make out the words. Something about the moon getting drunk and sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

Loud enough that Sam almost couldn’t hear when Nick started singing too, all graveled and low and begrudging.

It made him smile and then it made him feel a bit guilty because what business did he have invading on this little moment? He got off the couch, determined to go back to the bedroom and continue his fairly weak attempts at distracting himself. This wasn’t something for Sam to share in.

A floorboard creaked softly and the singing cut out as the men remembered that they weren’t actually alone.

“Hey, kido?” Gabriel called, and the blankets shifted like stage curtains with performers shuffling around backstage. “Bring the juice and come in here. We need a tenor.”

“I can’t sing.”

“We will teach you the words.”

“I… I don’t think I’ll fit under there with you guys.”

“You can sit on my lap.”

Sam narrowed his eyes at that table. That untrustworthy table. But still, he got the juice from the fridge, yet another glass (this one for himself), before crawling gracelessly down beneath the blankets.

The brothers winced at the sharply angled light cutting into their cave. Gabriel was sitting cross-legged, hair a mess. Nick was sprawled out with his long legs stretching towards freedom, leaning
back on his elbows, making himself low enough that his head wouldn’t smack the underside of the table.

Halfway in Sam had immediate regrets. “Oh my god, it’s like an over in here.” He complained before taking a place comfortably on the far side of Nick where there was a barrier between himself and the grinning lawyer. The blankets closed behind Sam and he was startled at how well the light was blocked out. He shifted around, settling on the pilfered couch cushions, copying his friend as best as he could because it looked like the most logical and easy way to fit in the small space.

“We’re going to bake the sick out of him.” Gabriel informed into the near perfect darkness.

“I’m not sure that’s the best plan.” Sam very, very carefully poured himself juice- which was a very tricky thing to do while blind.

“You’re not a doctor. You don’t know how these things work.” Gabriel said matter-o-factly.

“Neither are you.” Nick was quick to point out.

“My wife is. Which makes me practically half-doctor.” The smaller brother argued. “And it always worked when we were kids. So mneh.” Which was an odd noise, though Sam imagined that the man had stuck his tongue out despite the fact that no one could see it.

Sam wiggled his toes, stretching them on the far outside of the fort where the air was considerably cooler. He nudged Nick gently and was surprised when the man immediately responded by leaning against him and staying put.

“How was your nap?”

“It was nice while it lasted.”

“Why did you let him in the house?”

“He let himself in.”

“And why did you let him drag you under the table?”

Gabriel spoke over whatever annoyed answer that his brother was formulating. “I’m very persuasive when I want to be.”

“He lured me out here.” Nick grumbled. “He stole all my blankets and ran like the little bitch that he is.”

“Aw, Luci, you always say the sweetest things. Isn’t he sweet, Sam?”

“Not particularly.” Sam admitted.

Nick’s shoulders shook in near silent laughter.

“His ass certainly is.”

Which was a statement followed by near perfect silence.

“I mean, I’ve never had the pleasure, but I’ve always assumed. You should have seen him back in highschool. He was on the swim team for a few weeks before he got himself kicked off and Hot.Damn, let me tell you, I was just as sad as the majority of the female student body when he
put those pants back on full time. None of us had any idea that he was so… so well built in so many interesting places. I grew up sharing a room with the guy and even I hadn’t ever seen him out of a sweater and baggy jeans.” Gabriel talked fast. It was like being slapped with nonsense, no pause to get a word in edgewise. “He hid that fine ass from all of us. It was a damn shame. Years past highschool and no one’s seen it sense, but we all remembered, and fantasized about it. And you, you’re the first man to get in there, Sammy. So tell the class, how was it?”

Sam blinked into the dark. How was it?

*How was it?*

How was *what*?

Nick wasn’t laughing anymore.

Gabriel seemed to take the silence as a request for clarification. “I asked Rehka once if we could try some butt stuff and she just laughed and told me anything I wanted shoved up my ass all I had to do was say the word and she’d be more than glad to help. Which was not what I wanted- but has lead to some interesting nights since.”

Sam wished he could see Nick, so that he could look at his friend with wide and proper confusion. Look at all these odd things that were being asked of him. All these things that he really never needed to know about Gabriel’s sex life.

“Nick said it hurt but—”

“Isn’t your lunch break almost over, Gabe?” Nick asked remarkably loud despite how torn up his voice was- though perhaps it was just because they were in such a small, confined space.

“You were too vague.” Gabriel huffed. “I want to know how it felt to get you on your back and Sam here’s the only man who’s done it. Who better to ask?”

It wasn’t every day that you find out that during some point in the recent past you’ve sexed up your friend. Got him all splayed out and indecent. Hot and heavy. Panting and arching. Moaning his name. And it would be Nick’s first time. He would be so tight and- and this revelation did nothing for all those awful and confusing feelings that had been plaguing Sam since last night.

Should he answer?

How the hell would he know how *it* went?

He couldn’t say anything. He drank his orange juice like the coward he was and luckily Nick took over for him.

“Leave him alone, Gabe. Sam’s a bit shy when it comes to this stuff.”

Sam wasn’t actually shy at all. Awkward, sometimes. Uncertain, occasionally. But not shy. He hadn’t been shy about sex since, at the tender age of twelve, he’d accidentally walked in on Dean and a girl named Heather Martin who had been supposedly helping his big brother study for a Chemistry test. They studied naked, and in a decidedly horizontal orientation.

Mind you, he wasn’t really big on watching other people going at it. But that wasn’t out of shyness. It was just awkward to see people you know in such an exposed way. And he wasn’t used to telling his sexploits to other people- but that wasn’t shy either. It was just polite. He sort of felt that what happens between two people in moments like that, no matter how intimate, or incredibly hot, wasn’t really anyone else’s business.
“And he thinks you’re a creep.” Nick added.

And yeah. Ok. That part was true.

“Oh, he does not. What a mean thing to say, Luci.”

“He calls you the ‘scary one’.”

“Really?” Gabriel managed to sound kind of excited and a bit proud, which lead to a stunning conversation/argument about only god knew what between the brothers and Sam was able to relax.

He just closed his eyes and listened to the good natured sibling violence. It wasn’t that it bothered him, not in the slightest. It was kind of calming in a way. Familiar. The two men fought the same way that he did with Dean. Just petty little jibes that were undercut with poorly swallowed laughter. Such a perfect, comfortable distraction. Just what he’d been praying for.

Somehow in the midst of the ruckus Sam managed to doze off.

He wouldn’t have even noticed except that he was startled awake when Gabriel pushed aside the blankets, letting in a wash of cool air and halfhearted sunshine.

“Where’s he going?” Sam blinked and hid his face against Nick’s shoulder.

“He’s got to get back to work.” Nick sounded relieved. “His lunch break is- oh god! What the hell, Gabe?” He demanded with a raised voce as he awkwardly dragged his legs into the relative shelter of the fort. “Did you just lick my foot?”

“Eww, no. I don’t want to get sick.” Gabriel said from the wrong side of the blanket wall. “It was just the condensation from my glass.”

Nick shuffled around and made angry little noises like he might actually crawl out from the fort and attack his brother.

“You’re such big baby. It’s only water.” He knocked on the table, noisily little slaps. “I’ll swing back by after work.”

“Please don’t.” Nick begged without the smallest hint of shame.

“It’s alright, Gabriel. I’ll be here with him.” Sam tried to offer.

“You got him sick in the first place.” The table was slapped again. “And I like you kid, but you suck at taking care of him.”

One of Nick’s long legs darted out, a fantastic shot in the dark and he managed to kick Gabriel through the blankets and was rewarded with a little yelp.

Nick made a small, pleased noise before talking loud enough to be heard clearly from the outside of their shelter. “I’m fine. He’s fine. We’re fine. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Call me tonight.” Gabriel demanded and when his brother didn’t immediately agree, he tried threatening. “Or I can come by after work and we can play doctor. I will give you such a checkup. You won’t be able to sit for a week.”

“I’ll call you tonight.” Nick relented.
Both men still beneath the table heaved sighs of relief at the sound of retreating footsteps and the front door opening and closing.

“Sometimes I have these really elaborate fantasies of my brother going on one of his vacations and just never coming back.”

Sam held his empty orange juice glass and examined the patterns that his eyes were finding in the darkness.

“I won’t play devil’s advocate for him and tell you that’s not nice because I kind of wish the same thing.”

“That’s one of the reasons I like you.” Nick said softly as he stretched back out, finding a way to occupy the space that his brother had vacated. “I know he means well in his own fucked up way—but hell, did I did not luck out in the brother department.”

Sam chuckled and shook his head at the lovely understatement. He crooked a knee enough to bump Nick but found only empty space, which was very confusing with all the dark wrapped around him and everything. It felt like he’d suddenly been abandoned in this odd and very humid cave.

“You wanna get out of here?”

“But all the blankets are here.” Nick’s legs were suddenly over Sam’s lap. “And it’s warm.”

Holed up in the fort for the long haul then.

His elbows wouldn’t hold out for the indefinite length of time that he was suddenly sentenced to so Sam started scooting around the cushions, making a better, more accepting nest for himself. He was positioned crosswise to the table and in the end the most comfortable way he could find to lay himself was with his head and shoulders sticking out from one side of the fort and his legs from the knees down sticking out the other side. Fresh air on his face and feet. It was actually kind of nice.

“So… I got to have my ‘one sixteenth of the time’ time?” He was asking the empty room. The ceiling fan, the low window that was just within arm’s reach. The little stack of books in the corner of the windowsill.

Nick chuckled from inside the fort, so muffled and soft. “You remembered the ratio? Yeah. You got your one time on top.”

“When did I manage that?”

“A bit ago… the first night you came over when we got drunk.”

“I was drunk?”

“No.” Nick’s legs shifted as he settled in to tell a story. “No. But at some point in the afternoon, Gabe came over and helped me drag your ass from the couch to the bed… later you woke up… we were alone and you were still pretty pissed about the whole argument that we’d had and there was some yelling, and pushing, and a bed. A little of this lead to a little of that.”

“So we had angry sex?” Sam sounded out the words slowly, buying himself a bit of time to figure out how he felt about this.

“You bet your boots we did. It was rough and slow and it got real loud at the end. The neighbors
yelled at us through the wall to shut up.”

*Rough?* “Are you… ok?”

Nick let out a startled laugh. “Aw, are you worried about all those bruises that you didn’t actually give me?”

Sam sighed and pulled one of the books from the window. Of course Nick was fine. It was *fake* angry sex. There is nothing that the human body can recover from faster than fake sex. He guessed it was good to know that it went so well. His first time and all.

“*Sam?”*

He really didn’t want to answer. There was too much mischief in that single syllable. “Yeah, *Nick?”*

“You ever made out in a blanket fort?”

“We’re not making out in the blanket fort.” He said firmly as he put the book back, prodding at the pile, looking for a good one.

“But can we *say* we made out?”

“It’s like the surface of the sun in there and if you push yourself you’ll end up passing out from exhaustion or something.”

“Just a little necking?”

“Aren’t you too old for necking?”

Nick made offended noises.

“I’ve never seen an adult with a hickey before.” Sam clarified.

“I… you know what? I haven’t either. But I promise that even when you’re old and gross like me you’ll still enjoy it. You’ll just be more conscious of leaving marks.” His legs shifted again, almost like he was patting at Sam to keep his attention. “Besides, right now you’re young and wild and free- and teenagers fucking love necking under tables.”

“I’m twenty-two, you jerk. And I’m reading a book, so find something that isn’t me to occupy yourself with.” He looked at the cover of the book he held and thought to himself that he’d never actually read any Stephen King. “Go back to sleep.” He suggested to the table’s other occupant.

Nick grumbled and wiggled in a very distracting way. Each little movement a surprise because Sam couldn’t see what was going on behind the wall of blankets. “You found a book?” He finally asked.

“There’s a bunch sitting in the window.” Sam reached a hand under the blankets, moving Nick’s leg so that the back of his knee wasn’t resting against his hip.

“Read to me.” The man demanded.

Sam squeezed Nick’s knee before liberating his arm from the million and two degree fort. He took one deep, long suffering sigh before opening to page one and starting to read aloud.

It didn’t take long for him to realize that this book was a sequel to a different book, and Sam felt slightly lost, but Nick whined when he paused, so Sam just kept reading.
It was actually kind of nice, even if the going was slow, little breaks taken to cover dull, brassy little coughs, or to drink down a bit of juice in effort to soothe his dry throat.

Eventually Sam was interrupted by the distant bear noises that signified that Nick had gone back to sleep. Sam could have been offended, because hey, he was reading here- but mostly he was just glad to know that his friend was finally resting like he should be. Sam continued reading in silence because over the past hour or so he’d become invested in the story’s grumpy main character.

He managed to get a little over halfway through the book before there was a knocking at the front door. The front door that Sam couldn’t even see from where he was laying. “Just a second.” He called out and then began the arduous task of trying to free himself. It took a bit of doing and some awkward twisting but he escaped and was greeted at the door with his big brother’s cocky smile.

“Hey, Dean.” Sam grinned back, so happy to see that stupid face after so many days apart.

“Sammy… is that a blanket fort?” Dean leaned into the apartment, shoulder brushing the doorframe, completely forgoing normal greetings.

“Is that more tomato-rice soup?” Sam countered as he eyed the Tupperware that his brother was holding to his chest.

They made borderline uncomfortable eye contact, all kind of unsaid accusations, up until Nick emerged from the fort looking bewildered and wild eyed in his tshirt and pajama pants. He shivered all the way from head to toe before he clumsily grabbed up one of the blankets, dismantling the fort, and wrapping it around his shoulders like a cape.

“It’s fucking cold out here.” He told the Winchesters with a tiny frown.

Dean looked from Sam to Nick, slowly raising an eyebrow and looking back at the fort. “Soup.” He held it out to Nick until the man shuffled over and took the offering.

“Thanks.” The blonde awkwardly juggled the soup and his blankets before going to the kitchen and setting the meal on the counter.

“You got sick taking care of Sammy. I owed you.” Dean managed to sound resentful somehow, which only added some charm to the gesture.

Reason number forty-three why Sam loved his big brother.

“Let me go get my stuff.” Sam closed the door behind Dean, leaving his brother alone with his pretend boyfriend while he collected his change of clothes, and whatever else had been sent over in the care package. He could hear the men talking quietly in the other room. He happily listened to them making idle chitchat while he sat on the foot of the bed and pulled his tennishoes on.

It would be nice to get back home, but at the same time he was going to miss this bed. It was bigger than his and the company was nice. He’d grown accustomed after a few days (literally days) spent tucked up beside Nick in this bed, sleeping and watching movies and simply having someone beside him.

His own bed would feel rather lonely tonight.

Sam stopped mid lacing and frowned at himself and his thoughts and … and what the ever living fuck was he thinking? This was- this was last night all over again, only worse because it wasn’t just his libido (that he rarely ever was in agreement with) acting up simply because it had been moths since he’d had sex or even kissed a girl. This was worse because … because it was.
Because you’re not allowed to preemptively miss cuddling with your guy friend. Your very straight guy friend who only gets so close because he obviously wasn’t raised to understand the boundaries that society puts on personal space, and because Nick had corpse feet and enjoyed leeching warmth from Sam while he slept.

Forcing down the rising panic at this horrible self revelation, Sam got to his feet, got his armful of clothes and shoved them down into the paper bag that they’d come out of a few days ago.

One month left.

He could get over Nick in a month and then they could say good bye and it could be like those transient friendships of his childhood where you meet the best friend you never knew you were missing and then they move away and you never see them again and after a few weeks you’re over it and you find someone else to hang out with.

There was nothing special about Nick. At least that was Sam’s inner mantra as he left the bedroom. Nick was just a guy. Just a normal, tall, awkward guy like Sam. A guy who was sitting on the kitchen counter still wrapped up in his blanket, his feet hanging loose, kicking back and forth like a little kid while he talked with Dean.

Heat. Heat was rising to Sam’s cheeks and he had no idea why. Just looking at Nick when he was like this, eyes still a little glassy, but with a wide, easy smile… it did something bad to Sam.

Dean turned to his kid brother and a comment died on his lips as a strange look came over him. His gaze going dark and uncertain, confused.

“Hey… you ready to go?”

“Yeah.” Sam hefted his little bag and didn’t quite make eye contact because his big brother had always had the disconcerting ability to read Sam better than anyone else. Better than Sam could even read himself. “Give me a call when you feel better, ok?” He nodded to Nick because oh god, he couldn’t look at Dean right now.

“Do I get a kiss goodbye?” Nick quietly teased from his perch, a playful hook to his smile, seemingly unaware that anything was amiss.

“No, you’re sick.” Such a great excuse to stay over here where the world felt marginally safer.

Nick’s shoulders bounced beneath his blanket, a soft laugh or a shrug. “You can’t catch the same cold twice.”

That was a good point.

It was a very good point.

And the most important thing that Sam was struggling to accept in that moment was that he wasn’t gay. He was almost more than one hundred percent sure of that. He didn’t like men… just this one. Everyone supposedly had a one. An exception to their predetermined sexuality.

Now, there was probably a flaw in his logic somewhere, but even still… Sam wasn’t the kind of man to pass up such an offer, even if it was meant just as a joke. Only something to weird Dean out.

Sam suffered through a five second long argument with himself. A war between better judgment a just fuck it attitude raging inside him- but in the end he found himself standing in front of Nick, artfully dodging those kicking feet.
“I can’t catch the same cold twice.” He agreed.

“Thanks for taking care of me, darlin’.” Nick ran a big toe up the outside of Sam’s left leg.

“If I hadn’t stayed to keep an eye on you you would have overdosed on cough syrup days ago, you old lush.”

Nick rolled his eyes, the line of his mouth turning sharp and annoyed at the accusation. “Yes, but I would have enjoyed it. You just don’t like letting me have any fun.”

Sam just sighed and set his bag of sundries on the counter.

That annoyed little look turned to a curious one as Nick glanced down at the bag then back at Sam, one eyebrow darting up curiously.

“Hurry up and kiss the bastard goodbye so we can get going.” Dean practically yelled at them, because he’d never been all that tolerant with people who make him late to meals.

See, now it wasn’t just Sam.

Everyone thought that he should give Nick a kiss goodbye.

“I’ve got to go, Luci. You behave yourself.”

“Keep calling me that and I swear to god I will bite you so hard.”

Sam couldn’t help it. He really loved Nick’s little threats. He found them funny for some reason. “Goodbye, Luci.”

Instead of holding onto that anger Nick laughed loudly.

Sam kissed him.

A these were both normal responses.

Right?

Maybe Nick was expecting nothing at all to come from his little request, or at the very most maybe he was bracing for another one of those grazing kisses like they’d shared under the mistletoe last month. Definitely that was what Sam was expecting when he took himself a handful of that blanket and tugged his friend down.

Sitting up there on the counter made Nick a few inches taller than Sam- which was a unique and fun experience.

Just a soft peck, no more than what they gave each other’s cheeks, actually a little less than that. But the pretend kiss took a violent turn when Nick made good his threat by biting Sam’s lower lip. It wasn’t horribly hard, not quite like he had promised, just a gnash of angry teeth and Sam was caught. They grinned at each other- and that was even more fun than being the short one for once.

They should have pulled apart after that point. Nick should have removed his teeth from his friend. But there was a staggering amount of eye contact and their mouths were touching and that tiny little brush of lips went a little wrong a little fast.

One thing lead to another, as these things are prone to do, and suddenly Sam was closing his eyes and fitting his mouth over Nick’s hard enough that their teeth clicked and he could taste a hint of
This wasn’t the same kind of kiss from Christmas. No one was grabbing his ass, so that was one thing. There was also a bit of tongue, so there was that too.

Nick was warm and wet and sweet. As sweet as the orange juice that he’d been drinking earlier. And there was no good reason why he had opened his mouth wider in answer to Sam’s hungry little growl, or why he didn’t pull away when the younger man started to explore his mouth with deliberate, slow licks. Sam mapped the backs of Nick’s teeth and the worst thing that his friend did in retaliation was to dig his heels into the back of Sam’s knees.

“Ehem.” Dean said- literally said the word, not actually clearing his throat. Rather loudly, sounding out each little bit like the other men might be hard of hearing.

Sam had managed to actually forget that his brother was standing just over there.

What an uncomfortable thing to forget.

He pulled back from Nick, loosening his grip on the blankets, and smiling wide and uncertain. Never shy, but even still shame was not a new acquaintance to Sam Winchester, and he was fully aware that he’d crossed a line.

A rather important line.

He was hoping for some kind of, any kind of, recognition of this fact that didn’t involve getting punched in the jaw. There wasn’t even the barest hint of a smile being returned though. Nick’s eyes had gone wide, his jaw tight, his expression dammingly unreadable beyond an all consuming ‘bad’. BAD in all caps, bold font, size fourteen, because you know he felt it and wanted to share it through body language alone.

Nick’s was not a positive expression. No encouragement or assurance to be found.

And Sam felt his good humor at this new fuck up draining away. There was nothing funny about this. His smile falling from his face, breaking on the way down.

This was worse than he thought.

Much, much worse.

An oddly cold sensation started in his extremities, his toes and fingers, spreading, meeting in the middle and he clicked his teeth together, audibly loud in the sudden silence, but it helped to restrain the trembling feeling that rocked him.

“Any time you two girls wanna’ stop playing tonsil hockey, I’d like to get some dinner.” Dean announced he was still there, you know, just in case anyone managed to forget about him again.

“I’ve gotta go.” Sam whispered in a voice that wasn’t his own. Deep inside he was screaming at himself to run. Run and don’t come back.

He’d always found that the best way to deal with his problem was to flee from them.

“That’s a good idea.” Nick’s voice was painfully flat as he carefully sounded out each word.
Sam nodded a little too fast. Yeah, sure. He could handle that. He just needed to leave—like right now. He really, really, really needed to leave. Problem was that Nick’s heels were still on his knees, still holding him in a loose circle.

Escape was slow and awkward, clumsy and obvious. And despite all that, Sam thought that he did an absolutely stellar job of not looking at his brother the whole way down the stairs to the car. Dean did his thing where he talked overly loud and he talked a lot, filling that silence in a way that only he could because bless his heart, he knew that something was wrong and he was overcompensating for them both.

They were halfway to the restaurant before Dean ran out of completely unnecessary things to say.

He drummed his fingers across the steering wheel, loudly sucking on his teeth while watching the red traffic light that held them in place. “Seriously, Sammy. Did I interrupt you guys having blanket fort sex or something?”

“What?” Sam looked away from his reflection, from the ghost him that had been staring back at him for what felt like miles. “No. We weren’t—we weren’t having sex.”

“That’s what I would have done with a blanket fort.” Dean shrugged and finally made his left hand turn as the light changed to green. “Oo, or a treehouse. I would rocked the fuck out of a treehouse.”

Sam sighed and looked back out the window, the sky dark despite the fact that it wasn’t even five o’clock yet. Daylight savings time played havoc with his inner clock. It didn’t help that he hadn’t seen the sun in almost a week. Hiding out in Nick’s apartment with no visible clocks and all the curtains drawn tight. The passage of time had been measured in moments, in conversations and touches, for nearly a week. It was going to be hard to transition back to the standard flow of time set forth by Greenwich.

“So what then?” Dean prodded.

“Nothing.”

“You look like someone threatened to take away your puppy.”

“Dean, I don’t own a puppy.”

He slapped the steering wheel, grinning in that manic way of his. “Don’t shoot holes in my analogies. You two have another fight?”

“Why are you asking about my love life when we both know that you don’t really want to know.”

“I’m allowed to worry about you. You’re the only brother I’ve got.”

“I’m fine.” It was so very much easier to lie when he didn’t have to look at Dean. Dean who could read every little thing no matter how hard Sam tried to hide it.

He wasn’t fine. He was panicking worse than last night, he’d just found a way to do it without putting his head between his knees.

There was a fundamental difference between wanting to kiss his friend and understanding that it was wrong— to actually kissing the man and knowing how badly he’d fucked everything up in one glorious fell swoop. All he’d done was to lean up about three whole inches and closed his eyes.

It was possibly one of the simplest things that he’d ever done.
Possibly one of the most cataclysmic mistakes he’d ever made.

Lines in relationships were drawn for reason- and oddly that reason was not so that Sam could dance over said line like a self-destructive white girl on a Saturday night at the club. And maybe that was a bit too specific, but maybe it was also his internalized Dean. The jibes that Sam expected to hear if he was actually willing to tell the truth about the mess than he’d gotten himself into.

They had burgers. They ate across from each other and talked about things that didn’t involve what Sam had been doing this past week, just as well as they didn’t talk about their dad and his unexpected visit. They’d had years of practice in avoiding things like this. Sam was practically an expert by this point in his life. But then, Dean had been a fantastic teacher.

Chapter End Notes

also, I don't know if I mentioned it, but someone did a bamf picture of the scene where the boys are at the beach you can find it at http://hotspirit.deviantart.com/art/The-boy-who-blocked-his-own-shots-527839779 (do some copy and paste of that url. Totally worth it. Then go make bad noises at it like I did, because holly hell, someone actually drew fanart of my story and it still freaks me out in the best kind of way. Like now and then I see my user name in tumblr posts and I flail and grin like a fool and my love for you guys is smothering and beautiful and all consuming. I wouldn't keep writing these massive, dragging, weird stories if it wern't for you guys. I would probably have a life or whatever it is that normal people are supposed to do. I'm glad I don't have to do that.
Glad that you can forgive

Chapter Notes

There were two massive story points that needed to happen in this chapter. I managed to fail to include either of them, but true to form, the chapter length was getting grossly out of hand and I had to stop and backtrack and find a good cut off point. We will get there eventually. Maybe 2 chapters left if I can get my thoughts in order long enough.

So here you go, my lovely lovlies- about 20 pages in which nothing of import is accomplished. Sorry if you wanted real content. Have some confusing emotional drama instead. yay!

Thanks for all the love notes I've been getting in my tumblr inbox. Sometimes I know who it is (and you're all amazing, I want to smoosh your faces) and other times they are just these anonymuous messages of support that I've really needed over the past few weeks while my world was falling down.

I don't have anything good to put after that. Just know that I'm doing better and I appreciate you guys more than you know. I consider y'all my silent penpals. You don't say much but you are good listeners. and if anyone ever wants to say something back, please feel free to shoot me a message. I like having people to talk to in the wee hours of the night. It gives me an excuse for being up so late.

Sam was pealing at the blue label on his beer bottle, exposing the brown glass one shred at a time. Well ignored, his phone vibrated on the arm of the couch, dancing sideways until it fell to floor with a clatter- and that got Dean’s attention. His big brother looking up from the dismantled alternator spread out over the coffee table.

“You gunna answer that, Sammy?”

He should.

But he didn’t.

That’s just who he’d become in the last three hours. Sam was now a man who was too afraid of his phone to even check to see who was calling him.

Instead he pressed the bottle to his mouth, but didn’t take a drink. He’d been working on the single beer since they’d come home. It wasn’t going anywhere soon. He wasn’t in a hurry.

A burger and salad, two glasses of water and about a third of a beer later and he swore he could still taste Nick. He set the bottle against his knee, liking the weight.

He was perfectly content to keep up his thousand yard stare for the rest of the night as he fought down the continued urge to touch his lips, or sigh in a crippling way, or something else equally self deprecatong.
Dean, however, didn’t even seem remotely interested in keeping up this little dance they’d been doing so badly since dinner. He leaned over and grabbed up Sam’s phone, but the ringing had already stopped. “Two missed calls from Nick.” He read before looking over at his kid brother in a pointed way. “What did you two fight about this time? Because I swear you seemed fine when I came to pick you up.”

“We didn’t have a fight.” It had to at least be the fifth time he’d told Dean those words tonight.

“You had a something.”

“Just leave it.”

He set the phone on the couch beside Sam. “At least let me know if I need to break his other hand.”

“I’m not a kid anymore, Dean. I don’t need you coming to my rescue every time I have a bad day.”

“Bad days you get a little pissy. Right now you’re acting like a teenage girl whose boyfriend said her best friend was cuter than her… is that what happened?” Humor lurked somewhere in the undertow of Dean’s voice. “Did he tell you I’m the pretty one? You had to find out someday, I’m just sorry he didn’t let you down easier.”

Sam managed not to smile or encourage his brother in any perceivable way.

“I promise I won’t steal him from you.”

“Gee, thanks.” He picked up his phone and tried not to be too obvious when he checked to see if he had any new messages. There were none- which was for the best. He didn’t think he would be able to easily process whatever Nick had to tell him right now.

Dean just watched him and waited.

And it was almost funny- because if Sam knew one thing it was that his brother didn’t do touchy feely crap. He couldn’t actually be interested in what sort of drama that his baby brother was going through… but he could be interested in what he could do to fix it. Dean was just like that. Always had been. He seemed to want nothing more out of life than to take care of Sam, to plaster him with Band-Aids, or put a warm arm around his shoulders, or tell an inappropriate joke with a hope to earn a smile.

No. Dean didn’t want to hear Sam’s sad story- unless talking about it would somehow make it better.

That’s why they’d had a good dinner. That’s why Dean had gotten him a beer and offered to put on Empire Strikes Back.

But when all else fails, dubiously press the ‘relationship’ question.

“It wasn’t a fight… we just-” had never actually kissed before because we aren’t in a real relationship and I’ve been lying to you for two-ish months. Sorry. “I just got to the point tonight when I realized Nick and I aren’t looking to get the same thing out of our relationship.”

“You know…sometimes I wish I’d been given a brother instead of a little sister.”

“Screw you, Dean.”
good food together. You drink good beer together. You have sex- which I’m assuming is good?”
He made a slightly disturbed face before continuing. “What else is there?”

“And that is exactly why you never get second dates.”

“Psssh. What do you want- you wanna’ marry the jack ass? Because I won’t stand next to you at
the altar and give you away.” Dean shook his head, hands raised to god in complete surrender.
“Won’t do it.”

The younger Winchester stiffened.

What a ridiculous idea.

He didn’t want to marry Nick.

Sam didn’t want a wedding.

Sam only wanted a honeymoon.

And yes. That was definitely wrong- especially so because all those new and still mystifying
feelings were directed at someone who wasn’t the slightest bit interested in shifting their friendship
to something one hundred percent more intimate.

This whole thing was actually worse than his crush on Jess. Jess at least had never involved him in
some elaborate charade that required so much prolonged physical contact. He’d never left the
friend-zone with his little blonde classmate.

Nick on the other hand?

Well… Sam couldn’t say that he’d actually ever been properly initiated to any ‘zone’ with that
strange man. What they had was too complicated, too convoluted to last. It was a relationship
built on mutual destruction and luckily all Sam had to do was keep his hormones under control for
a few more weeks.

 Probably less than that now- because in a moment of complete madness he’d actually acted on
those grossly amoral feelings.

That simple hedonistic act had a high chance of breaking up this whole horrible game that they’d
been playing so badly for so long.

For not even long enough.

If they could pretend that the kiss hadn’t happened, if they could both just ignore the fact that Sam
had basically propositioned Nick’s mouth then… then…

Sam wanted nothing more than to keep up this giant lie that they had. There was a comfortable
friendship settling into the foundation of the shared deception. Sam knew that that at least was real
and honest. It had to be, because it served no purpose to convincing their brothers of anything.
And if that was all he could have, than he would take it.

He just had an uncomfortable feeling that that was no longer an option.

Dean was still looking up at him, waiting for a response to the teasing. Waiting for a smile.
Sam tried, but it felt strange, insincere at best.

“Sammy, if I’d have known you were going to… fall the son of a bitch I never would have tried to hook you guys up in the first place.” He sighed, kind of deflating and returning to his mangled bit of car part that really had no reason for being in the house. “I just wanted to help you get your rocks off- like any decent guy would try and do for his candy ass, broken hearted, baby brother.” He picked up what could have been an allen wrench. “I say break up with him. We’ll find you someone better.”

Sam didn’t want someone better.

But he didn’t have a good way to say that to Dean that didn’t make him sound like some broken spirited housewife with low self esteem, who was convinced she couldn’t do any better. That wasn’t the case at all. He honestly just didn’t think that there was anyone better than Nick.

And that thought was just about as simple as it was sad.

So he drank a little more and asked his brother to explain exactly why minor car repairs were taking place in the middle of their livingroom.

He wasn’t brave enough to call Nick that night. He lay in bed hours later, watching his phone apprehensively like it might mutiny against him should he look away. He managed to fall asleep like that, the phone taking up half his bed with its own pillow like the unwelcome guest that it was. And in the morning when he woke he shied away from the little notification telling him that he had four new texts.

Dean had left for work for the day and Sam managed to get himself a shower and a lackluster breakfast of cold cereal before he wrangled up the courage to even see who had been texting him while he slept.

Not surprisingly, it was Nick.

All four messages.

Great.

That wasn’t concerning or anything.

-Sam. last night was a mistake

-lets blame the drugs and the fever.

-I dont want it to change things between us because this would be a fucking stupid reason to ruin a good thing

-can we pretend it nevr happened?

Sam couldn’t tell if he been given a pardon, an insult, or a death sentence. All he knew was that his hands were shaking and he felt kind of nauseous. He put the phone down and closed his eyes, pressing the heel of one hand to his temple.

Yeah. Sure. They could go and blame the cough syrup that Sam hadn’t drank and the fever that had burned itself out a day before. What a perfect scapegoat.

But it meant that he could keep Nick for a while longer, and they could keep up this terrible thing that they had going for themselves. Is that what he really wanted?
Hell yes.

A best friend that you’re not allowed to kiss is infinitely better than no best friend.

**-pretend what never happened?** He texted back while his insides twisted and turned like a bag of snakes.

A few minutes later his phone lit up.

**-thats why you’re my favorite, darlin**

It didn’t take much imagination to read the relief in those words. Sam could practically hear Nick’s contented sigh. Could easily see the wry smile that would go with the declaration.

Sam couldn’t find the will or the words to keep up this conversation. Instead he gathered together his school things and walked the cold, quiet few miles to campus. Delving deep into the first day of new classes and syllabus, trying desperately to ignore his phone. To not take it out between each class and see if Nick had sent him something new.

Every third thought Sam had that day was devoted to wondering if he’d done the right thing.

It didn’t feel like the right thing.

It felt like the last feeble grasplings of a dying man.

... Nick’s hand slid warm against his skin, fingertips almost hesitant as he traced the strong line of Sam’s ribs. And Sam shifted because it almost tickled, which was not the feeling that he wanted right then- it wasn’t even at all close to what he was looking for.

He was looking for Nick’s mouth and the man was moving just as hesitantly in that department, sharp breaths ghosting over Sam’s lips, his pale eyes wide and uncertain. Questioning.

“Damn it, Nick.” He practically growled, because they’d come this far and he wasn’t going to just let it stop now. He kissed the other man, slow and purposeful. Meaning every slow lick and cut of teeth.

And Nick didn’t argue.

He never did in these types of dreams.

But like always Sam’s mind rebelled against him. Logic overriding his impulsive subconscious and dragging him kicking and screaming back awake.

Sam sat up in bed, skin blistering hot, heart racing like he’d just run all the way up the stairs to his room, terrible ache in his gut and lower parts of his body that were just as treacherous and just as pointedly being ignored.

It had been the same dream almost every night since he’d come home, recovered from his chest cold. Slight variations. Sometimes he and Nick were on the couch instead of on his bed, sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes in the car. That subtle change didn’t help to ease Sam’s mind, or the tightness in his chest.

School had started back up was supposed to have overridden whatever had gone wrong in his
head. Something far more distracting and important. But it hadn’t, and here he was waking up halfway between utter panic and arousal with a weird feeling of guilt just to top it off. Just for fun.

And it wasn’t like he could talk to someone about this.

What was he going to do, tell Dean that somehow, despite all logic, and whatever laws of nature that didn’t feel like applying recently, he’d developed a crush on his friend? They were supposed to be dating. You can’t get a crush on someone you’re dating. Especially not if it was on the grumpy faced, very straight man, that he was dating.

He fell back, head hitting his pillow a little less gently than he had anticipated and he winced. Try as he might to channel his internal Dean, to seek those brotherly words of wisdom that he needed to hear so desperately right now… he had nothing.

This wasn’t exactly a situation that he’d run into before this point. He had no basis for the advice that he needed given to him.

He should just go tell Dean. Tell him about the whole lie that had been perpetuating for the last two and a half months and demand to be told how to fix it. Dean might even understand. Sure, he’d be angry at first- but then he’d laugh about it and maybe after a few days of letting Sam suffer he would pull an arm around him and tell him what a screw up he was- but in a way that actually meant ‘I still love you’ and ‘it’s ok’ and ‘here’s how we’re going to fix it-’.

But how was that even close to fair to Nick?

Sam would go right back to getting set up on dates, now probably with equal amounts of men and women. Inevitably, Nick would be ratted out as well, and in the aftermath things would go right back to how they used to be for him.

Above all else, aside from all those horrible feelings that Sam was suffering though, Nick was his friend. And Sam couldn’t just back out now.

It wouldn’t be fair… right?

God, he wished he’d never met Nick.

However, that was not a productive thought that would get him out of bed this morning.

He dragged himself up, taking a cold shower and eating a cold breakfast, struggling to keep his mind focused on today and school and other important things that weren’t the nightmares he’d been having lately.

“You look awful.” Dean said cheerily as he came into the kitchen. He got out a mug and looked at the still sleeping coffee machine, scowling before going through the morning ritual of making the first pot.

Sam took a slow, cleansing breath, finding a smile. “Good morning.”

“Were classes yesterday that bad?”

“Just had a hard time sleeping last night.” He gave up on trying to trick a man who knew him all too well- hunching forward with rounded shoulder before shoving a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

“Yeah, you’ve been saying that since you came home last week.” Dean pulled out the chair beside Sam in an odd ‘you wanna talk about it’ gesture.
“Have I?” Sam risked looking up, looking away from his cheerios.

Dean just nodded, drumming his fingers over the table top, kind of pursing his lips, but not saying anything.

“Oh.” Damn it. He knew there was a right excuse to use right now, and if he’d been able to get any useable sleep last night he might actually be able to remember what that excuse was.

“You should just dump him. Save us all the pity party.”

“It’s got nothing to do with Nick.”

Dean sat there quietly, watching him with a dubious expression. But Sam was good at this too. He’d had years of practice just staring back at his big brother, daring him to call his bluff. And Dean caved first, rapping his knuckles on the table top before getting up to pour himself some coffee. Almost two minutes later one mug was carefully placed before Sam, an offering.

“Look, I… I know that dad just showing up was… unexpected. But no harm done, right?” Dean tried a very different and very wrong approach. Completely misjudging what was wrong. “He’s back home and we all got out of it in one piece. No one even yelled at anyone.”

And that last part wasn’t true, and the bit right before that wasn’t either. There was no way that Sam believed for even a second that Dean was just ok after having spent four days alone with John. He had been talking too loud and smiling too much since then for Sam to buy that particular lie.

No one was ok with John visiting.

No one was remotely close to ok with John coming out here to California. But that crisis had been averted with only a few lingering aches and pains. It was no longer a problem that Sam felt worthy of his anxiety. His old man hadn’t been worth it in years.

“It’s got nothing to do with dad either.” Which was the first honest thing out of his mouth in days.

“Sammy, he means well. You know?”

“Fuck dad. And fuck you for always making excuses for him.” Sam put down his spoon, surprised by his sudden anger. He took a slow breath and looked up at Dean again. His brother’s mouth had become a thin, angry line. “Sorry.” Sam amended softly, knowing that he’d overstepped himself.

Dean huffed and got up, pouring his half drunk coffee down the drain. He didn’t come back to the table, and Sam refused to turn around and watch- but he could hear his brother, bumping and thumping his way through each little step of putting together something to eat.

Today was already going downhill rather fast. Dean wanted to talk, or at least wanted to play the part of a good brother and listen- but Sam didn’t have anything he could share. He couldn’t talk about Nick, and he didn’t want to talk about Dad. It left the two of them back to back in an unpleasantly quiet kitchen.

“I’m going to be staying late at work tonight.” Dean interrupted his own silence. “Cas is coming in to balance the books.”

“How’s he been?” Sam latched onto the different topic, somewhere safer to dwell. And he hadn’t seen the little accountant since Christmas, it would be nice to get an update.
“He … he’s still Cas,” Dean said after some consideration. “He asked me about you too. I don’t know what the hell you guys are expecting me to say.”

Sam chuckled weakly- and then, like a slow dawn rising, a thought came to him. He’d been struggling to give himself advice for over a week now with no success. He didn’t know how to fix what he’d done wrong- but maybe he didn’t need advice, maybe he just needed someone to listen. Such a horrible thought- a solution to his nightly troubles. A complete betrayal to the master plan that had gone so wrong.

Sam needed an unbiased party to this mess that he’d made for himself.

“Hey, Cas’ office is just downtown, right?”

:::

Sam had a three hour break between his Tuesday classes, falling comfortably around lunch time. He’d set it up that way so he’d have time to go home and eat, or nap, or study as needed. Today he decided to use that time a little differently.

Cas had been confused but seemingly happy to have Sam call him up and ask to take him out to lunch. He’d agreed and, short story even shorter, that’s how Sam found himself sitting on the edge of a fountain, eating sandwiches with a man who looked like an unmade bed. Crooked tie and wind tossed hair despite the fact that there was no wind today.

“I take it that you’re feeling better.” Cas guessed between bites. “Nick said that you gave him quite a bug last week. He still sounds like he swallowed a can of nails.”

Sam smiled. He’d actually been making a point since coming home a week ago to not see Nick. Making excuses to himself that the man needed rest- needed some quiet to help him get better. Making worse excuses that they’d already spent more time together than they’d intended and Nick was probably enjoying having the younger man out of his hair and out from underfoot. Honestly, Sam was just afraid of what he might say or do if he had to see those eyes that were paler than the winter sky, or hear Nick’s rough voice saying his name like he owned it.

To be fair, Sam couldn’t just cut himself off cold turkey, so they’d still been texting off and on- but he was so deeply buried beneath all those levels of self doubt and post-teenage angst (because he really was way too old for this) that he hadn’t be able to bring himself to answer the few times that the phone had actually rung. And he felt guilty for that. But he felt guilty for a lot of things right now and that was pretty far down on his list.

“Maybe I’ll bring him some cough drops.” Sam wouldn’t, it just sounded like the right thing to offer.

Cas smiled his odd little smile, distant like they were talking about something else altogether. “I swung by a few days ago and brought him some soup and tea. Though he probably would have preferred it had been you.”

Sam ate a bit of his sandwich before acknowledging that statement.

He could be wrong, but Cas seemed like the kind of guy that if Sam didn’t just get on with it, the man would never ask. Sitting there, breaking off bits of his bread to toss to the waiting birds that had gathered. Cas looked perfectly at ease. Not even for a moment pausing to wonder why Sam had asked to see him today.

“Dean and I are going out to the movies tonight.” He said suddenly before Sam could get up his nerve.
“After you do the books?”

“I did the books last Saturday.” Castiel tossed more bread.

Sam frowned. Feeling like there was a fault in his communications with someone- but at the same time not wanting to just outright accuse his brother or Cas of lying to him.

He chose to take a safe road. “What are you guys gunna’ see?”

“Whatever looks good at the drive-in. He said we’ll just pick one when we get there.” Cas looked up, a happy expression spilling over his face. “I’ve never been to the drive-ins before. I’m looking forward to it.”

“I haven’t been in years.” Sam felt a derailing confusion welling up inside of him. “It’s a lot of fun.”

The drive-ins? What the hell, Dean? He knew his brother well enough that there was only one reason that he would consider going to the drive-in, and that reason had nothing to do with watching a double feature. But at the same time… the alternative was too weird to actually consider.

“How are classes? Dean said that they started back up last week.” Castiel was really very good at changing the subject.

“Yeah, um, they’re fine.”

The little accountant nodded, pleased to hear this, seemingly not bothered by how awkward this small talk was going. Not at all picking up on Sam’s agitation.

And Sam figured that he could dwell on whatever the hell his brother was not telling him he was up to- or focus on what he’d come here for. He decided to just jump in feet first and get it over with. Better the devil you know, or whatever that saying was.

“Hey, can I talk to you about Nick?”

“Certainly.” Cas answered back without any hesitation.

“I mean… can I talk to you about Nick and not have you talk to anyone else about it?”

Cas hesitated for the first time, his eyebrows drawing low and he considered the request. “Can I talk to Nick about it?”

“No.” Sam felt a swell of the same panic that he kept waking to morning after morning.

Cas blinked and took his time before nodding slowly. “Alright... What about Nick?”

“I…” Well now. Sam realized that other than the general panic he felt about this topic he hadn’t really thought it through all the way. Not enough to put the right words to it yet. He struggled with himself before finally saying, “I think I’ve got a… a crush on him.”

And just like that, Sam was reduced to a thirteen year old girl, whispering secrets behind the gym. Next thing you know he was going to be passing notes that said stupid things like ‘do you like me? check yes or no’.

Oh the horror.
A strange little pause formed between them as the birds hopped about their feet and traffic passed somewhere off in the near distance. Castiel was looking at Sam, looking at him with those big dark eyes that somehow managed to hold the same intense, and unnamable expression that his big brother did so well.

Castiel started talking slowly, bearing down on Sam with that same unwavering, hard to interpret look. “Since the two of you are dating that’s not entirely unexpected. If you’re planning to keep it secret from him I should warn you that he might already have suspicions.”

“It’s not that kind of relationship.”

“Are you going to tell me that it’s complicated?” He seemed doubtful.

“It’s… it’s not supposed to be complicated at all.” He shook hair from his eyes. “We’re just friends.”

“Who are sleeping together.”

Sam took a slow breath, and thought that if he was talking to almost anyone else they would sink their hooks into that pregnant pause and understand everything that he wasn’t saying. But not Castiel. No. He just waited expectantly for Sam to go on.

“We aren’t… sleeping together exactly.”

Castiel blinked slowly. Twice. “You aren’t?”

And it was suddenly all just coming out in a tidal wave of bad words and regrets. He’d never liked lying and the confession that had been sitting there on his tongue for months now just spilled out of him before he could grab hold and keep it back.

But good god, did it feel good to get it all out. Like drawing poison from his blood.

He told Cas everything.

Everything.

The master plan that had been born that first foolish night at the restaurant, the fact that Nick was pulling their sex life out of homoerotic books about the devil and feeding the lies to Gabriel, about how the kiss under the mistletoe a month back had actually been their first kiss- and they’d only shared one more since then, just last week and it was one of the worst mistakes that Sam had ever made.

And Castiel, surprisingly, took all this information in with only the smallest bat of his eyes and a little nod once Sam finally paused to take a deep, long suffering breath.

There should have been some kind of deeper response. Some sort of disappointment that he’d been lied to. Disbelief that two desperate men could plan something so terrible and screw it up so badly.

But Sam was starting to suspect that there was possibly nothing that could really upset this man.

Or maybe Castiel just knew his brother well enough that an almost three month old relationship built on lies was just something that was expected at this point.

So Sam sat there breathing in the fresh, clean air of a guiltless conscious.
Maybe he hadn’t come clean in any meaningful way, but a weight had been lifted from off his chest. A weight that he didn’t realize that he’d been carrying and now he was suddenly free. He felt himself start to smile and shortly that smile grew into a laugh. Half relief, half some kind of manic panic because is this really what he was doing with his life? This was the depth to which he’d dragged himself?

Wow.

Castiel blinked owlishly at him, expression turning open and confused.

It only made Sam laugh harder. “Sorry. Sorry.” He tried to apologize, turning his face away because it was easier to try to reign in his hysteria without an audience.

“I don’t see the humor in the situation.”

“It’s not- I just realized how fucked up this whole thing really is.”

For weeks now he’d just been too stubborn to admit to himself that what he was suffering through was more than typical feelings of friendship and camaraderie. Oh sure, he still wanted to push Nick up against the first vertical, load bearing structure that presented itself and kiss the man senseless.

But that was only half of it.

He loved the man’s dry sarcasm, and rough teasing. He loved the way Nick’s eyes crinkled on the edges, little crow’s feet making him actually look his age every now and then. His completely unfunny jokes. The way he played with Sam’s hair. His bad driving habits. His bad taste in movies. His cold, cold feet. The way that he watched Sam when he spoke like he was the only thing in the world. His lack of respect when it came to personal space. His big hands that were constantly restless. The way he could wrap his arms around Sam and somehow manage to make it feel like home instead of the awkwardness that should have been there.

And approximately a thousand more little things that were constantly running through Sam’s mind like a song that he couldn’t seem to shake.

He was so screwed.

If he’d only had a crush on Nick it would have been funny. Straight guy getting all hot and bothered over his also straight (best) friend, yeah- that’s sitcom gold. Fun for the whole family. Awkward and kind of cute and easy to find a remedy for.

But Sam couldn’t mess up in normal ways. No. He’d gone and fallen in love with his friend and that painful revelation had only just struck him.

It had been there for weeks, if not months.

Castiel waited patiently for the gibbering breakdown to pass.

Castiel was a good man.

Sam was fairly certain of that.

Anyone who wouldn’t just get up and walk out on him at this point deserved some kind of honorary title. A key to the city, or something. A sash at least.

“Have you considered telling my brother about your feelings for him?” Castiel asked once the
moment had passed and Sam got himself back under control.

“No.” He said a bit too loudly, startling the birds.

“It seems like something that he would like to know about.”

He thought about the kiss and Nick’s very negative reaction to it. “Oh, I’m pretty sure he knows already.”

Between the traffic and the fountain and those damnably cheerful birds, the silence that Castiel and Sam shared was rather loud.

“Nick is…” the little accountant pursed his lips, eyes narrowing in thought. “He’s not always smart, or observant.” He looked up at Sam, earnest expression. “I think you should tell him.”

Sam looked at what little sandwich he had left before crumbling the crust of bread and throwing pinches of it to the waiting birds. “That’s terrible advice.”

Advice like that would require some firm bravery and a strong heart on Sam’s part. He honestly wasn’t sure that he had either at this point.

“I want my brother to be happy. He deserves to be happy. You make him happy.” It wasn’t necessarily the most poetic of alliterations, but it served its purpose. “Maybe it’s not advice as much as it is selfishness on my part- but in this case I don’t mind being selfish.”

“I can’t just walk up to him and say ‘sorry, I know it screws everything up, but I sort of fell in love with you. You want to still be friends anyways?’ It doesn’t work like that.”

Castiel leveled him with a very withering look.

In that moment Sam considered what he had just said. The words that he’d let out. And they really were worse than all the rest weren’t they? So much worse. For a horrible moment he thought that his sandwich might come back up. But maybe this is what love was supposed to feel like. Complete and utterly helpless defeat. He just wished that he given himself a little more time to sort out that particular feeling before sharing it with someone else.

“Is this why you invited me to lunch?”

“I think I just needed to talk about it. Actually hear myself say it out loud.”

“Do you feel better?”

“I feel a lot worse actually.”

Cas almost smiled, the same odd tugging angle of lip that his brother pulled off so well. “I haven’t known you for long- but I feel comfortable saying that you’re rather stupid.”

“Hey!”

“Just about as stupid as my brother… perhaps slightly less.” Cas tried to smooth. “He is the type of person who doesn’t believe that he has the right to be happy- but you, you are actually refusing to even try.” He exhaled sharply through his nose. “You both make me sad.”

Which was unfair. Sam knew how well such a confession would go over. Best case scenario, Nick would give him a pained smile and change the subject after a fatal pause. Worst? Sam didn’t even want to think about what sort of emotional hell he would be opening himself up to.
“I don’t have any good advice that you want to take.” Castiel said rather pointedly, like talking to a very stubborn child. “But if you ever want to talk out loud again I am willing to sit and listen and cast quieter and harsher judgments on your poor choices.” He stood. “I need to go back to work now though. The sandwich was very nice. Thank you, Sam.”

Sam felt like laughing. He guessed that this was why Dean liked Cas so much. The man didn’t mess around. “You’re welcome?” That might be the right answer, it earned him an approving nod if nothing else.


Sadly, that night wasn’t any different from the many that had come before and Sam woke up from a dead sleep around two in the morning, gasping for breath, feeling unmistakably guilty as his addled brain figured out why he was so sweaty and sticky. He hadn’t been this much of a mess since highschool.

The only thing that kept it from being absolutely mortifying was that he was the only one who ever needed to know about it.

He cleaned himself up as best and as quietly as he could. Suffering the cold of his bedroom from outside the protection of his blankets just long enough to change into clean boxers and sweats. No hesitation before crawling back into bed beneath all those lovely blankets and he was surprised at how well he managed to ignore the momentary confusion and disappointment when he remembered that he was alone.

Still very much so, alone.

Why did he keep thinking that that might suddenly change?

It was going to take some effort to get reaccustomed to sleeping in a bed all by himself.

A few restless minutes later and he wasn’t entirely sure if he had fallen back asleep or if he was still on the outskirts of wakefulness when he found himself texting Nick. The phone glowing like a dying star, captive beneath the blankets. Painfully bright.

-you asleep yet? And his thumb was hitting send practically on its own accord.

Unfortunately Nick texted back. Almost immediately. –it’s not even 3 yet. Why would I be sleeping?

Sam almost sent something incriminating like ‘I miss you’ but managed to change it to ‘I miss having someone else in bed’- which actually wasn’t a great improvement.

-it’s kind of cold He added in a feeble attempt at saving face.

-youre cold?? You took my space heater with you when you left. Im freezing my ass off here.

Sam smiled at his phone before he managed to drop it on his face, which was another thing he was grateful that no one was around to witness.

-turn the heater on. He sent with one eye closed, lingering ache.

-the heater doesnt have your smile
Sam felt that kind of warm affection that he only really got when he was drunk or half asleep.

-you have school in a few hours?

Sam sent back a negative and was surprised by Nick’s next message.

-come get coffee with me

-it’s 2:45 in the morning. Sam pointed out even though he felt it a bit unnecessary.

-coffee isn't illegal before 6

-it’s got to be below 40 outside. I’m not getting on your bike. I was a fair argument in his opinion.

-we can take my car

And that is exactly how Sam found himself sneaking out of his own house in the middle of the night to run away with his boyfriend. He must have just been looking for an excuse, some action or reaction, any words that he could use to make sure that they would actually be able to move past that kiss.

Sitting in the passenger seat, hands held up to the little vent that was blowing hot air with all its might, Sam watched the nocturnal city lights giving way to stars and an empty stretch of highway that rambled on into nothingness. Void above, void below. And here sat Sam in the middle of it.

Good god, but he should be sleeping right now.

“Where is this coffee that you promised exactly?” Sam asked, only slightly concerned at his own apparent kidnapping as they passed the city limits, the sign flaring up briefly in the car’s headlights.

Nick was tight jawed against the cold that hadn’t quite been vanquished yet, the collar of his leather jacket popped up in an attempt to keep the back of his neck warm. “Pacifica.”

“That’s a half an hour drive… for coffee.”

“It’s really good coffee. There’s a place out in Monterey too, but that’s almost two hours and it felt a little ridiculous and out of the way.”

“You’re a little ridiculous.” Sam sniped back, at the same time he was smiling in the dark of the car where his amusement could be easily hidden.

“And out of the way?” Nick asked, finishing the thought.

“No. I think you’ve been in the way since I met you.”

“In the way of what?”

Sam yawned wide enough that his jaw popped. “Everything.”

Nick considered this for a moment before nodding with a hint of a smile all his own. “Fair enough.”

A quiet that was almost comfortable settled into the cab of the car and Sam quickly realized that he was at risk for drifting back to sleep. If he dozed off now, during the last trip that they might have
together…

It made his chest hurt. He’d had hours to think about Castiel’s simple advice. Hours to talk himself out of taking such damning advice.

Instead he would follow the coward’s way out. The option that was least likely to see his heart trampled underfoot. He would just keep pushing forward. Don’t upset the status quo. Nick wanted things to stay how they had been. Sam wanted that too… kind of. Well, not really. But at the same time he didn’t want not that.

So he would just keep up pretenses for a few more days.

That’s all he had left.

He could do this for one more week.

They’d come too far to start sabotaging things now.

And many other lies he’d been telling himself so convincingly that he had started to actually believe it.

He rubbed a hand over his eyes, trying to focus on the shadowed scenery wizzing past outside, but there wasn’t more than a quarter moon tonight, and the coastal roads didn’t have much to offer other than pale sand dunes anyways.

“Nick?”

The man humphed softly in acknowledgment.

But Sam had no idea what he wanted to say. He sort of panicked. “I – I missed you.”

Sam was not all that good at playing it cool.

For some reason the little stutter got Nick laughing, just a soft chuckle that made his shoulders bounce. “I missed you too, darlin’.”

And it was completely unfair that he still called Sam that stupid nickname. What should have been a joke the first night that they met had turned into something utterly charming and equally distracting.

“How’s school going?” The terrible man continued in a light tone.

Ah, they could to this. This was nice. This was familiar.

The two of them made some of that casually awkward small talk that had introduced them to each other months ago. They spoke of school, and Nick’s job, and the weather. Plans for that summer. Things that they’d both done ten or fifteen summers ago- and just generally stupid and distracting things that started with safe words like ‘I’ and nothing that contained ‘we’ or ‘us’.

No one mentioned the fact that they were supposed to break up sometime in the next five or so days. Neither of them brought up the rough, slow kiss that Sam had given Nick a week ago. They didn’t talk about the few days that they’d spent in bed within arm’s reach of each other.

It honestly felt like there was a lot more left unsaid during that drive.

But that’s alright.
At least it was, because at some point the warm glow of Pacifica lit up the sky as they crested one of the dunes. Orange and gold lights reflecting off the ocean, making the little city look almost twice its size. Had it already been half an hour? There was no clock in the car- but judging by the speedometer and the fact that they were pushing the triple digits, it was safe to bet that they’d made the drive in record time.

Nick downshifted the car as they came down that last hill and took the freeway off ramp. They idled at a traffic light and the man’s had slipped from the gearshift to Sam’s leg, just a touch above his knee.

Whatever childhood story that Sam had been encouraged into telling died on his lips, his mouth going dry as Nick’s thumb made slow circles on his thigh. Sam suffered in relative silence, struggling to figure out how he was supposed to respond to this sudden development, and what on earth it was supposed to mean?

Why the hell was Nick touching him?!

It took just about everything Sam had in him at this ungodly hour to not put and hand over Nick’s and pull it up into his lap where it could cause some real trouble.

Sam thanked the dark that the man couldn’t see what made him shift so uncomfortably in his seat. Fighting down his body’s natural hormonal response to such unexpected physical contact.

Wouldn’t it be just fantastic if this wasn’t a problem that he had?

Traditionally straight men who could stick to their convictions must have it so easy.

Though looking over at his friend’s stony profile- maybe those straight guys still had problems all their own.

The traffic light changed, bathing the intersection in a surreal green glow and Nick’s hand went back to the gear shift and Sam’s knee felt very cold at the abandonment. They were the only car on the road, the little city’s streets completely empty, but it was the middle of the night outside of tourist season. They had the whole world to themselves, or at least it felt that way. Nick didn’t even slow down for most of the stop signs; much less actually stop for them. Sam was all raw nerves at this point and the blatant disregard for traffic laws only made it worse.

He closed his eyes and didn’t open them again until the car came to a full and complete stop.

As luck would have it, the coffee shop was closed. It wouldn’t open until four. And such things were keeping well with the theme of the last few days, so Sam wasn’t going to start complaining now.

Nick killed the engine and the windows started fogging over almost immediately. Within seconds Sam could no longer make out the empty parking lot outside or the little empty storefronts.

“You drive too fast.” He whispered to the car, a soft lecture to a machine that was only built for one thing, and that was what Sam was telling it not to do.

“We made it in one piece.” Nick scoffed.

“In half the time we were supposed to.” Sam pointed out, looking at the white windows because it felt a hell of a lot safer than turning in his seat to face the man he was talking to.

“And you’re complaining about us making good time?”
“Now we have to wait.” He pointed out, glancing sideways only far enough to see how tightly Nick was strangle the steering wheel.

Using the clumsy little crank, Sam unrolled his window, hoping to let in some cooler air and defog things just a bit. It didn’t help, but it let them hear the sea, relentless crashing of waves. It immediately brought Sam back to their trip to San Francisco right before Christmas, sitting next to the bonfire, curled around Nick for warmth while the ocean kept rolling and the rain pattered down. And Pacifica was different from the beach out at Santa Cruz. Here there were sheer cliffs and rough breakers on either side of the bay. It made the sound louder somehow, trapping it.

“You think someone left the stuff to make a fire out of the beach?”

Nick audibly swallowed, a rough little noise before finding his voice. “Maybe… did you want to go look?”

Sam nodded at the dark night outside instead of trying to speak, but the man must have been watching him because he said “Alright,” and opened his door.

They walked down to the beach, side by side, shoulders bumping now and then and it was mostly for warmth. That’s what Sam told himself at least. From one end of the beach to the other they trudged through the sand, not so much as a piece of driftwood in sight.

“Parks and Recs district sure does keep things tidy out here, don’t they?” Nick wondered aloud as they passed beneath the pier.

“Real inconsiderate of them.”

“Right?” He bumped into Sam a bit harder than necessary, sending the younger man stumbling sideways a few feet.

“Hey,” Sam caught himself against one of the pylons, laughing softly. “I don’t know how I’m going to explain all this sand in my shoes when I get home.”

Nick waited for Sam to catch up, hand deep in his pockets, and even in the deep shadows in which they stood, his smile was hard to miss. “You didn’t tell your brother where you were going?”

“First off, he was asleep like a normal human, because it’s the middle of the night. Second, even if I had, how would ‘I’m going to get coffee’ possible explain why I’ve got sand in my shoes?”

“Well, I guess when you put it like that…”

Sam gave him a shove back, sending his friend into the surf, splashing in the inch deep wave.

“Oh my god.” Nick almost managed to sound angry, but he was laughing too hard. “Sam Winchester, you are a monster.”

“You started it.” He scuttled sideways to avoid the dangerous blond man who was suddenly darting after him with long reaching arms.

“Come back here.”

“No thanks.” Sam tried to run. He was used to having legs that were good at covering a lot of ground. It generally kept him safe from purist. However, Nick was almost as tall as him and his legs just as long. They chased each other down the beach, kicking sand everywhere and laughing loud enough to challenge the crashing waves.
Nick stopped to catch his breath, bending over, hands on his knees and Sam got a little worried when his friend stayed that was for more than a few seconds.

And it’s not that Nick was particularly old or out of shape, but he didn’t seem the type of man who spend a lot of time running around. Sam still went jogging most mornings (weather and health permitting), he had to have better stamina.

“Hey, you ok?”

Nick didn’t answer, so Sam closed the distance between them, worry settling in deeper. For all he knew the man had asthma and was having some kind of attack… or he was just a dirty liar, because as soon as Sam was close enough Nick pounced on him, letting out a victorious whoop of joy as they went tumbling to the sand.

“You son of a bitch.” Sam borrowed his brother’s favorite phrase as he struggled to focus on the man who was lying atop him, a very warm and solid weight.

“Did I win?”

“You cheated.” He huffed, sullen, trying very hard not to smile.

“I didn’t see any rules posted. Can’t cheat if there’s no rules.”

Sam put his arms around Nick’s neck in what more closely resembled a choke hold than anything even halfway friendly. “I could roll us both out into the water.”

“You wouldn’t.” Nick braced himself, grasping at the sand beneath them, then at Sam’s shoulders and the folds of his sweatshirt.

“I wouldn’t?”

“No.” Nick said carefully, gently, trying to talk some sense into the younger man laying underneath him. “You’re not the kind of guy who would risk drowning himself just to prove a point.”

“I’m not?” He managed to sound rather skeptical as he gave Nick an experimental tug.

“No. Definitely not. You’ve got a kind face.” As if that were any basis for such trust or hope. “Look at those dimples. Someone with dimples like that would never drag me out to sea.”

Which was a fair enough assessment, so Sam loosened his grip, relaxing into the sand. It was only then that he realized where he was. That the insanity of this situation started to sink in.

“Do you think the coffee shop is open yet?” And his voice didn’t shake too badly.

Nick had the decency to look utterly confused for a moment. “Coffee?”

“Coffee.” Sam sounded out slowly, hoping that his friend could get it together before he too became aware of their borderline romantic cuddling on the beach.

“Oh. Yeah, they’ve probably opened by now.” The man seemed almost reluctant to climb to his feet, offering down a hand to help Sam up.

The shop had opened and Sam had managed to shake the majority of the sand from his hair by the time the two of them stumbled into the brightly lit little café. Though the barista looked at them like they were lunatics, she made them coffee and handed over two muffins, her reluctant


expression turning bright as Nick dropped a twenty into the tip jar.

They must have still looked like mad men, dragging themselves up from the beach, a little wet and rather sandy, wild eyed in the early sleepless hour. But they took their breakfast and went outside to drink it, so what did it matter what they looked like.

The coffee tasted just like coffee. Nothing special about it. No reason for the drive all the way out here, except for the company. And Sam found himself smiling as he drank, realizing that most of the anxiety that had been plaguing him for the last week had all by left. He was in far too good of a mood to worry that he might have ruined things. Nick was teasing him and chuckling too much for the world to be as wrong as it had felt.

::. Maybe it was just Sam’s imagination, but the drive home seemed to take roughly an eternity. The dunes rising and falling on either side of the car and the sky still dark, not even thinking of changing yet to the odd colors of predawn.

He glanced over at the speedometer and was surprised to see that they we hardly even going fifty.

It was a rather intentional speed, and a horrible thought gripped Sam, that despite the light moment that they’d managed at the beach, that this might be it. The end of it. The end of three really good months.

Sam was exhausted down to his bones, a dull need for sleep chewing away at the caffeine buzz that had his hands shaking. His thought felt disjointed, dreamlike at best- because this wasn’t right. They had a handful of days left to them. Almost a week until Valentine’s Day and the breakup that they’d planned months in advance. You don’t drag someone out of bed and all the way out to the sea just to break up with them.

But if that’s true then why were they driving so slowly and why was Nick being so quiet?

And Sam had every intention of asking if his friend something asinine to break the silence, but instead he heard himself lining up the words “that kiss the other night,” and then he sort of trailed off. Realizing with horror what he’d been saying, and knowing that it was too much to hope that Nick hadn’t heard him.

“Hey, Mister College, we had a written agreement. It never happened.” Nick said in a very soft, very firm voice. “And you’ll only confuse things if you bring up something that never happened.”

Yup. Just like that.

It never happened.

Sam had never kissed him. Had never crossed that line.

They had it in writing.

Sam turned in his seat, but not towards Nick. He turned to look out the window because those barren sand dunes were more forgiving than his other option.

Just like that their quiet lost any semblance of comfort and Sam realized that even if there had been only gentleness in Nick’s words that he wasn’t going to be able to do this.

Mile markers rolled past them, flaring up for a second at most as the headlights hit them.
They’d only lose the last few days off the tail end of their original plan if they just stopped tonight. Admirably, that’s a pretty good run. Three months worth of a relationship that never should have worked in the first place. Nothing to be ashamed of.

Sam forced out the question, “so… do you want to break up early?”

“What? No.” Nick’s voice had gone startlingly loud in the small confines of the car. “Fuck, Sam. I don’t want to break up.”

Sam looked over his shoulder, taking in all his friend’s angry lines and angles.

“I just wanted some god damned coffee. You think I’m going to drive you out to the middle of fucking nowhere to tell you that we’ve convinced our brothers well enough, but this little game’s getting too weird and I want out?” He managed to make the suggestion sound utterly ridiculous. “I could have done that over the phone.”

“Maybe you just wanted an isolated place to dump the body.”

Nick kind of laughed at that, but it wasn’t really a joke so Sam didn’t join him.

“Look, we were both tired.” The older man tried before the silence became too oppressive. “And it happened and I don’t expect you to apologize- because I sure as hell don’t plan to.”

Which was unfair, because Sam would. He would apologize in a hot second if he thought that it might make this better.

The emotion that Nick chose to put into his words didn’t have a name. “I like kissing. I like you. Those two things were bound to try and mix at some point. But it didn’t work. The end.”

But it had worked and that was the crux of this whole damn thing.

Those few seconds that they’d let their mouths meet had definitely worked for Sam. He couldn’t keep his memory of that kiss from barreling through his mind like a destructive force of nature—any more than he could keep the little shreds of the dream he’d woken from so recently from returning to play havoc with what little sanity he had left at this unnaturally early hour.

They’d been in the kitchen, because naturally that was the best place for such things, only Sam had been the one on the counter and Nick had been the one between his knees. Kissing him until it hurt. His hands making rough work of Sam’s jeans while they ground their bodies together as much as their awkward, counter-bound tangle would allow for. And there was no basis for the dream. No foundation in reality, but that hadn’t stopped it. It had been a bad dream. It had been a fantastic dream. But mostly it had just been wet.

Sam pressed the soft spot below his thumb over his mouth, looking out his window and trying very hard to keep his thoughts and body under control.

“Look… I like you.” Nick made a bad noise that almost resembled a laugh. “I mean, obviously. That’s how this whole mess got started. But you’re my friend and… and I think for the sake of not fucking that up I’m going to stop talking right now.”

If you’re going to be turned down there were certainly worse ways for it to happen.

“Nick,” Sam considered his words carefully, “even if it was for a stupid reason, I’m glad that I met you.” He managed to find enough courage to look over a second time, just quick enough to see Nick’s eyes wide and confused, his lips curving up and then down like he couldn’t decide how he was meant to feel as he shot little glances from the road, over at the passenger seat.
Nick was all sorts of hesitation and false starts before he finally got out, “Would it be too weird if I told you that you’re pretty much my favorite person?”

That was possible the worst thing that anyone had ever told Sam.

“No.” Sam’s eyes stung as he struggled to focus on the scrolling landscape outside his window. “I think I can be ok with that.”
Hi, in case you haven't been paying attention, I have this horrible problem of planning one small event in a chapter, writing around 8thousand words, realizing I've never reached the singular plot point I needed to get to, and then give up and just posting what I've got.

This chapter reached a whopping 14thousand before I started looking for a place to cut it in two. No one needs 50+ pages of samifer in one sitting. When would you have your snack, or go outside, or say hello to your friends and family? or study?

...you know who you are.
I'm still expecting you to do well on your tests even if you're taking a break to read this nonsense.

In the cold light of morning, hours past the drive back from the beach, Sam couldn’t say why he’d let Nick stay the night. He couldn’t even remember which of them had suggested it or if they’d just come to some sort of communal, idiotic decision.

It certainly hadn’t been one of the better choices that they’d made since they’d met, though it wasn’t the worst either. Nick even behaved himself like a perfect gentleman for the first time ever and didn’t tuck a single hand or foot under the younger man for warmth.

Sam had never felt so lonely while only inches away from another human being.

But that was last night and this was this morning and there was Nick, hibernating beside him under a veritable mountain of blankets in that way that he did so very well, completely hidden- all except for one arm.

One arm had ventured from that burrow to hook easily around Sam’s waist.

And Sam wasn’t like Nick. He didn’t get all that cold, especially not with a well insulated body beside him. He’d willingly sacrificed his blankets during the night, stretched out over his half of the small bed and there wasn’t much between him and that arm now other than a bit of tshirt.

It was a beautifully crippling feeling but Sam was too terrified to enjoy the situation he’d found himself in. He couldn’t move.

Not to pull away and not to draw closer.

Nick’s fingers were softly flexing against his side, unconscious little twitches every few minutes.

If Sam had been a weaker man he might have done something irrevocably stupid. Instead he let himself have a long, slow stretch, arching enough that his shirt pulled up just a touch. It was enough that it let Nick’s twitching fingers crush bare skin and Sam thought that it might be the end of him right then and there.
There was no point in tracking how long he lay there, muscles tight with the strain to keep himself at the right angle for optimal touching. It could have been a few minutes or it could have been an hour- hell it could have been all day- and it still wouldn’t have been long enough to satisfy Sam. It wasn’t low enough either.

But that was a problem all on its own.

With more courage than he thought that he had, Sam managed to crawl out from the gentle embrace of the living bear trap that was Nick.

It wasn’t easy to do, but it helped to maintain whatever peace they had left between them after last night. Sam left a very important part of himself back up in that bed, but he could hear the distinct sound of his brother fumbling around in the kitchen and there was safety in those familiar sounds.

Today was Wednesday and Dean should already have left for work, though that fact was slow at getting through Sam’s brain. He came all the way down stairs and found himself standing dumbly in the doorway to the kitchen, looking at a man who was definitively not his brother, struggling to make coffee.

“Morning.” He managed to squeeze the words past the complete bewilderment that he felt.

Why on earth was the Castiel in his kitchen?

More importantly, why was he wearing Dean’s ACDC tshirt?

The accountant looked positively small without the protection of one of those suits that he always wore. Almost vulnerable in just a shirt and boxers, with his skinny legs and bare feet. It was positively surreal.

The dark haired man looked up from the cupboard he was digging through and he smiled in a completely shameless manner. “Good morning. Where are the mugs?”

Sam slowly pointed at the cupboards beside the refrigerator. “Where’s Dean?” His brother and Cas must have had plans for this morning… yeah. That must be it. It was logical and reasonable and absolutely failed to explain Castiel’s outfit, but no sanity preserving lie was perfect.

“He’s still in bed.” The man said simply as he pulled down two mugs, hesitating for a second. “Would you like some too?”

“No thank you.”

There had to be logic in this somewhere… right? But the only solution that Sam’s brain was giving him couldn’t be the right one. It couldn’t.

He decided to try and supervise these goings on because it gave him a familiar place to stand. “Dean likes his coffee to be at least half creamer.”

“I know. He showed me how he takes his coffee last week when he spent the night at my place.”

Last week? When Sam was out of the house Dean had… that wasn’t right. That couldn’t be right. Dean had been working on getting John out of the house- he wouldn’t have had time to…

Then again, Dad hadn’t stayed for the whole week. Only a handful of days.

That would leave plenty of time for Dean to visit his friend and… and spend the night.
But why?

Unfortunately, the why was starting to become disturbingly obvious the longer Sam tried to make sense of Castiel’s more than usually disheveled appearance.

Sam flatly refused to give the idea any weight. It was just too… no. No. Castiel didn’t come home with Dean after the drive-ins last night.

He couldn’t have.

It was too weird.

So Sam stood, feeling incredibly lost as he watched Castiel take two cups of coffee and head back upstairs.

Sam had problems a plenty to call his own, but for a few seconds they felt a little less important.

He made some breakfast, which consisted of a very big mug of very black coffee and by the time Nick stumbled downstairs Sam was almost human feeling again. His head unpleasantly clear.

Like a photo negative of Sam, still half asleep, bleary eyed and staggering just a little, Nick made his way to the table. Instead of taking a seat like a normal human, he leaned down to plant a soft kiss on the top of Sam’s head.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Sam said back smooth as you like, no perceivable tremor in his voice. “Coffee’s in the pot.”

Nick’s mouth hadn’t left Sam’s hair and he whispered. “You’re too good to me.” Hot breath tickling along his scalp.

It was harder than it should have been to find all the right words and then to put them in some kind of order that resembled the bones of the English language. “I… uh, I didn’t make it. Cas did. But I’ll send him your compliments.”

Nick straightened, hand on the back of Sam’s chair. “Excuse me?”

Sam looked up, head resting back against Nick’s stomach. “Your brother, the nice, quiet one, he made the coffee.”

“Oh.” Nick said slowly, but not like he really understood- and Sam didn’t have the heart to tell him that his brother was still here, still upstairs and most likely doing things that no one other than Dean was going to be approving of.

Such thoughts.

Thoughts like that could haunt a man.

Big brothers weren’t supposed to bring boys home.

Sam didn’t know if he should feel happy for them, or disturbed, or just plain confused. But there were no rules that said he couldn’t pick all of the above, so that’s where he decided to settle.

He sipped at his coffee and watched Nick wander around the kitchen, opening just about every cupboard possible before finding a mug and struggling through fixing up his drink how he liked it.
After almost five minutes Sam realized that he couldn’t take it anymore. “Oh- for god’s sake.” He got to his feet and pushed Nick towards the table. “I’ll do it.”

“But you don’t know how I like my coffee.”

Sam snorted and simply carried on- because yes, he did. In less than a minute he was setting the man’s drink down in front of him, far too pleased with himself.

But it was useless knowledge. Yeah, he knew how Nick liked his coffee. What the hell was he supposed to do with this information a week from now? He supposed he could anonymously send his friend drinks on a regular basis after they became exfriends.

“You alright?” Nick gently questioned, worry in his pale eyes.

That’s when Sam realized he was making a bad face, his whole body trying to recoil from the dreadful thoughts that he couldn’t seem to shake. He gave one of his best smiles. “Yeah, just a bit tired.”

The older man peered over his perfect cup of joe, vague suspicion in his gaze, but he let it drop. “Do you have class later?”

“No until after noon.”

“I can give you a ride.”

“No, that’s alright.”

Which was the wrong answer, or at least it was said far too quickly because it was met with a sharp silence.

Some days it felt like Sam couldn’t do anything right.

“You want to run away from home together instead?” Nick suddenly offered with startling cheerfulness.

Sam didn’t miss a beat. “We did that last night.”

“But we don’t have to come back this time.” He promised, little smile dancing through his eyes even as he did his best to hide his mouth behind his mug. “I’ve got some money saved up. Anywhere you want to go.”

“I got class in a few hours.” Which was not the same thing as a ‘no’- so much as a ‘there’s no way that I can’. And god but he wish that he could. He had no idea why he was being given an offer like this, except that Nick was a borderline lunatic who didn’t seem to give a single fuck about what was socially acceptable for him to do or not do, or ask, or offer.

“After class?”

Sam felt his mouth go tight, pressing his lips into a thin line of denial. “I’ve got classes for the next four months.”

“After those classes?”

Would it be inappropriate to grab Nick by the shoulders and start shaking him violently while yelling ‘what the hell are you trying to do to me’?”
It felt like it might be inappropriate.

Sam almost did it anyways.

Instead he managed, “for the summer, as friends? Sure.” He had no idea what he was even saying. This wasn’t him. He didn’t say things like this. This was just mean. He had no idea that he was even capable of hating himself this much.

Nick gave him a complicated expression in return.

Sam swore the man didn’t even blink.

And what did he want? What was he expecting? Sam was giving the best offer that he thought he could actually keep. He wasn’t a strong man. He was surprised he was even capable of this much when the only thing he wanted to do was forcibly drag the table out of the way and crawl into Nick’s lap. Which is actually not a fair thing to do to a man who had finally expressed his personal boundaries.

Lightly joking around for the sake of upsetting family was one thing. Actually doing the things that they joked about so much was quite another.

And that was ok. Really. Sam got that Nick didn’t think of him that way. He didn’t like it, but he got it. And it was what it was.

“How do you feel about camping?” He offered softly.

Nick’s eyebrows went up a fraction.

“We can go to Yosemite… maybe we’ll even see a bear.”

It was like someone threw a switch, Nick’s whole face lit up and he started laughing. The difference was night and day, and everything was ok again.

Or at least as ok as things were going to get from here on out.

“I’ve heard the place is crawling with bears.” Sam pressed on.

“It’s a damn lie, I tell you.” Nick had to set his mug down, pressing the back of a hand to his mouth, holding in a very healthy laugh. “People who say they see bears out there are just attention seeking bastards.”

“You know, I’ve actually heard that too.”

Nick kicked him under the table, nothing too hard, but he hit bone and it would probably leave a bruise. Sam kicked back, and as childish as it was they still managed to conduct a well and truly spectacular foot fight. It ended in a tie when Sam’s coffee got bumped to hard and sent a dark spill racing over the table top.

“Damn it.” Sam pushed himself up and went running for the paper towels while Nick cupped a hand under the edge of the table to catch the slow drips before they could hit the floor.

“I got it. I got it.” He bumped Nick aside with a hip and started sopping up the mess. “See, this is why we can’t have nice things.”

“No offence, but it’s kind of a crappy table.”
“I meant the moment. The moment was a nice thing.” The second the words left his mouth he realized how stupid they sounded, but no mocking reply came to him and that was even worse somehow. Sam risked a glance down and saw that his friend was still holding a careful handful of coffee. “Are you planning to save that for later?”

“… maybe.” And Nick wasn’t looking at Sam, he was shifting awkwardly in his seat, handful of coffee, like he did this all the time.

Sam nudged him again, knocking Nick’s hip with a knee- and that finally got the other man going.

Nick went to the sink and washed his hands. He didn’t come back to the table though. He just stayed there on the far side of the kitchen, looking out the window at the backyard. “I’m not all that big on camping.”

“Oh.” Sam tossed the wet paper towels into the trash. “Are you more of a road trip to Tijuana type instead?”

“I’m a ‘I’ll follow you anywhere you want to go- but I’d prefer it not be camping’ type.”

“Backpacking across Russia.”

That was an odd enough suggestion that Nick actually turned around. “Ok, no. That’s still basically camping, but you have to walk all day- and why the hell Russia?”

“Vast wilderness. Solitude. Radioactive bears.” Did there need to be any better reasons?

“I almost accused you of trying to get me alone… but then there you go with the bears again.”

“The bears are just coincidental at this point.” Sam tried a smile, it’s all he felt that he could manage at this stage in the conversation. He’d sort of backed himself into a verbal corner and had no idea how to talk his way out of it.

“Riiight.” Nick dragged the word out, looking highly skeptical, leaning against the counter in the same wrinkled tshirt and jeans that he’d worn yesterday and last night. And he had no right looking so good in such a rumpled set of clothes. Practically criminal and wholly distracting the way he was folding his arms over his chest, making little creases where his shirt was pulled tight over his shoulders.

“Maybe we could drive up the coast. Keep going until we hit Canada. Do touristy things during the day. Stay in crappy motels that only have single beds at night…”

“You be careful, darlin’. I might take you up on an offer like that, and then where would we be?”

Where indeed?

Half an hour, and two more drastic topic changes that didn’t ease any of the tension, later Sam found himself lingering in the doorway, watching Nick shifting anxiously from one foot to the other. He needed to go home and change before work- just like Sam needed to get a shower and go to school. If this had been a few weeks ago, someone would have leaned in and kissed someone’s cheek. No one ever really used to care who instigated the little goodbye.

But that was before and this was now, and they both just stood there like two emotionally repressed jackasses.

“You got any time between now and Valentine’s Day?” Nick said after two or three stuttering false starts, even now not quite meeting Sam’s eyes. Looking at his mouth or neck or pretty much
anything that didn’t speak of any commitment to the question. “We could get dinner or something… you know, one last time.”

Those words. One last time. Suddenly Sam felt like he was having a heart attack.

He was fairly certain that it took roughly an hour for him to manage a tight smile and half an answer. “Aw, Luci, you wanna’ take me out for dinner?”

“I was thinking of ordering out actually. We could stay in. Watch a movie.”

“So… same as we normally do then?”

Nick took a moseying little step closer, the toes of his boots nudging Sam’s bare feet. “It’d be damn strange to go and start changing things now, right?” And who stands that close? There was only a breath between them and it was hardly enough.

Sam shrugged, because this late in the game what would be the point in trying something new-also, he honestly preferred to be alone with Nick, not dressing up and going out someplace nice where he’d have to watch every little things that he said or did.

Though, maybe for safety reasons it would be far wiser to go out. Staying in could only lead to more of this. And this? This was bad. This was dangerous. This is just about as close as they’d managed to get back at Nick’s apartment before Sam suddenly found himself kissing him.

It seemed that every time Sam had found himself alone with Nick lately he’d managed to take things from uneasy to horrifically terrible.

And as par for the course, somewhere in the middle of that reflection, he became aware that Nick was saying something to him- but Sam’s ears weren’t working. All he could think was that despite the man having slightly red eyes from not enough sleep, more stubble than usual, and morning breath half hidden under the strong scent of coffee, Sam still wanted to lick him like a lollipop should be licked.

He mused that there was probably no clearer definition of lovesick.

Or at least of being wound up tighter than an eight day clock.

Now, rumor had it that Sam was a smart college kid, with a stunning GPA, and great potential, and yet he continuously managed to misinterpret almost every little move that Nick made. Sam knew that he was just reading into this what he wanted to. Clinging to those little moments when he could lie to himself and pretend that this whole thing wasn’t just the biggest, most painful mistake that he’d ever sunk himself into.

It was just too easy to fool himself into thinking that Nick’s intentions were something real and actual and not just their cover story and all of its agonizing manifestations.

It was getting too hard to remind himself of that fact, as the man reached out and tenderly thumbed along Sam’s jawbone. A gentle touch that was as casual as it was intimate.

Sam hated every second of it. Hated himself for how he let his eyes close, and for how he leaned into Nick’s hand.

A very soft, very slow kiss was placed on his cheek and nothing in the world could have made Sam open his eyes right then.

“I don’t mind being a little late for work.” Nick spoke in a stunningly low, life ruining kind of
whisper. “We could head back upstairs, fool around until you have to go to school.”

Sam laughed because it was what he was supposed to do, and also because it occupied his mouth and kept him from begging ‘oh god, yes’. He managed a gentle shove to Nick’s chest and a half hearted “I’ve still got to go take a shower to get all the sand out of my hair, jerk.”

He really should have dropped his hands after that instead of leaving them there on the man’s chest, but it was comfortable with them standing so close, with Nick still pressed against his cheek.

“I could come with. I am a very good helper.” One of Nick’s rough hands settled against Sam’s side, just above his hip in a way that felt almost menacing.

“You are the opposite of a very good anything.”

So was Sam at this point, but hey, he never said he wasn’t a hypocrite.

Nick chuckled, just a soft little puff of laughter against Sam’s ear and the younger man broke. He slid his arms around his friend’s shoulders and pulled him into the tightest hug that he could manage. The laugh turned into a breathy startled noise, but then Nick’s hand was leaving Sam’s hip for the small of his back and that grumpy blonde was making up the other half of the bone bruising embrace.

In the three months that they’d known each other they had never actually hugged. They’d looped arms casually around each other, they’d leaned against one another- but Sam had never held Nick against him and suddenly he’d realized that if he didn’t do it now he would probably never have a chance to.

And oh, he’d been missing out on something wonderful. They fit together like they were made for just this arrangement. Hips and shoulders and knees all lining up with perfection. There wasn’t enough room for an sliver of sunlight to pass between them, and that seemed like a good thing in that moment- and then it seemed like a particularly wonderful thing as Nick’s hand slid from his cheek to tangle in his hair and his friend kissed his cheek once more.

How long can two people hug in an open doorway in the bitter cold of a February morning?

Indefinitely.

Sam didn’t want to let go. Even if he knew that he should. That he had to.

He dared, just for a second, to be brave and say the right thing.

“It might just be easier to say goodbye right now and lie to our brothers about the breakup later-”

“Fuck that.” Nick interrupted very forcefully. “I get at least one more night with you. One more dinner. One more movie. One more time to try and keep my hands warm using your unhealthy body heat. One more chance to say something that I can regret for the rest of my foreseeable future- and you don’t get to take that from me. We had a deal, darlin’. We shook on it.” All this was said in that same rough whisper against Sam’s ear that made his stomach flutter and goosebumps run up his bare arms (or maybe that last bit was just because it was really cold outside and they were just standing there in the doorway, exposed to the wind).

And well… they had shaken on it. That was the same as a binding contract. Sam didn’t really have a choice, did he?

They were still holding each other, tight enough that Sam couldn’t remember why he should be
letting go. He buried his face in the side of Nick’s throat, feeling the soft warmth of him, smelling the salt of his skin, kissing the slow steady pulse just below the surface.

Now, Nick didn’t say no.

He didn’t say anything.

Not that he should have had to- Sam knew well enough that this was not something that he should be doing, but he was sort of caught up in the moment. He kissed his friend’s throat again, slower, a bit more thoroughly. Teeth scraping along tender skin and Nick was fisting a hand in his hair, making a noise very close to a growl.

That got Sam’s attention, his breath catching in his chest and choking him like smoke. Completely mortified at what he’d found himself doing, he started to fight with his body, struggling to let go and step back to somewhere safer.

Nick wasn’t loosening his grip, fingers digging into his scalp, holding Sam so close. “I know it’s probably been awhile for you- but that actually means don’t stop.”

“Nick, oh god, I—”

“Please.”

And who begs ‘please’ to something like this?

More importantly, who says no?

He kissed that offered throat with full permission and not a single idea what, or why he was doing it- except that it was good. Nick tasted like the sea and sleep, and as Sam worked a gentle bruise into the man’s skin he really stopped caring about the semantics behind it.

Biting Nick was another one of those things that Sam couldn’t find the ability to give a single good god damn about. Teeth tentatively cutting into the arch of his collar bone, Nick made a very deliberate, very bad noise, and Sam lost it.

He managed one and a half shuffling steps forwards, backing Nick into the doorframe, pinning him against that beautifully stable vertical surface that he’d been dreaming about. Fingers tightened in his hair to the point that it was almost painful, and someone was grabbing his ass, but it wasn’t as teasing or unexpected as Christmas, and no one heard him complaining.

Nick slid a knee between Sam’s, their bodies fit just that much closer together, just as he took an almost pained sounding breath and whispered a gentle stream of ‘fuck’ and ‘harder’ and many other things that you don’t say to your friend.

Right then there were quite a few things going on that crossed the friend-line.

But no one was complaining about them either.

“Oh my god!” Dean’s voice was as jarring as one of those tests of the emergency broadcasting system. “Get a room, you two. No one wants to see that first thing in the morning.”

Except his big brother, who couldn’t have chosen a worse time to finally come down stairs.

Apparently he was complaining.

It was an odd feeling to hate someone while appreciating them with every fiber of your being.
Sam jumped away from Nick like he was a hot stove, trying to straighten his cloths and pretend that they hadn’t just been doing exactly what it looked like they’d been doing. And if the two men weren’t supposed to be dating then his reaction might have even made sense.

“Seriously. We talked about this. Not in the living room.” Dean looked halfway between nauseous and amused. However Castiel at his side was wild-eyed with shock, the smallest hint of pink on his cheeks.

“Sorry. Nick was just leaving. We were… saying goodbye.” Sure they were. That’s how everyone says goodbye, right?

Well, they should. It was a great and fairly memorable way to part.

“I don’t care what you were doing. I just don’t want to see it.” Dean grabbed his coat from where it was slung over the back of the couch. “And just because I’m leaving right now doesn’t mean you guys can keep going. Seriously.” He shook his head at Sam, mock disappointment struggling to stay the dominant emotion. “The neighbors can see.”

“Cassy?” Nick didn’t seem to have heard any of what was going on, instead focusing on the fact that his brother was just standing at the base of the stairs, looking very out of place (but dressed in his own clothes, which Sam was very grateful for). “Why are you here?”

“Good morning, Nick.” Castiel didn’t seem all that bothered by his brother’s abruptness, or at least he managed not to show it. “And hello again, Sam.” A knowing tone creeping in.

And he knew.

Oh good lord. He knew that the whole thing was a lie. Sam had told him yesterday- and now, less than twenty-four hours later he was getting caught necking. What was Castiel supposed to think? That Sam had taken his advice? That he’d told Nick.

It would certainly be a good excuse if it were true.

Too bad.

Not that Nick probably didn’t have a really good idea at this point that Sam wanted him.

But he had known since the first kiss (not the one on Christmas, no one was going to count Christmas at this point), and now, only a week later, Nick had a completely different reaction to roughly the same interaction.

So what the hell was going on?

He hadn’t exactly discouraged Sam.

With the confusing cloud of lust fading just as quickly as it had come, the young man was left with a lot of questions.

Was Nick just going along with it out of… kindness? That didn’t seem like something that anyone would do- not even Nick. You don’t neck in open doorways just because you feel bad for your friend and his pathetic little crush. You don’t moan like that.

Or maybe he was just that great of an actor. Sam’s back had been to the house and Nick had a clear view of the stairs. He could have just been playing around for the sake of upsetting Dean.

But that seemed too mean.
Didn’t it?

Sam had been about one more moan away from starting to see what sort of friction he could find between his and Nick’s hips.

And it wasn’t just Sam who’d gotten completely caught up in those few rough, tenuous seconds.

It couldn’t be just him.

Please, if there was any kind of mercy to the universe, his friend had felt something too.

But that hope was competing with the conversation that they’d had last night.

Sam’s head hurt.

He risked a look at Nick and all he saw was a man who looked worried for the sort of trouble that his little brother had gotten himself into. No embarrassment. No lustful haze in his eyes. Just worry and anger mixing as he looked from Castiel to Dean, thoughts forming visibly across his face and in the clenching of his fists. Bad, dangerous thoughts.

Even as dangerous as a protective older brother might be (Sam knew those lengths from personal experience) it was an opportunity to latch on to something other than the set of stunning bruises on Nick’s throat. Sam leapt at the chance.

“How were the movies last night?”

And Cas smiled. First at Sam, then at Dean, then at the floor, Nick, floor again. “The first one was very exciting. Not very believable, but there were lots of explosions and at least four car chases.”

Despite being only half brothers there were definitely a few hard to miss similarities between Castiel and Nick, but the older brother was never this good at looking this adorable. Nick was like a grumpy bulldog- and if they were going to use dog analogies then that made Cas a corgi puppy or something equally small and awkward and alarmingly cute.

“How was the second movie?” Sam couldn’t help himself.

Castiel turned bright red, all the way up to his ears. “I don’t know... I didn’t get a chance to see most of it.”

Sam turned slowly back to his brother, eyes wide with the unspoken question.

Without an ounce of guilt, Dean just shrugged and turned to Castiel, grinning. “Come on, I’ll give you a ride back to your car.” He didn’t even allow Sam to put in his two cents on this development before he hustled his boyfriend(?) out the door. “See you tonight, Sammy. Nick.” Little nod to the murderous blonde looming in the still wide open doorway, and then they were getting into the Impala and leaving.

“How mad would you be if I killed him?” Nick was the first to finally speak.

“It’s not that bad.” Which was a lie. “I don’t think they actually did anything other than go to the movies.” Which was an even bigger lie- but Sam was sort of attached to his brother and honestly wasn’t sure who would win in a fight.

“He said they were going to the drive-ins, but I didn’t think they would actually-” more fist clenching and a bit of audible teeth grinding. “If he touched my Cassy I swear I’ll skin him alive with a butter knife.”
“They’re both adults.” Sam reminded. “And if anything at all happened than it isn’t any worse than what we’ve been telling them we’ve been up to for months.”

“But you’re not a virgin and Castiel is- or at least he better still be, because he deserves a hell of a lot better than his first time being with your fucking brother in the backseat of that car.”

Sam didn’t think it was wise to comment that that was actually pretty much how he’d lost his own virginity (you know, except for trading Dean out for that cute, slightly older girl from school). He also didn’t think it would end well if he tried to get clarification, because he was almost certain that Castiel was older than him, and how do you get to your mid twenties and still have never…

And then Sam was getting a bit mad at Dean too. His big brother lacked certain levels of tack, and good sense, but at the same time, that actually seemed like something that he would do. Except not with a guy. Sam had just never imagined that he’d find himself in this particularly confusing crossroads of brotherly-ambiguous sexuality.

The only comfort that he had was that Dean hadn’t come down stairs and past them with anything even remotely resembling his usual postcoital swagger. Everything was probably still ok and platonic.

Maybe?

“I’ll talk to Dean, find out what happened.” For the sake of his own sanity as well as his friend’s.

Nick didn’t look like he was listening though, just standing half on the porch, staring daggers at the empty driveway.

“I’ll text you. Ok?”

Blinking like he was coming to the surface, Nick looked over at him. “Yeah.” His frown went funny, nose wrinkling, teeth showing for a second. “Yeah. That’s ok. I- Cassy was too calm for anything too exciting to have happened, right?”

“Right.” Sam had absolutely no basis for comparison, but he agreed anyways.

“Right.” Nick almost smiled, taking some comfort in Sam’s confidence. “Ok. I’ve really got to get to work. I… um,” an odd look crossed his face as he licked his lips. “We’re still on for Valentine’s Day, right?”

Sam froze.

“Ordering out, staying in.” Nick gave a gentle reminder. “We can sit on the couch not cuddle, because we’re men.”

“Very straight men.” Sam added on and they shared a slightly uncomfortable laugh.

He didn’t get a kiss goodbye. Not on his cheek or any other part of his anatomy. Which was for the best because such gentle partings seemed to escalate a bit too quickly. Sam wasn’t strong enough or brave enough to keep this going much longer. He was left to stand, leaning against the door, forehead pressed into the wood, laughing quietly while he felt like doing quite the opposite.

He just managed to get his newest breakdown under control with enough time left to get that much needed shower before running off to school.

Waiting for a crosswalk light to change he pulled out his phone and sent a simple and to the point text to his brother
what the hell?

Three hours later, somewhere in the middle of Sam’s sociology lecture his brother finally answered.

- he got scared at the movies. I told him he could stay over if he needed to. Dudes a real wuss when it comes to monster movies

Sam held his phone in his lap, grateful that it was a dark lecture hall and no one was paying much attention to what he was doing.

-he was wearing your clothes He didn’t hesitate to point this out to his brother.

-for some reason he forgot to bring a change of pants to the movies with him Dean grumped.

Which was actually a pretty fair argument for why the man had been rocking Dean’s boxers and favorite shirt.

-so he just slept over where the monsters couldn’t find him? Nothing else?

Dean’s answer didn’t even take two seconds to get to Sam.

-the fuck do you mean nothing else?

There was an option of being delicate, but these last few weeks had been hard on Sam and he didn’t feel like the effort, knowing full well that Dean wouldn’t really be offended by a bit of bluntness anyways.

-you guys didn’t have sex?

Dean didn’t reply before class ended and Sam had to tuck his phone away to start his walk home. Shouldering his book bag and braving the cold February afternoon.

Sure, Sam was curious, but at the same time he realized that he hadn’t been thinking clearly this morning. Of course Dean and Cas hadn’t had sex. This was Dean after all and Dean wasn’t dumb enough to do something like that. He was a hell of a lot stronger in his sexual orientation.

He checked his phone while waiting for the same crosswalk light to change and was greeted with a rather cheery reply to his question.

-the fuck is wrong with u??

-no

-we didn’t have sex

-no one wants to have sex with Cas

Sam looked at those words, imagining the exact tone of outrage that Dean would use to go with his raging denial if they were having this conversation face to face.

-I don’t know. I think he’s kind of cute Sam wrote back, not because it held much truth, but because he needed to be an ass to his brother because it was a great distraction from everything else that had gone so very wrong so recently.
That was all the answer that Dean gave and it was impossible to tell if it meant that Cas wasn’t cute or if Sam simply wasn’t allowed to think it.

The light changed and Sam started walking again, texting and doing his best to keep from wandering out into traffic.

Nick replied almost immediately to the good news. Ranting happily about his brother and his still fully intact chastity.

-cassy is a beautiful flower that shall not be plucked

-I would have killed dean

-slowly

-with a brick

Sam found himself grinning at his phone, despite the threat on his brother’s life. There was just something so sweet about how protective Nick got over Castiel- and Sam found himself wondering if other people felt the same way when they saw him and Dean.

-I think he could take you

Some days Sam liked to make trouble- you know, just in case he hadn’t done enough already.

-I’d like to see him try

He could imagine Nick’s grumpy little frown, the way he would puff up his chest a bit.

Sam was having none of it.

- I think he did, and you both ended up in the Home Depot

-I mean hospital

Stupid auto correct.

-right. that time I helped him install some nice laminate flooring

-good times

Sam laughed again and let himself in the house. It was hard to like someone so much when they kept being such a smartass all the time. At the same time it was almost impossible not to have completely fallen for a man who always knew the exact right way to tease him.

He found himself standing in the doorway, not even able to formulate a proper response to the mocking. Right here, just a few hours ago, Sam had managed to do a very bad thing. Even as alone as he was now, no one to look at him, or say anything, or to cast unfair judgments on a young man who suffered from these horrible cravings for physical contact, Sam felt his whole face go red. Heat eating though him. Embarrassed at the mere memory.

The door got closed, his book bag thrown onto the couch, and he sank down beside it, looking at his phone, trying to figure out if he was supposed to apologize- or if this morning was just going to be like the kiss that they were supposed to pretend hadn’t happened.
But how do you willfully forget something like that? It wasn’t like Sam was capable of overlooking how Nick’s whole body had gone tense against his, arching and writhing just enough to drive Sam practically over the edge. Friction and heat and eager little movements, and even if he wanted it to— that memory was not likely to leave him anytime soon.

He was getting hard just thinking about it.

It wasn’t a problem he normally let himself have while in the waking hours because it tended to over complicate that whole ‘not going to let myself get too attached to Nick because I have to let him go soon’ master plan that he had devised for himself. So far he’d been failing rather miserably, but deliberately rubbing one off while thinking about the way Nick’s breath had hitched as Sam dug his teeth in, certainly wasn’t going to help anything.

Shaking just a bit, he pulled out some nonsexy law books and tried to focus on his homework in a stunning attempt at self preservation. And he was really getting into some awesome judicial code when his phone lit up and threw off his whole groove.

-work has been teasing me all day. Thanks to you no one believes I was sick they all think I was off on some kind of sexual bender

Sam looked long and hard at his phone, trying to decide if he should answer that one, and how.

Nick sent him a picture, long line of his neck exposed, collar of his tshirt pulled down to show off the trail of reddened bruises that Sam had given him.

-I’m so sorry
-I don’t know what I was doing

When in doubt, apologize. It covered a multitude of sins.

-don’t sorry me. It feels like being a teenager again I love it
-I want another one tomorrow

Sam realized that he couldn’t win at this point.

By the time he got out of an impromptu emergency shower, foggy minded and warm, Dean had come home. Dinner was almost done, the whole house smelling so good that Sam’s stomach immediately started growling, making itself known. But before Sam could sit down, before he could ask how work had been or even say hello, Dean was pointing a spatula at him with malicious intent.

“Cas told me about what you and Nick have been up to.”

And that’s what Sam got for trusting an accountant. A stunning panic attack, at being caught in the biggest lie that he’d ever told, left Sam weak kneed and rather grateful for the kitchen chair he gotten a hand on.

“I can explain.” He forced out, wanting to stop the inevitable lecture that was about to take place.

“I already had it explained to me. Cas literally drew it out… on a napkin. I’ve got it in the glovebox, I can show you later. I just want to know what the hell you were thinking.”

Sam sunk into his chair, pushing his hands through his hair and remembering how to breathe. He
wasn’t a little kid. It’s not like he’d stolen some gum, or wrecked the car and now had to confess his sins to an adult that he respected. This was just his brother.

“It seemed like a good idea when we first started.”

“Damn it, Sam. You know the costal roads are dangerous at night, and your boyfriend drives like a werewolf. You’ve told me, and Cas told me. Apparently he’s already totaled two cars driving on those fucking winding roads, almost killed himself last time- so why the hell did you think it was a good idea to drive out to Pacifica in the middle of the night with him?”

Nick had never told Sam about any car accidents.

That was all that Sam could really think about at first. He’d known this man for three months, and no car accidents had come up at any point. Not a single mention of them. And it wasn’t like they had to tell each other everything- hell, Sam literally had a lifetime of things that he hadn’t shared with Nick so far, but it was almost surreal to hear facts like this coming from someone who wasn’t supposed to know the man at all.

Then it hit him that Dean was talking about last night. About Sam running away from home and rolling around on the beach. That’s what Cas had told him about- and how Cas knew about it was anyone’s guess (though if Sam was a betting man he would put money on Nick).

Dean didn’t know about all the fake dating.

Sam laughed in relief, which only earned him a rather stern look from his brother.

“We took the roads real slow.” He promised through what sounded very much like giggling, only more masculine. “I don’t think we went over fifty on the way back.”

“You could have taken my car. Driven yourself.” He sucked in a sharp breath. “If I wake up one morning and you’re just gone and I have to find out days later that you died in the middle of nowhere because you ran off in the night with your boyfriend who can’t fucking drive, I’m going to be so mad at you.”

“So mad?”

“Won’t even go to your funeral.” He sniped before turning back to the stove. “Bitch.”

“Jerk.” Sam said without thinking. It was just an impulse at this point. A plate of enchiladas clattered down beside his elbow. “T-thanks?”

“You’re welcome.” He said without a hint of hospitality. “Cas and me got into a fight this morning about you and your Nick. I had to defend your sorry ass, so you better start shaping up.”

Sam watched his brother eating, but found his own hunger had suddenly left him. “What did Cas say?”

“That you and Nick are both complete idiots and you deserve each other. But I know you can do better, which begs the question, Sammy- why are you still with that assclown? Weren’t you just telling me yesterday that you’re ‘looking for something different’ out of this whole relationship, you big girl.”

“I… we’re getting together for Valentine’s Day. I’m thinking of breaking it off then.” Just keeping up appearances, that was Sam. When in doubt just stick to the plan, no matter how it made the panic in him roll.
“That’s cold, Sammy.” Dean waggled his fork at him.

“Are these chicken enchilada?” And when the plan got to be too painful, use aversion tactics.

“No. They aren’t fucking *chicken* enchiladas. I am a man. I eat man food.”

On a different day Sam might have smiled at that. Instead he ate quietly, pausing long enough to complement his brother on a fantastic dinner. Even if the meat was red meat, and they were supposed to be watching what they ate. In the grand scheme of things it wasn’t all that important. Besides, Sam saying that they needed to eat healthy, and Dean agreeing to it and actually making healthy good were two different things.

Kind of like how agreeing to a platonic, complication free, fake relationship and actually being able to successfully have one were worlds apart.
it came to my horrified attention that it's been almost a month since I updated this story. And I said to myself, 'self, they'd probably like a few small chapters spread out now and later, than just a massive soul crushing chapter in another month or two.'

so... it's short, but it's to the point.
I'm not proud of what I've done here today, and y'all wont be too happy with me soon after you read this and realize that I am forever lying about when the last chapter is going to happen- and when you start becoming increasingly suspicious of what horrible things are waiting in the next chapter- but hey, it's still a update, right?

Also, this is where I earn my M rating.
And if you knew how hard it was for a grumpy little asexual like myself to even put together a chapter like this we'd be throwing a party in my honor. I'd be receiving a medal.

and cake
I didn't even get cake on my birthday this year.
someone, please. This kid over here needs some celebratory man-smut cake.

“...You’re in a... really good mood today.”

Nick looked over his shoulder, the little smile on his lips faltering, his soft humming tapering off.
“I’m trying to cover the fact that I’m freaking. Is it working that well?”

Dinner was no need to freak out. “It’s just spaghetti.” Sam tried to talk his friend down.

When Nick had first offered to make dinner instead of ordering out, Sam had been thrilled. But apparently the only thing that Nick knew how to make was spaghetti. So he was a little less thrilled, and a little more just hungry- and that was ok.

“Did you want some help?”

“I wouldn’t say no.”

Ah, if only Sam knew how to make spaghetti. The sauce wasn’t coming straight out of a can, there were a collection of ingredients and the kitchen had been rather daunting as soon as Sam took stock of that. Other than that whole: pasta goes in the hot water part- he really didn’t know what to do. Dean had always done the cooking at home. Since they were kids. Maybe at some point Sam should have asked for lessons.

He got up off the couch and came to Nick’s little kitchen, clumsily taking the spoon that was held out to him.

“Stir.” Came the command- and Sam followed it.
This was their last night together. There had been no proper plans made for the how they were going to break this off. Both of them seemingly wanting to drag this out as long as possible. Make it as painful as they could. And Sam was in it wholeheartedly. He wanted every last twist of the knife. He wasn’t masochistic, he was simply in too deep to find his way back out.

Nick’s humming picked back up, too soft to really decipher the tune, as he fussed around with things on his side of the stove.

They’d seen each other two nights ago, had what Nick had called a ‘real first date only three months too late’- and Sam hadn’t known what to take from a title like that. But he didn’t have to have strong opinions. They’d gone out to dinner at a fairly reasonable time and ended up staying until close, the servers shooting them dirty looks and pointedly and repeatedly cleaning the tables around them in hopes that they would get the hint. Two hours after that had found them still sitting in the parking lot outside the restaurant, fogging up the windows of the borrowed Impala while they spoke. Sam liked the bench seats, it let Nick stretch out long, their legs kind of tangled with how they sat facing each other, knees touching- and Dean would be pissed if he found out that they both had their shoes on the upholstery, but no one planned to tell him.

Although they’d started the night with intentions to catch a movie they never got around to it. In fact, other than a rather strange phone call to Gabriel that got put on speaker phone, that Sam found himself trying not to laugh his way though, it was a rather quiet and uneventful evening.

Sam had fallen in love with that night. And it was a little sad to realize this late in the game that apparently that’s what he’d been looking for out of a relationship. Not romance or even great sex. He just wanted close, quiet conversations and shared laughter in dark spaces.

And he was thinking about that now while he stirred. That maybe that ‘date’ had been rather aptly named. Almost every night that they’d spent together had been roughly the same, but it took knowing it was about to end to realize how perfect it had been. To appreciate what he was getting ready to give up.

Would they be able to come back to it weeks from now when they had had proper time to get over their ‘break up’ and go back to being ‘just friends’?

God, he hoped so.

He took a slow breath, trying to find a smile and remember that they weren’t really going to have a fight tonight. They were only going to stop whatever this was. At least that had been the plan months ago. They hadn’t really talked about it since the first night, and going off of those rather close and intimate accidents that they’d had recently, Sam wasn’t sure where anything stood at this point.

“I talked to Cas last night.” Nick interrupted Sam’s train of thought, sort of letting his words hang there.

“Did he finally give you a straight answer on the movie adventure they had?” As the days went on Sam had come to realize that Dean had lied to him on some deep and concerning level.

“He’s still having nightmares and I really hate your brother, how’s that?”

Sam paused mid stir. “I thought Dean was joking about that whole scary movie thing.”

“I wish.” Nick sighed, leaning a hip against the stove. “I’ve had to call him every night since then and talk to him until he falls asleep- then again a few hours later when he wakes up in a panic.”

“That should be entertaining to listen to tonight.” He tried a little smile, not entirely sure how he
should feel about Castiel’s unusual reaction to something as simple as a horror movie.

“Nope. He told me not to worry about, he’s going to be out all night and he’s pretty sure he’ll be ok.”

Whereas it was good to hear that Cas had a date. He was a sweet (albeit rather strange) man and he deserved himself a nice young man or woman to keep him company- Sam had a rather unsettling feeling that that’s not what tonight’s plan called for.

Dean had been rather anxiously checking and double checking as to how long Sam planned to be gone tonight.

‘You still wanna be a cold hearted bitch and break up with him on Valentine’s Day of all days, at least have some dinner and one last fuck for the road, Sammy- and call me before you come home, you know, just in case I’m in the middle of something.’ Had been his brother’s final request before handing over the keys to the car.

In the middle of something.

Sam made a face with the sudden concern that Castiel might be the ‘thing’ that Dean planned to be in the middle of.

He decided not to tell Nick about the other half of what might be going on, mostly for Dean’s safety.

“Well, I hope he sleeps better tonight.” Was all he felt comfortable adding.

“Me too. It’s really hard to convince someone that there’s not a demon doll hiding under their bed when you aren’t there to check for them. It’s just heresy and he has a hard time buying it.” Nick turned off the fire under his pan and dumped the cooked sausage into Sam’s pot. “Apparently he thinks I’m a bit of a liar and might just be trying to make him feel better.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point.” He tossed his spatula into the sink.

“What is the point?”

“I’m… I’m not really sure actually.” He got a little frown between his eyes as he rubbed at his neck.

It needlessly drew Sam’s eye to the fading bruises that’s he’d been pointedly not looking at for the past half hour or so. Little spots of color on an otherwise perfect throat. He wondered how inappropriate it would be to ask if he could refresh them. But he knew the answer and so he kept his mouth shut and kept stirring.

Nick finally got out a box of pasta and tipped it over into a pot of water that had been boiling away on the back burner for some time. “Ok, toss the spoon, come wait with me. We’ve got nine minutes to kill.”

Whatever would they do with nine whole minutes?

Nick tugged the spoon free from Sam’s reluctant hands and in one easy movement he swept the younger man into a slow spin. One hand holding his, one at the small of his back and they sort of did a lazy box step around the kitchen.
“Nick, how much have you had to drink tonight?” Sam asked after his friend started humming again.

“Not a drop. I decided tonight I would perform without my usual safety net.” And from this close Sam could see how clear the man’s eyes were, could taste the whisky free breath against his lips.

Sam almost complained, or at very least really questioned why they were still doing a slow two step around the room- but before his mouth could go and ruin things, he realized he was enjoying this far too much.

“If I was a girl,” he started slowly, letting the man get a little smile “Would you have taken me out dancing?” Of all the things that they’d talked about over the past few months, they’d never really touched on old relationships or past dates. The one or two mentions of Nick’s ex had set Sam so on edge that he’d been wholly unwilling to press the subject and no one else had ever really come up.

“Dancing?” His eyes narrowed just a touch. “Do I look like the kind of guy who goes dancing?”

“Yesterday I would have said no, but now…”

“This is high school prom quality slow dancing, you can’t hold it against me.” He skipped a beat, their knees knocking and his hand fluttering for a moment down at the base of Sam’s spine. “I haven’t danced with anyone since I was sixteen.”

“I don’t think I have either.” Sam smiled. “And I’m not really complaining, but why now, and why am I the girl?”

“Because you’re the first person I’ve wanted to dance with since I was sixteen and I figured tomorrow wouldn’t be a good day to ask. Also, I still buy the meals, that makes you still the girl. So I get to lead.”

“Except you’re cooking tonight, doesn’t that kind of make you the girl?”

And Sam wasn’t all that big on traditional gender roles. He was all for house dads raising kids and women holding good paying jobs, and whoever was best at cooking doing most of the work. But none of that factored into why Nick still insisted on holding doors open for him, or why he got to lead when they danced slowly around the small kitchen.

This wasn’t a new argument between them.

Nick got a funny little frown and tightened his hold on Sam, catching him off guard long enough to lower him into a shallow dip. It was such a feeble attempt that the younger man couldn’t help but laugh and kick one foot into the air for added effect.

“Tadah.” Nick added with some half hearted flair before righting Sam and just standing far too close in that way he was so very good at.

“Would now be a bad time to tell you that the pot is boiling over?”

Nick glanced over at the stove and quickly released his dance partner, rushing over to rescue the spaghetti noodles, swearing at them the whole time like the pasta was intentionally being difficult.

“Should I set the table?” He needed something to do with himself before he took the few steps needed to press himself against his friend’s back.

Nick gave his blessing and Sam was able to kill the last few minutes until the food was ready.
Very quickly he realized that there was only one chair at the table and when he asked what happened to the other one Nick had looked just as confused. So they ate on the couch, plates in their laps, coffee table for their glasses of grape juice because apparently Nick had been serious about trying to get through tonight sober. A clear head seemed like a good plan so Sam didn’t argue, despite the fact that he’d never been all that big on grape juice.

“We should have done this sooner.” He sighed contently between bites.

“This is pretty much the only thing we’ve ever done since we met.” Nick argued with a hint of a smile.

“We should have done it more often.” He softly corrected himself. “I like the spaghetti.”

“Did I do good?”

“You did good.” Sam assured. Best dinner he’d had in a long time.

“Forever ago, after the divorce and the whole marines thing, I lived with Michael and Anna for a while. She was popping out babies and needed help around the house while Mike was at work. The only thing she was able to teach me to make was spaghetti… but let’s face it, it’s some damn good spaghetti.”

“I like how you never brag.”

“I know, right? I’m just so modest… and handsome. And good at… things.”

“Things?”

“Tons of things.” His knee bumped into Sam’s in the same familiar way that they’d been doing for so long.

Sam grinned, because there was no forthcoming list of this man’s talents. They both just sat smiling at each other, which seemed to drive the non-list home that much clearer.

Things indeed.

Nick set down his fork, and used his now free hand to help him speak better. Odd little points and gestures. “Now, I got to tell you, ‘cuz you seem like you’d enjoy it- back when I lived with Anna, her oldest girl was a real picky eater, but she loved that stupid Lady and the Tramp movie. So I’d make her spaghetti and we’d eat it together like the dogs would.”

“You shared the noodles?” Sam remembered the scene. It was too iconic not too. Though the idea of Nick eating with one of his nieces in such a cute way… it was too much. He started laughing.

“See. I knew you’d like it.” Nick looked so proud of himself at having guessed right.

“It’s sweet.” By which he meant, ‘you’re sweet’, except that’s not the kind of thing that you tell someone like Nick.

“It would have been if she didn’t always try to bite me. I’d have these little teeth marks on my nose for days at a time.” He sounded so wistful for a moment- and Sam had to glance away.

If he kept looking at that quiet little smile he was bound to say something stupid.

But what difference did stupid make at this point in the game?

Simple answer? None.
It wouldn’t make any difference.

“How are you this cute?” The word felt foreign, clumsy in his mouth.

It did the trick though and Nick puffed his chest up, all kinds of disgust and offence.

“I am not cute. How dare you.”

“You let your niece bite your nose just so she would eat her dinner.”

“I was hoping to nurture her basic cannibal instinct so that she could eventually grow up to kill and eat her father.” Grump. Grump. Grump.

“You’re a good uncle.”

Nick just pouted, trying to stay offended over the complement.

And Sam did his best not to laugh. It was harder than it should have been. “Here,” he carefully fished one noodle free from his plate and held the end out to his sullen companion.

“Why?”

“I’m probably never going to have a niece willing to reenact Lady and the Tramp with me.” His heart was suddenly hammering, and for no good reason in his opinion. He was not facing a firing squad, he was just trying to get Nick to smile. “Share one with me?”

Nick’s lips did something funny. It wasn’t the smile that Sam had been looking for. It was like the pout intensified, but quickly went a little crooked and then Nick was laughing. “Aw, Sammy, if you wanted a kiss all you had to do was say so.”

He dropped the noodle back onto his plate, feeling his cheeks growing warm. “Shut up.”

“You don’t have to make up these elaborate plans, or even ask me. Just, at any point you’re feeling it please, please, throw me down and make me your bitch.”

His spaghetti plate got thunked down beside his untouched grape juice, Sam couldn’t even look at his friend right now. Not sure if he would start laughing or if he would just take the man up on his ridiculous offer. And if he couldn’t trust his own response it was time to change the subject. “I’m picking a movie.”

A long suffering sigh came from the far side of the couch, but Sam knew enough to know that that meant ‘all right’. He pulled out the little tablet and swung his legs up onto the couch, sitting sideways and leaning back against the arm.

“Blues Brothers?” He asked after a bit of Netflix browsing.

“Never seen it.”

“Blasphemy.” Sam glanced up and gave a startled laugh at the surprised look Nick was wearing at that proclamation. “Get over here you uncultured son of a bitch. Let me educate you.” And it was a little rougher than he intended, and by the way Nick’s eyebrows hitched, it was a little rougher than expected. But Nick came over all the same, pressing in beside Sam in that perfect movie watching way that they’d found weeks back.

Five minutes in Nick was rolling off the couch with a mumbled apology, wandering off to his
room and coming back while settling his glasses into place. Sam swallowed a grin.

“Oh, shut up. I can’t see a damn thing without them.”

“You’ve never worn them before when we were watching movies…”

“You were watching. I was listening and admiring the blurry colors.” He settled down again, back to Sam’s chest, repositioning the tablet so he could see it better. “Oh my god, that’s John Belushi.”

Sam couldn’t hold back any longer and he ended up laughing into Nick shoulder, which lead to sporadic chuckles for pretty much the rest of the movie. Incidentally he got elbowed quite a few times, and when he briefly stole Nick’s glasses he was rewarded with a lot of annoyed grumbling.

“They’re just for reading and computer stuff.” He was leaned back as far as he could go, cheek brushing Sam’s throat. “Give ‘em back, you little brat.”

“I’m not little.”

“Yeah, yeah-” he tugged his glasses off Sam’s face and perched them back on the end of his nose where they belonged. “I’m sure you’re still little where it counts.”

It was Sam’s turn to elbow his friend, but being the big spoon in their movie watching sprawl gave him no good angle to do so. He settled for lightly tickling Nick’s right side, fingers digging briefly into the man’s last two ribs.

Nick made a horrifying noise and the tablet fell to the floor in the sudden struggle. Not really enough room to wrestle on the couch, but they managed, and to Sam’s surprise he ended up pinned into the corner of the couch with a lot more man straddling him than he had intended. Arms pinned over his head at an awkward angle, back slightly bowed over the arm rest.

“Sam Fucking Winchester, you keep your damn hands to yourself.”

Sam grinned, all teeth and no apology.

“I mean it. You are a god damned menace and I don’t know why I ever let you in my house.” He huffed.

“It is a mystery.” Sam twisted his hands, testing the man’s grip, but knew that he was kind of trapped down here.

“You going to behave?”

“Probably not.” Sam was just being as honest as he knew how.

Nick sighed, shoulders relaxing, hands loosening. “God damned menace.” He repeated softly, but Sam was in the right place to see the way his friend was trying to hide a smile.

Sam was reluctantly released and they settled back in, Nick stroking his tablet, making sure it was still ok before turning back on the movie. Every now and then he would gaze suspiciously over his shoulder up at Sam and frown. Whatever his intent was, it got Sam to laugh every time.

Eventually, as all things must, the movie ended.

Even the credit stopped, but neither of them said anything for quite some time. If it weren’t for the way that Nick’s fingers were restlessly picking at the seam in his jeans, Sam would have guessed
that the man had fallen asleep.

Would it be wrong to just wrap his arms around this man and kiss any bit of skin he could get at and ask to stay the night?

Sam let his head fall back and his eyes close as he tried very hard to talk himself out of that plan.

Nick broke first. “So, we break up tonight.” It wasn’t a question, just a quiet whisper like the first line of a ghost story that promised to be absolutely terrifying.

“That’s the plan.”

“Why?”

“Does it really matter? People break up for the dumbest reasons.” Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll just tell Dean that we decided it wasn’t working and I don’t want to talk about it. He’ll like that.”

“He really doesn’t like me, does he?”

“He fucking hates you.” Sam agreed. “Thinks you’re awful for me and he regrets ever introducing us.”

Nick took a slow breath. “Well, I guess that part worked out like it was supposed to.” He set the tablet on the table and crossed his arms tightly over his chest, all the while not looking up at Sam. “You think he’s going to lay off trying to hook you up with random ladies for a while?”

“Oh, if he does try I’ll just start talking about you and sighing a lot.”

That almost got a laugh out of Nick, soft little puff as his breath caught. “At least you’ve got a plan.” He got to his feet, kind of stretching and rubbing his face. Glasses were tossed down beside the tablet and when he finally turned so that Sam could actually see his face, he looked more tired than anything else.

“Still friends though, right?” Sam put his feet on the floor, feeling small all the way down here while Nick was looming over him. “I mean, we can still text- and in a few weeks or whatever we can start hanging out again- tell everyone that we decided to try being friends again.”

“Yeah.” Nick smiled a tight smile. “Of course.”

It was Sam’s turn to stand, and he had no idea why this suddenly felt like a very real break up. Like when you promise to try and just be friends but it never works and weeks later you’ve deleted them from your cell phone and try your best to not think about them anymore.

“Thanks for dinner.”

“Yeah, any time.”

Sam wondered if there was possibly a way to make this anymore uncomfortably awkward. In a valiant attempt to seal the deal, he held out a hand to Nick. “Well, goodbye I guess?”

Nick seemed to consider this offering, quickly settling on some less than amiable emotion. “You know what? No.”

“No?” Sam blinked wildly. No?? Why no? No to what?

“Fuck this.” Nick clarified.
“… fuck this?”

“Fuck the whole god damned thing. I thought I could go thought with it- but I can’t. So fuck it. If you’re leaving then I’m getting a goodbye kiss. I’ve earned it.”

Sam’s fingers flinched mid air and he dropped his hand quickly, trying to mask the nervous gesture. “Earned a kiss? Nick, I- I don’t-”

“Look, I’m not going to end the most meaningful relationship of my life with a fucking handshake. Do you really think that, years from now, when you’re all grown up with your perfect little wife, and two point three kids, and your white picket fence, that it’s going to matter to you how we said goodbye tonight?”

Sam realized he was shaking but he wasn’t at all sure why.

“Because it won’t, Sam. We both know that this is The End. You’re leaving and it’s just… it’s done. It ran its course, and it served its purpose and you could do a hell of a lot better than me in the friend, and boyfriend, category so you’re not likely to be coming back around to-”

Sam was done.

Just done.

He wasn’t going to listen to this god awful, self destructive bull shit anymore, and the nice thing about it was- he didn’t have to. He simply reached out, took Nick by the shoulders, pulled him in, and smothered all those lies out of the man with a rough, quick kiss.

Nick looked up at him, eyes gone wide, shock mixed with something that too closely resembled panic. Just frozen there like that.

“For once, can you please shut up,” Sam begged, “and maybe just show me how much you’re going to miss me instead?”

“…show you?” Like he didn’t understand the words.

Sam threw his hands up in the air in frustration. “God damn it, Nick. Do you want your fucking goodbye kiss or not?”

“I… didn’t think you were going to say yes.”

Good god. Hope had really robbed him of his ability to read this situation. Sam felt like a fool.

Nick had just been teasing him again. Of course he was. Sam needed to leave. Like right now- while he still had the chance because he could only see things going downhill from this point.

“I’ve- I need to go.”

“I need you to stay.”

But he really was shaking badly at this point. Crossing his arms over his chest to hide his hands. “I don’t want to do this, Nick. It’s not funny anymore.”

“It’s not even slightly funny.” Nick agreed in a horse voice. “I- oh god. Alright, you know what? This would be a hell of a lot easier if I wasn’t so damn sober.” He ran a hand over his face and took a slow breath before speaking very fast. “Sam, I- I want to do bad things to you.”
“You're already the worst thing that's ever happened to me- I don’t see how you could make it worse at this point,” he tried to say under his breath, but judging by the slightly pained look that passed over Nick, Sam was really doing a crap job at this. He wanted to apologize, but all he could do was stand there and feel horrified. He hadn’t meant it. He really hadn’t.

Nick just sighed, looking up at the ceiling for a moment and visibly collecting his thoughts. “This is... actually going pretty much the exact way I thought it would.”

“You thought I would make a complete ass of myself by kissing you again.” Great. At least he was predictable. He’d sort of hoped that his throbbing man-crush wasn’t *that* obvious, but you know, he hadn’t been all that good at hiding it lately.

“Jesus fucking Christ. No. I mean, I always kind of hoped you would, but I’m a realist and you’re way out of my league and straight and... and... and why are you looking at me like that?” Sam had no idea how he was looking at his friend, so he had no idea how to answer. All he knew was that the awkward advice that Castiel had given him a few days ago seemed remarkably less insane for a second.

Nick... he hoped that Sam would... that Sam would kiss him?

If this was another joke the bad timing was only slightly overshadowed by the incredibly bad taste.

“Nick,” Sam felt a stunning swell of panic rising up inside his chest as he braced himself for the inevitable blow. “Do you want your goodbye kiss or not?” Soft repetition with all the frustration bled out- nothing left but an anemic, whispered request. Like lining himself up before a firing squad. Begging to get shot down this last time.

In lieu of an answer, Nick held both hands up to Sam, palms out in a calming gesture like you’d do to a horse you were expecting to suddenly bolt. It did the trick, if only because Sam was too terrified of what he’d just offered to even manage little things right now, like blinking, or inhaling. Turning and walking away had long been taken off the table.

Once he seemed certain that he had Sam’s attention and undivided terror, Nick fit his hands briefly over the younger man’s broad shoulders, his touch tentatively running up the sides of Sam’s neck before lacing behind his head and drawing him down those insignificant inches that stood between them.

Sam’s stomach tumbled, fingers tingling, head feeling hot. Not since his first attempt at this when he was fourteen had he been so terrified of kissing someone.

And they’d done this before.

Twice.

Three whole times, if anyone wanted to count the one from a few seconds ago.

But three times were nowhere near enough practice to approach with any level of confidence.

And this, this was how Nick was going to miss him? Ill at ease to the point that he couldn’t even kiss Sam in joking anymore. It was all hesitant little touches and false starts.

Sam was half dead by the time he heard his own voice begging a very weak “please,”

Nick shivered rather notably before finally leaning in, lips brushing almost too lightly to actually
be considered kisses even in the technical sense. But Sam closed his eyes and swallowed hard, tilting his head experimentally, lips parting in a hopeful invitation.

And that apparently killed every last pretense of hesitation because Nick was suddenly canting forward fast and a bolt of heat sang through Sam’s body as he felt the man’s teeth click against his.

Nick curled a fist through his hair and swallowed down Sam’s ragged moan because Nick’s hand was huge and firm and he could control Sam so easily like this. Anywhere he wanted him. God, just fucking anywhere.

Trembling like a caffeine addict, Sam took two fistfuls of Nick’s shirt, somewhere along the man’s sides, dragging their bodies together a little more forcefully than he intended- but at the same time nowhere near hard enough to merit a second thought beyond ‘yes, good’.

In near silent agreement Nick grinned against his mouth, as sharp and as terrifying at it was stunning. He kissed Sam and kissed him and kissed him. Trading him for oxygen, fraying breaths between them strained and too fast to do much good.

Sam’s heart was pounding against his ribs like a trapped animal. Starved kisses stolen from one another, forceful and ruthless enough to break a man’s will and Sam knew he wasn’t all that strong to begin with. They couldn’t keep this going for much longer, not in an upright position at least.

Sam slid a shaking hand up the side of his friend’s neck, and all he could think was ‘oh god, what do I do now?’ He’d honestly never planned for it to get this far. He didn’t even let himself daydream this far. He always reeled in his imagination when one of them started to lean in, because this? It was wrong. It was too much. It was…

It was actually kind of disgusting how much Sam wanted this.

Practically growling as Nick pulled away, Sam hissed a forceful ‘’no,” or more like pleaded because pride wasn’t factoring into things right now actually.

Nick pressed his forehead against Sam’s, not opening his eyes, just taking long, forcibly slow breaths. “Sam?”

“NO.”

“Sam, I um… I think this might be something we need to talk about.”

He could have said ‘no’ again, but instead Sam bit at Nick’s mouth, slicking his tongue along the back of the man’s teeth. That distracted them both for a few moments that weren’t even half long enough for Sam before Nick was stubbornly finding that terrible empty space between them once again.

“We can… we can put it off for a few more minutes I guess.” Nick relented.

“We can put it off for a few hours if you think you can keep it up that long, old man.”

Nick suddenly grinned at him again, vicious, eager, and hotter than fucking sin. Then he was pulling Sam back to the couch, sitting down and dragging the younger man with him.

Sam had one knee on the couch between Nick’s legs, covering the man’s body with his shadow,
and Nick’s eyes were in slits, biting his lower lip and tipping his jaw into Sam’s hand. His skin hot to the touch, radiating heat, which was new and kind of thrilling.

For a long second Sam couldn’t move any further, just staring down at his friend who had never looked as good as he did right now. Dark eyed, red, abused mouth, crooked little smile. Sudden unspoken promises laid out, eager and wanting- and how the hell long had they been on the same page about this?

Maybe they really should take a moment to talk about it.

But later was just as good as now for talking- better in fact, because Sam could think of at least five other things he’d like to be doing with his mouth right now, and Nick wasn’t going anywhere.

The older man seemed to catch on to that slight hesitation, biting his lip again, murmuring, “Come on, come on,” breathing unsteadily though his mouth.

And Sam couldn’t possibly say no to that, because he’d be waiting for what suddenly felt like months and months. A giddy sensation welling up inside of him as he laughed airlessly, pressing his slick mouth to Nick’s throat. Nick jerked, moaned, and Sam felt it like a minor electric shock. His fingers caught in the collar of Nick’s shirt, licking the taste from the hollow of this friend’s collarbone.

This he knew. This he’d done once before and replayed over in his mind on loop until it felt almost like second nature. He knew just where lay his teeth, where to leave his mark in flesh and bone.

Nick was panting, twisting his fingers in Sam’s hair. His body arching into Sam’s until the younger man gave in with a groan and sank down on top of him. And Sam knew without a doubt that this stupid, ugly couch was going to be where he would die tonight. It wasn’t going to be inspiring, or romantic. It was just frantic. Borderline desperate, and you know what? It was kind of ok.

There would be more room if they could find the will and ability to take this to Nick’s bed- but it didn’t matter because room isn’t what Sam wanted right now. It was this. Just this. It was the way that Nick’s rough voice broke over his name. It was how they fit together like they were made for one another.

It didn’t matter where they were, just that they were.

Despite either of their intentions, it was all going to be too quick, and they both seem to know it, shoving each other’s shirts up but not off, notching together and rocking so tight and close. Nick hooked one leg around Sam’s waist, wrapped his arms around Sam’s shoulders. His mouth dragging over Sam’s earlobe and Sam shuddered beautifully.

He curled a hand over Nick’s face and Nick gnawed at his thumb, movements made careless by the friction between them. Sam lifted his head to watch, open-mouthed and dumb.

“For fuck’s sake.” He breathed out.

Nick’s teeth sparked across the pad of this thumb and Sam’s hips ground down into his friend’s automatically. Nick gasped, throwing his head back and letting Sam’s thumb slip from his mouth- and Sam couldn’t do anything but kiss him then.

Nick growled half formed promises and curses against his mouth, words that may not have even been in English at this point, because Sam was too far gone to make any real sense of them. He
got the gist of it though, because if nothing else, he was panting against Nick in the same indecipherable code.

Sam felt bits of his mind chipping away, gone red behind his eyelids and somewhere way far away, he could hear himself begging Nick’s name. It seemed to be the only word that his mouth still remembered how to make with any certainty, and even that was lost to him as he came down hard. All he had left was a spine bowing shiver of pleasure and then a great resounding nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

And it was more than alright.

What felt like an eternity later, though was probably only a minute at most, Sam found himself clinging to Nick, relearning how to breathe, feeling wonderful and weak as he rested against his friend’s chest. Sam wasn’t sure when he would be able to move again, his whole body buzzing and alive but too stunned to do anything about it.

That had been simultaneously the best and worst sex of his life- and he wished that he could summon up enough energy to laugh about it.

Nick’s hand was tangled in his hair, lost up to the wrist, his arm shifting over Sam’s shoulders as they rose and fell with each shallow, too fast breath. His voice came as a slow rumble, rolling though his chest like thunder and with Sam resting against him like he was the words were more felt than heard.

“That was…”

“Yeah.” Sam whispered. Agreeing instantly to whatever sentiment there was. Because God yes.

“Wrong,” he finished after another moment of quiet.

Oh

Oh

Sam’s heart was suddenly up in his throat and he was shaking again, but for all the wrong reasons.

“Yeah.” He repeated weakly, waverling as he pushed himself up so that he could move away. His internal mantra becoming a steady stream of fuck.

He threw his legs off the side of the couch, trying to find his bearings and the strength to answer the sudden need to leave.

Two arms encircled his waist and pulled him back against a sold chest, warm and hard. Comforting. Fuck. Sam let his shoulders hunch, because he didn’t give a good god damn about his posture right then, all he wanted was to get away.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Nick murmured against the side of his neck.

And Sam couldn’t help but shiver at the feel of Nick’s breath against his skin, rough lips along his pulse as he spoke. Tortuously slow, Sam turned his head, trying to catch a glimpse of Nick’s face or any part of the man over his shoulder.

There was only a crash of blond hair and hunched shoulders, Nick’s embrace was gentle, but determined. Nearly possessive.

It made Sam’s chest clench tighter. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and tried to speak.
“I know.” He forced out, aiming for sounding light and easy, but his voice cracked a little and it matched the feeling in his gut, so who was he to complain. “I mean, I- I get it. It’s alright.”

“Sam,”

“Be-cause you’re right. This was wrong. We shouldn’t have. We shouldn’t-”

“That’s not what I meant.” He whispered so gently even as his hands fisted against Sam’s sides. “Calm down and take a deep breath, Sam.”

“Fuck you.”

“I think you already did- at least a good solid attempt at it.” Soft breath lightly stirring Sam’s hair. “I’d give it an eight out of ten for effort.”

“Don’t.” Was all he said, and if it counted for anything, Nick didn’t. Not for a little while at least. Growing quiet and still, strong arms tight around Sam like a weighted anchor.

“I need to go home.” Sam finally managed to get one solid thought together, his mind feeling crowded and unfamiliar.

“Do you want to go home, or need? Because I’m not kicking you out. If I get any say in the next few minutes I really, really want you to stay.”

For some stupid reason Sam suddenly felt like crying.

“If you just need to get cleaned up, I’m thinking I need a shower too...”

“Nick, this isn’t something that’s going to be ok to joke about.” Not right now, possibly not anytime ever.

“Joke? Who’s joking? I’m sticky as fuck and it’s kind of gross.”

The need to cry quickly shifted to a laugh that was only mostly bitter.

Nick’s fists relaxed a bit, his big hands splaying out, long fingers slating against the curve of Sam’s ribs. “I’ve been thinking about this fake dating thing we’ve got going.”

The laugh died on something that sounded suspiciously like a whimper and Sam hung his head.

“I mean, our brothers went for it, right? They’ve left us both alone and I think… I think it’d be a real shame to risk the whole blind date issue starting back up.” Nick was hardly making any noise as he spoke, breathing the words in a ragged, broken kind of way. “I think the only good solution is that we just keep dating.”

Sam’s fingernails caught on the upholstery of the couch, his fingers digging in mercilessly.

“It makes sense, right?” Nick needed to know. Half begging for an answer.

Problem was, it made almost too much sense.

It felt like a trap.

“I don’t want to keep fake dating you.” Sam choked on the words.

“How would you feel about real dating me?”
His whole body felt like it was shutting down. Overloading. Critical systems simply stopping in hopes of self preservation.

“You wanna think about it at least… maybe in the shower… maybe with me in the shower with you?”

Sam managed to nod.

He nodded an awful lot.

Chapter End Notes

and because I can't say it enough, thank you guys for your reviews, your support, and your reluctance for this stupid thing to end. I'm not ready to let go either.
Thanks to the cool kids who find me on tumblr
Thanks to the person who left a review in Spanish- you provided some good mental exercise for my roommate and me. (I took French back in school and wowee, it was a fun struggle piecing your words together)
Thanks to the lovely individual who lives in Russia who gets my obscure references-
I'm still taking you up on that offer of cookies and marriage one day
Thanks for the fanart
Thanks for sharing this story with people and converting new friends to the sinking ship that is samifer
Thanks to the kids who've never made a peep at me- because if nothing else, you're still here with the rest of us
and thanks to the anons on tumblr who send me random love, and songs that remind them of the boys. You know I'm making a play list and it's awesome.

I'm glad that we found each other.
And it hurts to hold on, but it's missed when it's gone

Chapter Notes

I always rewrite these notes at least 5 times, trying to find the best words. This chapter especially feels like it needs something really prolific at the beginning- but you know me, and you know I have nothing great and glorious to share. I just hope that y'all are as excited to see this update as I am to know that I've only got one chapter left to this beast.

Bitter sweet partings, as I've said many times over.

And when you reach the end of this one, you might get why I've been poking at some 'happy stories' (it's self preservation I tell you) in between chapters. Along those lines, I'm taking requests/prompts for samifer related fic-lets. Gimme something that sounds happy and nice.

Please? I need some happy things to write about, even if it's just like 'they move the furniture out of the way and go sock skating in their apartment'

We all have needs.
Don't judge me

also? sequoias are some of the largest tree on the planet.
Just in case you didn't know... and that fun fact will make sense to you in just a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They both had excusably winter pale skin, though Sam had his suspicions that Nick never tanned. That he would always be the color of moonlight regardless of the time of year. Soft slope of muscle, hard curve of bone, all washed as white as the bed sheets, except for the crash of colors over his arms and shoulders, and then the less intentional but certainly no less interesting blueish bruises (suspiciously in the shape of Sam’s long fingers) which had formed along the slant of his hips.

Sam kissed the back of Nick’s neck again, listening to the deep, contented rumble that had been the only response that he’d been able to get out of the man since they’d made their way from the shower to the bed.

It was late, and really, Sam had lost any intention of leaving quite some time ago. Probably about the same time that Nick had gently cornered him in the bathroom and started helping him unbutton his jeans.

No. Sam would be staying here tonight. Maybe for most of tomorrow as well. He wasn’t too worried about making any concrete plans as of this moment.

Nick shifted just a fraction where he was laying on his stomach, hugging his face into a pillow, only half covered in blankets. And for someone who was usually far too cold, he was still radiating heat, enough to make his neck flushed a soft pink, enough that he was still completely naked and didn’t seem to mind the general chill of the apartment. It might have just been from them spending far too long in the shower. All that hot water sinking into his bones. Or maybe more to do with the radiant heat from Sam, where he was half lying over Nick’s back.
He couldn’t be sure, but knew that it wasn’t important to him right then either way. He kissed the sharp curve of Nick’s left shoulder blade, dragging his teeth just a little, tongue flicking out to savor the clean taste of his skin.

Nick only rumbled softly at him once more.

Pushing still damp hair from his eyes, Sam sat up on an elbow. He’d never in his life, not even once before meeting Nick, had looked at another man and felt a curl of lust. Not the way he did right now. It was those bruises. He’d marked this man in such a welcome and delightfully forceful way. Nick was his now. Sam got to keep him. That warm tightness in his chest was possessive.

He slid a hand over those bruises, following them through touch and memory as they rounded Nick’s hip and Sam’s fingers got lost from sight between mattress and flesh.

In a pleasantly involuntary way, Nick’s hips bucked into Sam’s hand, and the man chuckled thick and warm and slow. He turned his head, face coming up from his pillow as he surface for air just enough to let one clear blue eye blink at Sam.

“I’m flattered, darlin’. Really am. But I don’t have another go in me t’night.” It was the first real words spoken between them since Nick had tugged him off the couch. Oh, there had been things said in the shower, but they were just loose adverbs and stunning blasphemy and they didn’t count.

Sam felt himself grin even as a blush ran over his cheeks. “I wasn’t…” He took his hand from that nice little dip bellow Nick’s hip, resting instead on the small of his back, which was only slightly less interesting to him. “I’m sorry about, um, if I got a little too rough.”

“I think you mean ‘you’re welcome’.” Nick gently corrected and little sliver of his face that was visible to Sam gave him the impression of a smile.

“That’s not what I meant.” Sam sighed.

“Darlin’, I’m the one who pushed you down and sat in your lap. I was sort of in control of the roughness.”

Sam felt his grin and blush both return at the memory. “How are you feeling?” His thumb was making small circles along Nick’s spine, fitting over each bone in turn.

Nick eye closed and he did that soft rumbling noise again. “Like I just took a sequoia up the ass? But in a good way if that makes sense.”

Sam let out a startled laugh, somehow surprised at how easy it was to just talk right now. Shouldn’t this be weird? This man, who had sort of fallen into best friend territory a while back, had given him the full cowgirl about half an hour ago. There really should be some kind of shyness or awkwardness, right?

He lay back down, sharing Nick’s pillow, laying close enough to kiss… just, you know… should the opportunity present itself.

“For how long, Nick?”

The man slitted that one eye open, eyebrow going up thoughtfully. “At least a few more hours. Maybe a quick one before breakfast if we’re not too hungry when we wake up.”

“No.” Sam laughed. Where as he found it kind of amusing that he’d completely worn Nick out,
that’s not what he was asking. “I mean… how long have you wanted to…” he found himself grasping for the word that he wanted.

“How long have I wanted to get you inside me?” No shame at all. “I don’t know. Probably since that week you stayed over when we were both sick. I’d just been updating Gabriel on our fake sex life and it came up and… it sounded a lot better than I thought it would.”

Sam shouldn’t still be blushing. They really were past this point by now.

“But I think I’ve had a thing for you since Thanksgiving.” Nick threw out the confession so casually it took Sam a second to process. “I probably fell in love with you somewhere between then and that trip out to Pacifica last week. It’s a bit harder to pinpoint. Jus’ kinda snuck up on me.”

And Sam simply didn’t breathe for a bit, his chest starting to burn with the need. He didn’t have a proper response to something like that. Even though he knew, he knew he needed one.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” He finally got out, which wasn’t an answer so much as panicked floundering.

“Why?” Nick laughed again, visible eye crinkling around the corner in what had to be a grin. “Oh my god. Don’t get me started on why.”

Sam just looked at him, pulling out his best kicked-puppy impersonation.

“Because- because I knew I wasn’t good enough for you. Knew I didn’t need you to tell me that much.” The humor had just about left the corner of his face that he was willing to give Sam. So quickly souring.

“That’s… stupid.” Sam countered with an angry little shake of his head, a bit more forceful than he intended.

“It’s not stupid.” Nick sighed hard enough that it had to have hurt. “Have you ever even looked at yourself? You’re fucking gorgeous, and smarter than hell. You’re going to be a lawyer for Christ’s sake.”

“Isn’t your brother a lawyer?” Sam had taken from Nick that Gabriel was nothing to be proud of as family members went- and he didn’t want his chosen profession to count as a mark against himself.

Nick turned his face back to his pillow, vanishing again, words coming out muffled and soft. “You don’t get it. You’ve got all this potential, and charm and… and just, you can still fucking be anything you want. And here I am, a dirty old man with nothing to show for myself except half a college degree that isn’t worth shit, an exwife psycho bitch, a daughter that I’m not allowed to even think about talking to, and a family that knows I’m never going to be more than a fucking disappointment. So no. I didn’t tell you, because a fucking mangy old dog has no right to tell the moon how beautiful it is.”

Sam hated, hated, this sudden down sweep. Nothing could ever be easy between them, could it?

He reclaimed his job as a human blanket, sprawling over Nick so easily, kissing the back of his neck once more. “You are right about one thing I guess. I am pretty fucking gorgeous.”

Nick’s laugh was loud and sharp, it made his ribcage, and by proxy Sam, bounce.

“But that whole dog and moon thing? No. I can see where the analogy was going but it’s not
working for me- because you know what? Every night the dog that lives on the other side of my fence, all he does is howl to the moon. Screaming love, love, love to the sky with every breath.” He kissed the tense muscles of Nick’s shoulder. “And the moon… it comes back every night just to see that damn dog.”

Nick was quiet for the space of two long breaths. Chest rising and falling in even, slow movements. “Just for that one dog?”

“Only for him.” Sam promised softly, speaking with his lips against Nick’s skin.

Nick turned his face, trying to look up at Sam, and the younger man shifted, leaning over to kiss him- and it probably wasn’t what Nick had been looking for. He moved his lips slightly, sighing little lost words against Sam’s mouth before giving up and kissing back.

Even if they were both worn a little thin from the physical and emotional strain of tonight, they both had it in them to kiss. Slow and careful, curious little touches like it was their first time. Nick got an arm around Sam’s shoulders, hand tangled in his hair in that way that he did so well and they came together, Sam tugging Nick into a slow roll, settling somewhere underneath him and it was an absolutely perfect place to be.

He liked the weight. He liked to be able to look up at Nick and those blue, blue eyes of his. He liked to feel kept and close and like there was nowhere and no need to run.

He fell asleep like that

But he woke up alone.

The bed beside him cold to the touch. For a confusing moment he simply sat there, looking at the rumpled bed sheets and tossed blankets. At his vast nakedness and the stunning lack of companionship.

Somewhere out in the living room came a frustrated noise. Sam perked up at it and started looking for some kind of clothes to wear. Despite the fact that Nick had seen him quiet naked at this point, it was still early February and colder than hell.

“You can’t-“ Nick raised his voice suddenly, yelling at someone who wasn’t Sam. “You fucking can’t do this, you bitch. I have rights and- don’t, god damn it, don’t hang up on me!” Another furious sound and then a clatter of plastic and Sam realized that Nick must have thrown his phone against the wall. “Fuck!”

Not knowing what to do, Sam stayed on the bed, hardly breathing.

Nick didn’t come back in, but he could be heard pacing the small front room.

Comfort or Space? Sam didn’t know what to give. If it was Dean out there then the answer was to stay the fuck away and give him time to calm down. But Nick? Nick was still new and fairly uncharted territory when it came to mood swings.

Sam finally decided that if nothing else he couldn’t just stay in here forever. His own clothes were probably on the bathroom floor where they’d been dropped last night, so he stole some pajama pants from the dresser, and shuffled out to the front room.

Nick was still stomping around, running his hands through his hair until it was a complete mess, working his jaw, grinding his teeth with soft little pop sounds.

Cautiously, Sam dodged around him and into the kitchen. Coffee was made and a perfectly
brewed cup was set out on the counter shortly afterwards. A peace offering even if Sam hadn’t done anything wrong.

And if nothing else, Nick seemed to show a cursory awareness to all of these goings on. The pacing slowed down and almost sheepishly he came to the kitchen, shoulders hunched, head down, angry lines deeply carved over his forehead. But he took his coffee with a small nod and went and planted himself in the corner of the couch, drawing his knees tight up to his chest.

Sam let him be. Staying over at the table with some coffee of his own, slowly waking up, waiting for the slight tremor to leave his hands. Exciting things like this shouldn’t happen to him first thing in the morning- or before noon for that matter. He glanced at the clock over the stove and saw that he’d already slept in long enough to miss his first class of the day.

He watched Nick, saw him slowly relaxing as he got deeper and deeper into his cup of coffee. He uncurled in phases, shoulders dipping, head falling forward to rest against his knees.

“How’d you sleep last night?” Nick’s voice came suddenly and startled him.

“Fine… just fine.” Sam rolled his coffee mug between his hands, taking as much warmth as he could, kind of wishing that he’d taken the time to steal one of Nick’s shirts too. “How about you?” He fumbled through the appropriate response.

Nick looked over his shoulder and gave him a tight smile. “Great. Just, bit of a rocky start this morning.”

Sam glanced at the indent in the far wall, and the shattered remains of a cell phone on the floor bellow it. Kind of nodding, but not speaking. There was nothing constructive he could say at this point. He stayed over at the relative safety of the table until Nick started waggling his fingers in Sam’s direction, beckoning.

“Come ‘ere.” He added when Sam didn’t immediately come to him.

With a soft chuckle and a one shouldered shrug, Sam set down his mug and came over, letting out a startled noise as Nick caught him by the hips and pulled him down to sit on the arm of the couch.

“I’m going to kiss you.” He said evenly, hands sliding slowly up Sam’s chest, over his shoulders, hooking behind his neck.

“Are you asking permission?”

“Does it look like I’m asking?” Nick raised an eyebrow as he pulled Sam down the rest of the way and kissed him gently. “Good morning.”

And Sam had kind of forgotten that this was a thing that they were allowed to do now. And it was a really awesome thing. Not the kind of something that he wanted to forget. He steadied himself against Nick’s chest and kissed him a handful of times, each one slower and more lingering than the last.

“Good morning.” He finally got out and then found himself returning a grin.

“Do you have to go to class?” Nick’s long fingers were slowly knotting themselves in the short hair at the back of Sam’s neck.

“I probably should.” He said slowly and Nick nodded, but then Sam was kissing him again, sliding off the arm of the couch and pushing his friend down. It was a replay of last night’s first
frantic exploration on the couch—only they managed to actually get their clothes out of the way this time. So much more than just friction, and Nick was still so tight and Sam was still sure that they shouldn’t be allowed to do this. Things that felt this good must be illegal.

He also had a sinking suspicion that neither of them had planned for their morning to go quite like this. With Nick on his back, bare legs up over Sam’s hips as they rocked together, hard and slow. But it was a good way to spend the morning none the less.

Sam didn’t make it to class. Nick didn’t make it to the store to buy a new cell phone. They didn’t get around to talking about what had caused the need of the phone’s destruction in the first place. Some things just weren’t as important as getting to know each other that much better.

Dean apparently thought otherwise, because when Sam finally got around to checking his own phone sometime after lunch he saw that he had a dozen missed calls from his big brother, along with a fair amount of aggressive texts, because Sam still had his car and Dean would really like it back.

“I really should get back home.” Sam said absently, stretching his arms high over head, shaking his phone where Nick could see it, either as an explanation or an apology.

Letting out a sleepy sigh, Nick just nodded. “I guess you would have to eventually… unless you want to move in?”

Sam laughed, and leaned over to pat Nick’s chest. “We’re just hardly past the ‘I like-like’ you stage. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Oh I at least get a kiss goodbye?”

“I’ve been kissing you goodbye since last night.” Sam bore his teeth in what might have been able to pass as a grin, even as he leaned down to give Nick a gentle peck between the eyes. “I don’t think I’m very good at it.”

“Just need more practice.” Nick made a noise part way between a growl and a purr. Soft rumble in the back of his throat as he sat up on his elbows and tried to steal yet another kiss even though they were both well over the limit.

But Sam allowed it. He allowed it many times over in fact before finally finding the strength to escape, before Nick somehow talked him into getting back onto the couch with him.

“I really, really have to go before Dean walks himself down here and kills me for not bringing his car back last night like I promised I would.” Sam apologized and slipped away, going to find some clothes to wear. His own jeans from last night were… not really salvageable. They needed to be washed, along with his boxers. The fabric stiff and not at all something that Sam was willing to put back on. So he went ahead a stole/borrowed more of Nick’s clothes, secretly loving the feel of the other man’s jeans against his bare skin.

“Hey,” Nick called down the hall, and Sam could just barely see the man arching up on the couch to try and peer down the hall. “How are you going to explain the whole us not breaking up… thing to your brother?”

Sam came back down the hall and started to outline the plan that he’d made except for the fact that Nick obviously wasn’t listening. Eyes gone a little wide, trailing slowly over Sam. With a sigh, the younger man folded his arms over his chest. “I’ll bring them back.”

“I… yeah. Ok.” Nick slowly sat up, grabbing up the pajama pants that Sam had stripped off of him a little while back. He stood and got at least half dressed and Sam found himself politely
looking away which was almost funny to him but he didn’t know why. “I’m going to have to request that you never steal my clothes after this point, because hot damn I want to take ‘em off you with my teeth.” A slow kind of drawl creeping in around the edges of his words when he was this kind of tired and Sam loved hearing it.

“Oh my god, Nick.” He felt himself blushing even as he laughed and skittered away, keeping a healthy distance between them.

“I’m jus’ being honest. Figured that after three months with you I should give it a try.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m still going to leave before you-“

There came a rather self-important knocking at the door.

“… distract me again.” Sam finished softly, glancing at the door and back at Nick who oddly looked exactly like a man who’d just had rough sex on the sofa, rumpled and a little bruised and a bit sticky in the stomach region, and more than anything else, just happy. “You want me to get that while you go clean yourself up?”

Nick glanced down at himself, lightly touching the drying cum on his stomach before looking up at Sam and grinning. “Yeah. I’ll be right back. Give your brother a big ol’ kiss for me, thank him for introducing us.” Nick called over his shoulder as he trailed out of the room.

“Yeah, I don’t think he’s all that happy about it at this point.” Sam mumbled to himself as he went to answer the knocking. An apology forming on his lips before he even got the door open.

Except it wasn’t Dean glaring at him.

It was Gabriel- and he wasn’t glaring so much as just looking mildly confused, then grinning.

“Hey, Sambo. Didn’t expect to see you here. Nick in there with ya?”

And wow, Sam really hated that nickname more than he thought he could, but he shrugged it off. His day was too good to let something as little and insignificant as Gabriel wreck it. “Yeah. Come on it.” He stood aside and let the shorter man brush past him. “I’ll tell him you’re-“

“Luci, I’m home.” Gabriel simply sang out, as loud as you like, not even giving Sam a chance. “And Oh.My.God- it smells like sex in here.” He managed to grin wider somehow, jaw practically unhinging like a snake’s.

Sam went and collected the cold coffee mugs and then busied himself with rinsing them out.

“What did I interrupt? Like I don’t already know.”

“What?” Nick said, coming out of his bedroom. Jeans and a flannel and all those lovely bruises Sam had given him well hidden. “Sam was just getting ready to head out ‘s all.” He ran a hand through his hair almost self consciously. “What ‘d ya need, Gabe?”

“What do I need?” The little blonde asked with a laugh. “What do you need? I got a call from the hose beast’s lawyer this morning. Know you got one too. Figured I’d come over and find you drinking yourself numb just like old times.” He flashed his grin between his brother and Sam. “But this is better. Much, much healthier way to cope with the fucking mess you let her turn you into.” He moved to sit on the couch and Nick made a wild noise that sort of translated to ‘no’.

Gabriel glanced at the couch and his grin withered into a disturbed kind of grimace as he went to the dining room table instead. It was the first and only indication that he was less than ok with everything going on between his brother and the rather sturdy college student he’d decided to
keep. Or maybe he’d only just noticed for the first time how really ugly the couch actually was.

Nick watched it all with quiet acceptance, no comment. No rising to whatever bait Gabriel had been laying out for him.

And Sam wanted to ask. He really did. He was a smart kid and he knew that Gabriel’s visit had something to do with Nick’s exwife. Same as the busted up phone still in the corner. It was a bit too obvious. But at the same time he couldn’t bring himself to ask. If it was something that Nick had wanted to talk to Sam about he would have talked about it.

Maybe Sam would be brave enough to ask tomorrow.

“I’ve got to go.” He announced to the room at large, leaving the clean mugs on the counter.

A hint of his earlier cheer flickered over Nick’s face as he took a little step in Sam’s direction. “Do I get a goodbye kiss?”

“Fucking no.” Sam laughed and went to go look for his shoes on. “I’m not falling for that one again.”

Nick shambled after him with a soft laugh of his own, lurking in the hall and watching Sam. “You coming back tonight?” The happily battered man asked.

“Tomorrow night.” Sam apologized. “I’ve got homework I really should do.”

Nick leaned on the wall, watching him with lidded eyes. “I can accept that. But I will be calling you tonight once I get off work, and I’m going to talk to you while I touch myself.”

Sam had to look away. “I’m really leaving.” He pulled his shoes on and made for the door, refusing to smile when from the corner of his eye he saw Nick still trailing after him with that same slow limp.

“Hey, I…yeah. Ok…” Nick sort of just trailed off in defeat. He leaned up against the door, keeping Sam from opening it right away, and those pale eyes of his were all for Sam. Pointedly ignoring Gabriel on the far side of the room. It was just them and the full weight of their sins.

It all sort of sank in in that moment and surprisingly with the collection of everything they’d said and done last night, to the distraction on the couch this morning from whatever the hell Nick was going through- Sam found himself grinning. He was happy. For the first time in what felt like weeks all that anxiety and doubt and generalized bad was gone.

But before he could manage to voice any of that Nick thrashed it all with a whispered and slightly strained “I love you.”

Sam’s heart caught in his throat, same as it had last night, and even though the words felt foreign and strange to his mouth he managed a soft “I love you, too.”

The look on Nick’s face was wholly worth it.

Funny, but Sam found himself ignoring the fact that he was supposed to be leaving this apartment in favor of giving the man one last and rather thorough kiss goodbye.

“Oh, can I get one of those too?” Gabriel asked them loudly as they pulled apart. “I mean, I’ll take one from either of you…’m not too picky.”

“That’s what Rehka said before she agreed to marry him.” Nick whispered loud enough that
everyone could hear him. “I’m not too picky.”

Sam laughed and Nick grinned up at him like he’d just won something. Stupidly happy that Sam liked his little joke. It was almost too cute and Sam found himself leaning back down to kiss the smile off his lips.

He was never going to get out of the apartment at this rate.

“My lunch is only an hour long.” Gabriel said with a sigh.

Nick flipped his brother off over his shoulder, speaking with his lips still against Sam’s, little grin and nip of teeth between words. “You own your own law firm, and I’ve seen you take three day long lunches before.”

“If this is going to take much longer can I at least crack a window so I don’t choke to death on you guys’ musk?”

Sam got his hands on Nick’s sides, thumbs slipping easily into the little indentations below his hips. He gave a few little tugs until the older man got the idea and stepped away from the door. “Get yourself a new phone.” Sam ordered. “Call me tonight.”

Nick just grinned, little wink and a nod, and Sam left with a laugh.

Everything, literally everything, felt wonderful, and flawless and just stunning.

Lucky Sam.

He got to keep that beautiful feeling for two whole weeks.

And he loved it.

He loved every damn second of it.

Nothing good can last though. And looking back, Sam supposed it was just the transient nature of the universe or some other ‘grown up’ and philosophical bullshit like that. In actuality, it was just because sometimes people say stupid things that they don’t mean.

Really… really stupid things.

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“I don’t want to go.”

“They’re your family,” Sam eased gently, “and they want you there.”

And Nick, the adult that he was, simply stuck his tongue out at Sam.

“You already told them you were going.” He tried a different approach.

Same reaction.

“You keep sticking that out and me- I will bite it.” Which wasn’t much of a threat. Maybe it would have had some weight a few weeks back… but now all it did was make Nick’s smile go crooked, his eyes instantly growing darker. “You’re going.” Sam insisted in what he hoped was a firm sounding voice that held no reaction to Nick’s suddenly lusting gaze.

“Come with?”
“You’re going- not me.”

Nick attempted a puppydog look, but he was going up against a world champion of pitiful expressions, and simply failed to impress. The fact that he was sitting half naked on the foot of the bed, blankets up around his shoulders like a quilted shall, did very little to help the attempt. Hint of bare chest showing. The crooked gaze of the wall eyed monster tattooed over his heart almost looking at Sam. It sort of undercut Nick’s best attempts.

Sam just shook his head, picking his shirt up off the floor and pulling it on in one easy movement. “I can’t go to your niece’s Communion with you. I’m not Catholic.”

“I’m not either.” Nick’s lip curled.

“But you’re her uncle.”

“And when we get married you’ll be her aunt, so it’s all good.”

Sam threw his head back and laughed. “Oh my god, Nick. No.”

“No you’re not coming or no we’re not…”

And with as much strength and sincerity as he could muster, Sam swallowed down his laughter and placed a hand on either of Nick’s cheeks. Deep breath. No smiling. “Just no.” He leaned in and gave the gentlest of parting kisses. “Go or you’re going to be late.”

But Nick grabbed at Sam’s hands before he could let go, skin rough and a little warm. And with the most pitiful expression that he could manage, he kissed Sam’s wrist, pale blue eyes never wavering. “Please?”

“No.”

He kissed the other wrist. “But... I love you.”

Which was just dirty pool, and not the first time that he’d tried this particular tactic over the last two weeks. And, for the record, it had worked every time, and probably would keep working every time.

A long drive up the coast later Sam decided that the awkwardness of attending a Catholic anything was greatly overshadowed by the fact that Nick was actually in a suit and tie. Because Nick… he looked really good in a tie.

Distractively so.

Sam honestly had no idea what took place in that church. It was Sunday. There was Mass. Sam spent the whole time with his hands folded tightly in his lap, pointedly not touching Nick’s thigh despite the fact that it was only inches away. The only thing that he managed to take out of the ceremony (or whatever it was considered) was that Nick’s niece Sarah looked very sweet in her white dress.

Well, and one other thing. Apparently churches, or family, or neckties, or something made Nick nervous. His right leg jittering and bouncing up and down the whole time. Even Castiel, who was sitting on Nick’s other side noticed and had to whisper a few times to his big brother to knock it off.

“Sorry.” He whispered back each time and the nervousness would ease for a few moments before
the bouncing would start right back up.

“Are you alright?” Sam leaned in.

“Yeah, yeah.” He offered a weak smile. “Just thought that Gabriel would be here.”

Sam frowned, not understanding why today of all days Nick would actually want to spend time with his squirreliest brother. But there were lots of things going on that Sam didn’t know about, and Gabriel’s absence was the least of them.

From beneath the bench in front of them emerged a slightly messy haired, wild eyed child. The youngest of Nick’s nieces climbing her way into her uncle’s lap, straightening her dress that was made of roughly a million ruffles, and looking rather pleased.

“This is boring.” She told them in something that almost could have passed for a whisper.

“I know, monster.” Nick folded his arms around her, almost completely hiding her from sight. “But it’s almost over.”

“And then we have cake.”

“That’s what I hear. Now hush,” and Nick kissed the top of her head, “or your mom is going to come back here and pinch us.”

Sam had his suspicions that Anna would do worse than that, but she was rows and rows ahead of them and too engrossed in watching the small herd of children taking part in the Mass, eating their little crackers.

The weight of a small child seemed to be enough to calm Nick, and he stopped jittering in favor of letting his niece twist and jab his fingers in ways that looked fairly painful. But if it bothered the man he didn’t show it.

Mass took less than an hour and Gabriel slid in at the tail end, just in time to follow everyone outside for cake, which meant that Nick gave Sam a quick and surprising kiss on the cheek before abandoning him with a collection of relative, and complete strangers.

Sam ended up sitting by himself for a few minutes, wondering if this was just a normal part of dating someone. Occasionally having to wait alone in a place you didn’t really want to be. And it wasn’t so much that Sam was against church, or really any kind of organized religion for that matter- in fact they’d moved outside to enjoy the unseasonably nice weather while they had a large picnic of sorts- it was just that he didn’t feel like this was a place he belonged. He was far from home, in a setting that was unfamiliar to him, and the only people he knew had walked off together to argue animatedly under an oak tree.

Not too much time passed before a man came and sat down on the bench beside Sam. He was short (and everyone was short in comparison to Sam, but this guy couldn’t have been more than five foot six) with close cut dark hair and a bit of a beard that looked more like a few weeks worth of a misplaced razor than any kind of fashion statement. He also smelled faintly like gin. Not that Sam was passing any kind of judgment, but… it was eleven AM on a Sunday… at church.

“I don’t recognize you.” The man said simply.

“I’m here with the Novaks.” And that was Nick’s last name, right? Sam found himself laughing a little when he realized he had no idea what his boyfriend’s last name was. Sure, he knew Castiel’s, but the men were only half brothers and that didn’t mean anything in the grand scheme of things.
But his new companion nodded, gaze following a cluster of running children as they scampered past. “Good family.” He glanced back up at Sam. “Didn’t expect to see Nick with them though. Last I heard he’d sworn off any and all family functions.”

Sam wondered what that was supposed to mean exactly, but by the gentle look on this man’s face, Sam realized that he was probably just over thinking things and shouldn’t somehow get defensive for Nick in his absence.

“That’s actually the brother I came with… I don’t really know the rest of the family all that well.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. You picked the best one after all.” And the man laughed softly. “But don’t tell them I said that.”

The fact that Sam agreed made him like this man a little bit more.

“Dad!” A woman’s voice cut through the air, almost angry.

Sam looked around to find Gabriel’s wife coming over to them rather rapidly across the grass despite her impressive heels.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone you were coming?” She demanded to the man beside Sam.

This was her dad? He had expected someone a bit more… ethnic. Not that he’d ever considered what Rekha’s parents would actually look like, but she had to be Middle Eastern of some sort and the man that she was pulling up into a fierce hug was just about as white as they came.

“I didn’t want anyone making a big deal.” The man said sheepishly, giving her an awkward half hug back, sort of patting her shoulders and then looking a bit lost.

“You stupid old man.” She laughed and let go of him long enough to put one hand on his cheek and kiss the other before standing up straight, hovering over the sitting men. “I see you met Sam.”

“We hadn’t really gotten that far yet.” His dark eyes darted about, obviously embarrassed but pleased by the affectionate greeting he’d just been given. “Hi, Sam.”

“Hi…”

“Chuck.” The man supplied a name and held a hand out for Sam to shake.

“Sam is Nick’s boyfriend.” Rekha said, just as simply as you’d say that the sky is blue or that water is wet.

It was horrifying to hear it out loud.

Chuck’s eyes went a little wide and he looked at Sam a bit more thoroughly. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Sam said uneasily. “For a little over three months now.” Not sure if this was the right sort of place to be sharing this information. They were in San Francisco, but they were also in the grassy area behind a Catholic church. It didn’t feel like the best place for these kinds of confessions.

“Is this just something you boys are doing to see how mad you can make Michael, or is it an experimental… thing?”

“Dad!” Rekha smacked the man’s shoulder and saved Sam from having to answer. “They are very happy together. Nick’s started coming to holidays and other things, and he’s sober, and I
think Michael’s outrage is just a pleasant afterthought at this point.” She looked apologetically at Sam and shrugged.

He kind of shrugged back. Honestly not sure that pissing off part of his family wasn’t still part of Nick’s master plan anyways.

“Well,” Chuck rubbed at the spot on his shoulder where he’d just been hit. “If you make my son happy, then I’m real glad to meet you.”

“I… yeah.” Sam found himself nodding along uncertainly. Suddenly remembering this man from a photo that he’d seen months ago over the desk in the tattoo shop. This wasn’t Rekha’s dad. This was Nick’s.

“God knows it’s been too long since we’ve seen him smile.” He stood and nodded slightly at his daughter in law. “I’m going to go get a drink, save my seat for me.” A gentle excuse and Sam watched the man go, sort of drifting off into the group of milling parents and children.

Rekha watched him go too before sitting down beside Sam. “Thanks for dragging Nick out here. It means a lot to Anna.”

“I didn’t do any-”

“You did a lot.” She assured, gently patting his arm. “Just take it as a complement and say ‘you’re welcome’.”

Sam chuckled and did as he was told. She nodded at him approvingly.

“I was worried that with Lilith suddenly causing trouble for him again that Nick would just disappear like he used to. But he’s keeping it together really well.”

Sam felt his smile wilt. Nick hadn’t mentioned anything even remotely like that going on.

“You’re good for him is what I’m trying to say, and we’re happy to have you around.” She gave his arm a little squeeze. “Now, I’ve got to go find Dad. I think he got lost looking for that drink.”

She left him too, and Sam was left with his lonely bench and some mixed feelings. These past two weeks had been little more than school and sex, and by no means was Sam complaining. He’d seen Nick almost every night since Valentine’s day, and when their schedules wouldn’t allow for one of them to sleep over they would call and talk way too late into the night. But Nick had never mentioned his ex.

They talked about… god, they talked about nothing. Nothing even remotely important. It was all just stupid things like making plans to go back to the beach one night when the weather got better, or there had been an hour long argument about the Ship of Thesis and how Nick had never taken any kind of philosophy class, but still had formed some very strong opinions on souls and what makes you you. They’d talked about some of the brighter parts of Sam’s childhood. They’d commiserated on their shared family camping trips as children. They talked about what Sam wanted to do once he graduated.

Never once had Lilith come up.

Sam looked up at the leaf bare trees and the clouds encroaching on his sunny sky.

He didn’t know that much about Nick’s life past the age of about thirteen. Sure. Sam knew that he’d been married, but there had also been some mention of a master’s degree and a military service, but no details had ever been offered.
And beyond those things, down at the base of it, Sam had fallen in love with a man whose last name he didn’t even know with any certainty.

It didn’t change how he felt about Nick. But it did make Sam take a long hard look at some choices that he’d made recently.

He got lost somewhere in those thoughts and the next thing he knew a shadow had fallen over him, reminding of the fact that it was only just March and spring hadn’t really arrived yet. Sam looked up and saw Nick’s familiar facsimile of a smile. Tired hooks at the edges of his mouth. Maybe he’d actually been willing to make an appearance today to appease his family, but it looked like it had taken a bit out of him.

“Hey, darlin’. Are you ready to head back home?”

“Yeah.” Sam stood. “You get to say goodbye to your dad?” Which was a weird thing to say. As soon as he said it he had regrets.

Nick’s face went complicatedly neutral. “My dad?”

“I- I thought that’s who he was.” Sam found himself almost apologizing. “Chuck, right? About yay tall… or was that actually Rekha’s dad?”

Because trust the smart college boy to get this one wrong.

Nick gave the barest shake of his head, not quite looking at Sam, eyes scanning the people standing around. “No one told me he was here.”

“He said he didn’t want anyone making a big deal, then he went to go get a drink…” how long ago had that been now? Rekha hadn’t come back either actually.

“Fuck- I,” Nick was making small fists at his side, clenching and unclenching as he looked around a bit more frantically. “I’ll be right back.”

And then it was just Sam and the bench again.

He couldn’t take it this time though. After ten minutes he was up and looking for Nick. And for whatever it was worth, the little red car that they’d come in was still in the parking lot, but it took long enough to find the man it belonged to that Sam had actually started to worry.

He didn’t need to get worked up about it though. Nick hadn’t actually made it that far. Sam found him sitting in the empty chapel, quiet and tucked away in one of the last pews, arms folded over the back of the row in front of him, head resting on his arms.

In all his searching, Sam hadn’t come across Nick’s dad, and now he really had nothing good to say to his friend who apparently hadn’t found him either. So Sam came over and sat down, close enough to be noticed, but not close enough to be intrusive if Nick still wanted to be alone- because that was the only reason that Sam could figure for coming into the empty building when literally everyone else was still outside enjoying themselves.

“Did he say anything to you?” Nick didn’t lift his head.

“He… no. Not really. I told him I’d come here with you and didn’t really know the rest of your family- and he said that was ok, that I’d picked the best brother any ways.” Sam watched in fascination as Nick looked up impossibly fast, eyes wide and confused. “But he also told me I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone that part. So… you know, keep it between us.”
Nick looked in pain. It was the best way Sam could think to describe it. Like someone had punched him in the gut and knocked all the wind out of him.

“I found Rekha.” Nick said after the quiet got a little too oppressive. “She said he’d already left before she could stop him.”

Sam didn’t have anything to add to that.

He didn’t know why this was significant. If it had been John that had left without even saying hello in the first place, Sam would have been ecstatic. But Apparently Nick had a different relationship with his father, which was just one more thing that Sam had no idea about and oddly now didn’t feel like the right time to ask.

“Do you want me to drive us back home?” He offered instead.

Nick laughed with a dull, hollow kind of sound. “What is with you always trying to drive my car?” But he pulled the keys from his pocket and handed them over. That little gesture said a lot more than it was probably intended to.

Around the time they were passing Half Moon Bay, when a quiet costal rain started to patter and leave little speckles down the windshield, Nick finally looked up from where he had been resting his head against the passenger side window.

“I feel like we missed out on the golden opportunity of having sex in a confessional.”

Sam let out a startled laugh. “Absolutely not.”

“No. No, you’re supposed to offer to turn the car around.”

He’d say it again, more clearly this time just in case Nick hadn’t heard him right. “Absolutely not.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Is your last name Novak?” Sam asked instead of rising to the obvious bait.

From the corner of his eye he watched Nick sit up straighter in his seat, reaching up to tug at his lower lip for a moment. “No.” He said finally. “That’s Castiel’s. He kept his mom’s last name even when he came to live with us.”

Sam waited.

“You… you really don’t know my last name, do you?”

“It’s never come up.”

“…Shurley.”

Sam blinked and almost turned to look at Nick, but kept his eyes on the road for more practical reasons. “Are you serious?”

“I changed it to my dad’s back when I was changing my first name.” Nick chuckled. “And don’t make that face. Nick Shurley is still a better name than *Lucifer*.”

“Yeah, ok.” Sam could give him that.

“Why didn’t you ask that when we first met?”
“Why don’t you ever talk about yourself?” Sam countered.

“I do.”

“No. You don’t. I know how you like your coffee, sure. I know that you won’t wear socks to bed even though you’ve always got cold feet. I even know that you actually count while brushing your teeth to make sure you’re doing it long enough- which is stupid and I love it.” Sam added when Nick started to protest. “But I don’t even know what college you went to. I don’t know why you have these really detailed tattoos over your arms and then you’ve got that stupid looking whatever the hell it is on your chest. It looks like a five year old drew it- and it’s weirdly cute, don’t get me wrong. I just… I don’t know who you were before I met you.”

“Sam,”

“I don’t know who you are now.”

“Christ.” Nick rubbed a hand over his face. “I knew I shouldn’t have left you when I went to talk to Gabriel. Can’t leave people alone in churches.”

“What were you talking to Gabriel about?”

Nick got very still on his side of the car.

Sam waited.

He’d been doing it a lot today, and he thought he was starting to get the hang of it.

“Just… stuff.”

“Stuff.” Sam repeated. “Well, there you go. You guys were talking about stuff.”

“Fuck you.” Nick bristled, suddenly very defensive. “I don’t have to check in with you whenever I talk to my brother.”

“I’m not saying-” Sam cut himself off, hands clenching at the steering wheel. “You’re important to me. If there’s something big going on, something I can help with, I’d like to know.”

But that didn’t get a response.

They got off the freeway, the surface streets fairly empty in the fresh raid as Sam drove towards his own house.

“It’s the monster that used to live under June’s bed.” Nick said quietly, hand absently coming up to touch his chest. “It was the first letter I ever got from her. She was worried about it trying to eat her at night, because she didn’t have anyone to check under the bed before she went to sleep. She didn’t have a dad at home like her friends did to do those sorts of things. So she sent me the picture. Thought that if I knew what the monster looked like I could maybe find it during the day and talk to it for her. Tell it that she’d left a peanut butter sandwich downstairs for it to eat instead of her…” Nick’s voice faltered and he turned in his seat to look out the window. Not saying anything else until Sam pulled the car into the driveway beside the Impala.

“Dean’s home.” Sam didn’t know if he meant it as a warning or just a fun fact if somehow Nick had managed to miss the enormous black car.

“I’ll just get going.”
“No, you can come in.”

Nick turned and looked over at Sam, trying for a weak smile that didn’t even reach halfway to his eyes. “You brother actively hates me.”

Which wasn’t necessarily an overstatement. Dean certainly hadn’t decided to like Nick any more once he found out that Sam was not actually breaking up with him.

“He thinks you’re using me.” Sam killed the engine, fingers twisting slowly over the keys.

“Well, I am.” Nick sunk down, not even unbuckling his seatbelt, so this conversation obviously wasn’t winding down just yet. “I mean- that’s why we started this in the first place, isn’t it? We were using each other quite openly. I needed to keep Gabriel off my back and you…” One of his long fingered hands sort of gestured uselessly in Sam’s direction.

“And I what?”

“And you were just a bit lonely.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, that’s why Dean set you up with me, wasn’t it? Your friend had gone and gotten married, you were moping around for months and your brother thought a quick fuck would cheer you up.”

“No.” Sam felt like he was going crazy. “No. I was just tired of getting set up on dates all that time. Same as you. What the actual hell, Nick?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“No. It wasn’t. You’re making it sound like I was hanging around hoping for sex because I couldn’t get it anywhere else.”

Nick ran his hands through his hair, fidgeting like no one’s business. “I’m sure you could have gotten it just about anywhere else. I don’t know why you settled for me.”

“Because I love you, you asshole.” They’d already had this conversation.

“Do you?” And it wasn’t a gentle question. It was almost an accusation, and something had gone very wrong while Sam wasn’t looking.

“Seriously, Nick. What the hell?”

He let out a long rough breath, the noise tearing at his throat, as he raked his hands through his hair a bit more forcefully.

And Sam waited one last time.

Nick sat there, watching the water running down the windshield. “H-how did my dad look?”

Sam blinked, startled by the abrupt change. “He looked… fine.” He hadn’t really spent all that much time examining the man.

“I haven’t seen him in almost ten year, Sam. Try and be a bit more descriptive.”

Oh. See now that was one of those things that seemed like it should have come up at some point since they’d met. “He was a little grey at the temples, hadn’t shaved recently. He also might have been a bit drunk- but like father like son.” And that last bit shouldn’t have been said out loud. Sam
wasn’t even conscious of forming the thought.

“I haven’t had a drink since we started having sex, so fuck you.” Immediately Nick looked apologetic. “Damn it. These past few weeks have been a fucking nightmare and I can’t- I didn’t mean to… sorry. I’m gunna go now. I need a few hours to just not be here.”

To not be with Sam.

Yes. That thing that had gone wrong had gone expertly so.

And the thing was, Sam was nearly one hundred percent sure that it had nothing to do with him. This morning they’d been tucked up together in Nick’s bed, having slow prebreakfast sex, followed by something that… probably wasn’t technically spooning, but it was close and good, and then Sam had made them toast and coffee and they’d tucked back up for an episode of X Files before Nick had to get ready to go to Mass.

Nothing about this morning had been bad or given any indication that trouble was brewing. He was going to blame Nick’s family for this one. They’d both been fine until they’d gotten to that church. Then Nick had left with Gabriel, and apparently something was going on with Lilith…

Sam felt like an idiot.

And a bit of a coward.

Rekha had said that she thought Nick was holding it together pretty well, but for Sam that concept hadn’t sunken in immediately.

There had been signs.

Little faults in Nick that he had been pointedly ignoring for a while now.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Christ. No. I thought that by dating a guy I’d be spared this touchy feel crap for once.” Nick unbuckled his seat belt. “I’m not going to talk about it because it’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Oh, nice.”

“Look, you wanna’ talk? Fine. Ask me questions, I’ll tell you all the dumb ass stuff that you want to know about for some fucking reason that I’m never going to understand. It’s not important and that’s why I don’t’ bring it up.”

“What’s going on with your ex?”

Nick’s shoulders got tight. “I meant the stuff about school, and… and the military and whatever else. There’s a difference between things too stupid to bring up and none of your damn business.”

Sam got out of the car. Nick followed, but he didn’t say anything nice like ‘wait’ or ‘sorry’.

“You’re right.” Sam said for him. “It is none of my damn business.”

Nick came around the car and held his hand out for the keys.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to see your dad.” Sam had learned from Dean when the best time to shut up actually was. Problem with that though, if there was one thing that Dean did well, it was run his mouth long past the point that he should have shut the hell up. “He seemed nice.”
Nick snatched the keys from Sam’s hand. “Fuck you. Maybe he didn’t stick around like yours did, and he wouldn’t win any awards. But I don’t need your sympathy.”

Sam folded his arms over his chest. Weird, bitter feelings churning in his gut. “Did you really just compare your mousey, polite dad to the monster I grew up with?”

“Oh right. I forgot. You’re an expert on terrible fathers. You obviously know how to classify them so much better than me.”

“I know enough to say that you’d make a pretty fucking terrible one.”

And Sam didn’t mean that.

He didn’t.

Oh good god, but he didn’t mean that.

It had been such a stupid thing to say. The kind of thing that you regret about three seconds before you say it and even then was still too late.

Nick didn’t look angry though. His jaw was tight, but there were no namable emotions on his face. Everything boiled away until all that was left was this terrible stillness.

He didn’t say goodbye.

He didn’t even tell Sam to fuck off.

He just left.

Sam was left reeling, blinking wildly at the empty street, trying to recognize some shred of himself in this young man having a panic attack on a rain spattered driveway.

But he didn’t know this kid anymore than he knew the man who was driving away.

Chapter End Notes

same as always- thank you guys.
I don't know if you really understand how much your support means to me.
We're all neurotic kids at some point, even when you get old and weird like me, and I love that we found each other and that you put up with me even when I make you wait almost a month for a chapter like this.
It gets better.
I promise.
If it makes you less sad

Chapter Notes

Let's be honest here.
I'm a giant liar when it comes to the time frame in which I'm going to end this beast.
You know it. I know it. Let's sing it from the roof tops.
I really, really, really wanted to just jam all of this into one last chapter. But it's too much! It's just too much.
And I'm whining to my friend that I haven't even come round the corner to a conclusion and I'm pushing 50 pages and who even writes chapters this long?
Her solution was to break it up.
she is wise and very patient with me when I have weird writing crisis involving stupid boys.

so here. Have part of an ending. I made sure to cut it off at an optimistic point?
And, ugh.
I don't know guys.
This story is slowly killing me. I'm removing any expectations on chapter counts. It will be done when it gets done. I obviously don't know how many words are between then and now
Just let the final chapter count be in the low one hundreds.

amen

Over the next few minutes Sam tried calling Nick what felt like well over ten times.

First he’d done it standing in the driveway, listening to the man’s phone ring and ring and ring before going to voicemail where Sam wasn’t brave enough to say something. He probably kept that up for five minutes straight before Dean had come out, wondering why he’d heard a car pull up but no one had come inside. And Dean… who really was a good big brother, just stood there in the rain beside Sam for long enough to call him a dumb ass, then took him by the shoulders and hauled him inside.

A beer was placed into Sam’s useless hands and he was steered to the couch. Stubbornly he tried calling Nick again, but after a few more failed attempts he just started getting sent straight to voicemail.

Which could only mean that Nick had turned his phone off.

Sam sank deep into the couch cushions, low enough to rest his head against the back of the couch and he with a sigh he closed his eyes and abandoned the phone somewhere beside him. “I... can’t... I just can’t.”

Dean had lowered himself into the chair he must have been sitting in before coming outside, near to the coffee table which was once more overrun with some kind of car guts, all chrome and shiny and out of place in the living room. “Told you you should have dumped the guy.”

“Not helping, Dean.”

“Do I even wanna’ ask what happened?”
His breath rattled around between his ribs, and Sam raised his head, glancing down at his phone and then at the beer that he’d managed to somehow not drop onto the carpet.

Sam felt like an actual idiot. “I- I don’t know. He brought up dad and I just... I just. Oh god. I think I brought up his daughter and-” Sam was still feeling the horror of that choice. It had been a gut response. No thought to it, and only regret in it’s wake. “-and now he’s not answering his phone.”

“Wait-wait. Hold up. You never said he’s got a kid.”

“Well.. he doesn’t anymore.”

Dean stared at him, the white of his eyes showing a bit too clearly. The look was enough.

Even Dean thought he was a complete bastard for that one.

Sam sank a little deeper into the overwhelming horror of what he’d done.

“What did he say about Dad?” Dean asked carefully after a pause. Too careful to pull off the ‘casual’ tone that he was probably aiming for.

“That at least our dad didn’t leave like his did.” He took a long drink from his beer, and it was cold enough that it hurt his chest. “I would have… I would have fucking given anything to have Dad just walk out one day and never come back.”

Mixed loyalties played over Dean and in the end he didn’t say anything.

“We would have been better off without him.” The same flash of anger that Sam had felt in the driveway came back in an instant, but it quickly soured back into guilt. Because Nick couldn’t have known that. The blonde wasn’t the only one who had big gaps in his life that he didn’t want to talk about. Sam couldn’t rightly blame the man for ignorance.

Nick had just said something stupid and Sam had done him one better.

“I am …literally the worst boyfriend.” Because he hadn’t just said something a little cruel, he’d gone right for Nick’s weak spot. But that was just part of the Winchester charm, right? They didn’t pull their punches.

“I say fuck ‘em- and not like you’ve been doing, going at it like rabbits for the last few weeks. Because I walked in on that shit last Tuesday, with you guys on the stairs, and I could have gone my whole life without seeing some dude going down on my baby brother. I still have nightmares.”

Suddenly Sam’s whole face felt hot. Rightfully embarrassed for very valid reasons, the least of which being because this was the first he was hearing that Dean knew about what happened on the stairs a few mornings back. But right now was really not the appropriate time to think about the way that Nick’s stubble had scratched along his inner thigh.

In all probability there was probably never an appropriate time to think about such things.

Dean waggled a wrench in his direction, derailing that warm train of thought. “He’s a creep. He gives me the creeps. And he’s a bastard. Leave him. You don’t need him. I liked you better before you met him anyhow.”
“He didn’t-”

“Don’t defend him.” Dean hunched over his work, pointedly not looking at his brother while he spoke harsh words. “The fucker knows you well enough to push your buttons and anyone who plays dirty pool like that doesn’t deserve you.”

“He didn’t mean it.” Sam insisted, saying the words in a rush so he couldn’t get cut off a second time. Because if Nick didn’t mean it, then Sam didn’t mean it either. They could both be forgiven.

Dean just gave him a long, hard look. “You’re both fucking idiots, and I don’t want to hear your bullshit excuses. Drink your beer and calm down. You don’t get to call him until you can see the bottom of the bottle.”

And it wasn’t that Dean was encouraging him to get drunk before making a call. Dean just knew that Sam was in panic mode right now. He also knew that it would take Sam a few long minutes to finish off the drink and it would give him a chance to calm down before he did something stupid.

Well, one more something stupid.

He’d already set a pretty high bar for himself today.

The anxiety eased just a little by the time that Sam finished off those last weak drops of beer. Not much, but enough that he thought that he’d put together an acceptable apology. He took the empty bottle along with his phone to the kitchen- for recycling and privacy. Thought the house was quiet enough that Dean would probably still be able to hear everything- it was the illusion of isolation that mattered.

The call went straight to voicemail again, and Sam honestly preferred this than if it had rung on and on unanswered. Nick’s phone being off was more a broad aversion to the world and instead of a singular shunning of Sam.

“Hey,” in an instant all his carefully planned words flew apart and Sam sagged against the counter, resting his elbows on the formica, hand to his forehead. “I didn’t mean it… call me back… please.” He fumbled the end call button and then let the whole thing fall from his grasp, clattering down to the counter. There was no gentleness left in him.

“ ‘s just pathetic.” Dean’s voice broke through to him, no pity to be found. Just that normal roughness that he did so well. “Come out and help me with the car.”

Sam looked over, if only just to make sure that it was actually his brother standing there. There was one thing that they never did together, and that was work on Baby. She was Dean’s and Sam literally didn’t know the first thing about her inner workings.

“Come on, Sammich.” He nodded towards the garage. “I’m gunna bring her inside, you are going to get us a couple of beers.”

“Okay.” Sam stretched the word out, not really sure what was going on.

As it turned out, it was all a distraction.

That was the only logical thing that Sam could think to call it hours later when he was tired, and dirty, cleaning up before dinner. It only dawned on him as he soaped up to his elbows that Dean had managed to drag his thoughts away from today’s glorious crisis with auto manuals recited from memory like old stories. Sam had learned how to replace a transmission and how to change the car’s oil and Dean had treated the whole thing as delicately as open heart surgery and the
caution and care over every little move had completely consumed Sam.

He rinsed his arms, frowning at the black oil stains still beneath his nails. His head felt a bit clearer now, though that might have something to do with beer number two, or three. But it made sense to him now, at least as much as it ever would. He and Nick had had their first ‘real’ fight, and it had basically boiled down to name calling. Which, in the end, meant that they were no better than six year old girls.

Sam had apologized already, he’d made the attempt, and tomorrow Nick would call him back and apologize too, and they could both feel like complete asses and then they could have some makeup sex. And Sam had never had makeup sex, but if rumors were to be believed, it was something to look forward to.

Only… Nick didn’t call him the next day.

Or the day after that.

And Sam began to wonder at what point he should try calling again, or when he should just start getting annoyed.

Thursday came around, and despite Dean’s very loud protests against such actions, Sam went ahead and gave Nick the benefit of a doubt and another call. He’d had almost four whole days to brood. And honestly, aside from the little hooks of guilt that wouldn’t quite let Sam alone, he really just missed his boyfriend.

But this call, like the last one, went straight to voicemail and he found himself just staring blankly at the phone after the message beep with nothing really to say this time. He hung up without leaving anything behind and just sort of sunk down in his chair.

“Are we free then? Is that the sigh of quitting and getting over that douche of a boyfriend?” Dean leaned into the kitchen, apparently having been waiting just out of sight in the hall.

Sam looked over his shoulder and didn’t know what kind of emotion was showing on his face, but it apparently was bad enough to take the grin right out of Dean.

“How do you ask Cas next time you see him, just… see if Nick’s ok?”

“I’m sure he’s fine.” Dean sighed.

“Please?”

Dean’s mouth was nothing more than a thin, angry line. Not at all interested in helping out with this one.

Sam let his shoulders sink as he used his best pleading look. The same look that had gotten him his brother’s ice cream cones when they were kids, and getting to borrow the car for prom, and the top bunk of the bunk bed.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll ask.” Dean looked disgusted with both of them. “God. You know, I never wanted a little sister for this reason.” He clasped his hands under his chin and went into a rough falsetto. “Do you think he still likes me?”

Sam wished that he had something to throw at Dean, or that he was at least within smacking distance. “Shut up, jerk. Nick doesn’t live on his phone, but I’ve never really seen him turn it off either. I’m just worried.”
“Course you are.” Dean just shook his head. “In the meantime, if you don’t mind taking a break from writing ‘Sam -hearts- Nick’ all over your notebooks, you wanna go get something to eat?”

The report came back a few days later. Apparently Nick was just fine, though Dean had given the status update in a short, clipped kind of way that usually meant that he was either lying or really just wanted nothing to do with any of this.

Sam wasn’t willing to bet money either way to be honest. He had a feeling that this was just a losing game anyway he came at it. All the same, he waited for Dean to gumble and head upstairs for a quick shower, demanding that Sam order out for Chinese because he was too damn tired to cook tonight- and Sam got out his phone. But he didn’t call for food. He called Nick.

Call him a sentimental fool.

Call him a masochist.

He just wasn’t willing to live in a world where Nick was fine without him. There had been too much between them for everything to just stop dead in it’s tracks and suffer no ill effects from it.

The ringing stopped suddenly and Sam felt his breath catch, but it wasn’t Nick’s low, smooth voice that came down the phone line.

“Hey, you giant son of a bitch.” Gabriel practically sang. “I was hoping you’d call.”

“Is Nick there?”

“Oh, you sweet summer child. You don’t get to talk to my Nick anymore.”

There was no way that he’d heard that right. No. Because, no. “Excuse me?”

There were some shuffling sounds and a door closing and then an odd amount of ambient people noise, like Gabriel had stepped out into a more public place. “See, he can’t come to the phone, so I’m stepping in to answer all questions and concerns on his behalf and I’m making an executive decision here to call it quits for you two morons before anyone else gets seriously injured.”

Sam’s jaw hurt and he slowly became aware that he was grinding his teeth. “Give Nick back his phone. I need to talk to him.”

“No can do, kido. I’m on my way out to my car and he’s not really up for chasing me down.”

And Sam wasn’t going to ask to leave a message. It didn’t seem likely that Nick would actually get it- or that he would call back, seeing as he hadn’t felt it important enough to so far. “I don’t like you.” He managed instead, just sort of a wayward thought that found it’s own voice.

“You’re not exactly a contender for my new BFF either. You broke my favorite brother. And apparently he’s too damn stupid to keep himself safe, so now I suddenly have to be responsible and do it for him- and I hate being responsible. It’s not me. It’s not what I do. It’s not who I am.”

“You’re not even going to tell him I called, are you?”

“Oh, I’m going to pretend that you never even met him. Who is this calling? You must have a wrong number. So sorry.” And Gabriel actually hung up on him.

Sam stared at his phone feeling a terrible, cold kind of anger that settled low in his stomach.
He managed to still order Chinese food. Enough for Dean to have leftovers for lunch tomorrow—
but no extra for himself. He was too mad to eat. Mad enough that he almost borrowed the car and
drove himself over to Nick’s just to talk to him face to face. To let him know that his brother was a
jackass.

But the anger soured and Sam found that he was just tired. Too tired to do anything about this
tonight. Or tomorrow. Or the day after.

If Nick wanted to get ahold of him, he knew how. There wasn’t really anything else for Sam to do
at this point other than wait, and try not to hope too much.

And, as insane as it sounded, life kept on going.

The world didn’t come to a standstill around this finite moment.

Just the same as Sam found that he couldn’t just skip over all the inane little details of every day
and arrive at the glorious morning when he could open his front door and there would be Nick
with a sheepish smile and an apology—or at very least an explanation.

It was just… life.

There were classes.

There were midterms bearing down on him.

There were arguments with Dean about leaving the bread bag open.

There were nights that he would wake up in a hot sweat, aching something fierce—
usually followed by mornings standing under a cold shower until he was shaking.

Honestly not much had changed except the massive Nick shaped void.

It was, for lack of a better work, terrible.

Absolutely terrible.

All the fundamental pieces were still there. The wheels were still spinning. The tides still rolled in.
The the Earth still spun.

And Sam still missed Nick.

But it was life.

And there was no stopping it.

:::

The most important part of it to keep in mind was that this wasn’t a real date that Sam was on.

Sure, he hadn’t heard from Nick in well over two weeks—but that didn’t have any bearings on
why Sam was out with someone else on a Friday night.

There was this girl named Jas in one of his debate classes who he’d kind of sort of known on the
peripheral of various law classes for the past few years now. She was nice enough, and they’d sat
next to each other for most of this semester which had lead to slightly deeper conversations
between them recently than the last few years had produced.
And apparently her sister was out visiting for the weekend and now was going to be a really awkward time for Jas to come out as gay, so could Sam maybe come with her and her girlfriend and a few other people and sort of act as a beard, or at least a distraction to her older sister? It was just the movies. There would be six people going, and at least one other of the people would be male. Sam was just going along to keep it a balanced group- because apparently the sister had started thinking it was weird that Jas spent all her time only hanging out with her roommate.

Sam was a good guy, and Jas had offered to buy his movie ticket for him.

The only real problem in this whole thing was that Dean refused to even try to wrap his head around Sam doing a favor for a friend, and instead had gotten wholly caught up on the ‘lesbian’ aspect of it. It was embarrassing to the point that Sam had told Jas that he would meet her at the theater, not trusting whatever might come out of Dean if the girls came over to his place.

The movie had let out, some superhero nonsense with lots of explosions and dramatic angles, and now the group of rowdy college students were just sort of loitering out in the parking lot, breathing steam into the cold winter night like smoke and just laughing and joking around. For a few more minutes not worrying about homework and midterms.

Jas was tucked in between her ‘roommate’ and Sam, the three of them leaning against someone’s Kia. And Sam had started to mentally check out, smiling and laughing on impulse and social cues, his mind kind of drifting. These last two weeks had been hellish and it was nice to just be in good company, settled into a group of actually happy individuals. It was easy to pretend along with them. To blend in.

He pulled his phone out to turn it back on (having switched it off for the sake of the movie and consideration of the other people in the theater), and saw that he had one new voicemail. No idea who it was from. Probably just Dean, wanting to know if there had been any of the ‘girl touching’ that he had seemed convinced would be going on tonight despite Sam’s annoyed protests.

“You have one new message,” his phone told him in a tiny, effeminate voice. “First message:”

“What are you doing?” Nick’s voice came from far away, angry even at this distance.

A woman’s soft, husky voice laughed warmly right against Sam’s ear and it instantly went to his groin.

“Hey, hey- who are you calling?” Nick sounded closer. “That’s my phone. Give it back, you turbo skank.” Odd clattering and more of that inappropriate for public consumption laughter. “Hello…? Hello? …who did you call?”

Words that Sam couldn’t make out beneath all the other noises and then Nick kind of grunted and the line got frighteningly quiet.

“Fuck.” And then the phone went dead.

Sam stood there blankly. A great big glaring nothing ringing through his head as the electric voice in his phone gave him instructions on what to do next.

He ended up listening to the message three times over.

Even then he couldn’t tell what it was that he was supposed to feel.

The message got deleted and the phone went back into his pocket.
Sam struggled to rejoin the conversation, sliding an arm around Jas’ shoulders and smiling like he knew what was going on.

It wasn’t as easy as it looked. Not by far.

Problematically, Winchesters were never all that good about brooding.

Well- no.

That wasn’t entirely true. See, John was a master of melancholy. John could outwait the apocalypse itself, sitting there bleary eyed, with his arms crossed, grumbling things like ‘I’ll do what I want’ and ‘fuck you’.

But Sam and Dean? They must have taken after the mother that neither of them could really remember. Strong, stubborn, irrational genetics because neither could sit and be moody for all that long before the restlessness and anger took over, pushing them to action. Sometimes rather stupid actions- yes. But stupid was sure as hell better than sitting around feeling sorry for yourself.

So, regardless of what it might do to him, Sam found himself in the hall outside Nick’s apartment early the next morning.

He knocked gently at first, almost worried that he was going to wake someone, but that was part of the plan, right?

He knocked a bit harder, rapping his knuckles below the peekhole.

About a rough minute later there was some scraping and shuffling, the lock clattering, and Sam braced himself- but he wasn’t prepared for the sight that greeted him as the door swung open.

She was tall. She was very tall, with artfully sleep tousled blonde hair and less than subtle curves that looked straight out of a Playboy- the mostly naked part certainly wasn’t leading Sam away from that instant correlation that his mind had given him. She had on a top if nothing else. Nick’s faded Johnny Cash shirt that might have been black years ago, tight across a pair of perfect breasts, and barely long enough that Sam felt it was a bit of a tossup whether or not there were any panties included in this ensemble. A gentle breeze would solve all mysteries.

He very firmly made eye contact.

Her face was not any less distracting however. So perfect and delicate that she had to have been put together by some very skilled, and very expensive, professionals.

“Hi?” She cocked a hip, folding her arms comfortably beneath those very perky breasts, wearing an easy smile that should have never left the bedroom.

Despite anything else that he intended to be doing right in that moment, Sam felt his neck growing hot. Chemicals taking over the reptilian part of his brain that hardly ever consulted him on matters like this. “Hi… is Nick here?”

Her eyes instantly got dark and her smile grew deeper. “Shower.” Came the easy explanation.

And really, Sam didn’t need any more details. He could put these pieces together and see a whole picture. He was a smart kid. Went to college and everything.

His smile felt veneered on, no deeper than surface tension holding him together.

“Oh.” Was all he could say at first.
“You can come in and wait.” The blonde in the doorway offered, but the way she said it sounded like much more than a simple invitation. Her gaze slowly trailing down Sam like a proposition.

“You must be Georgia.” Sam thought he remembered the name of Nick’s recurring one night stand - not that it was any excuse for what had obviously taken place here.

Her smile got a little sharp, edges of her very straight very white teeth dimpling her lower lip. “No. No I’m not Georgia.” The honey going right out of her voice.

And Sam took some perverse pleasure in the fact that Nick was probably going to be getting at least half the hell that the younger man was feeling right now, once he got out of his damn shower.

“You know what,” he raised his hands, palms out to sort of shield himself. “I’ll just call him later.” He excused himself as best he could, feeling that enough damage had been dealt out to everyone playing the game at this point. He knew when he’d lost, and he thought he might still be able to walk away with some dignity in tact.

“Who’s Georgia?” She didn’t look quite ready to let Sam escape though, her bare feet making soft sounds on the floor as she edged closer.

“An ex,” which wasn’t really a lie any more than it was the truth, but it was about the least spiteful thing that Sam could manage to say in that moment. He wasn’t a complete ass. There was some remaining loyalty deep down in him that he really felt that Nick didn’t deserve at this point.

She suddenly laughed, shadows of the same sound that Sam had heard on his phone the night before, only for some reason it didn’t have the same affect on him in the harsh light of day.

“I bet she is. Nick’s got about a hundred exs.”

“Just about.”

A hundred and one, actually.

There was definitely a plus one to add to the list.

Sam was rather sure.

:.:

“Hey, Sammy. Gunna be home late. You’re on your own tonight.” Dean rattle off quickly like he didn’t have time for a real conversation.

“Yeah. That’s fine.” Sam rubbed at the bridge of his nose, looking away from the textbooks that he wasn’t really reading anyways. “You want me to save you some dinner?”

“Nah, I’ll pick up something with Cas.”

Instantly Sam went from mildly disappointed at the idea of eating by himself (which was really nothing new) to flat out annoyed. But this was nobody’s fault other than his own and he choked down the bitterness he felt for his brother having a nice, pleasant, normal friendship with a decent human being. Easily managing something that Sam couldn’t seem to do on the best of days.

“See ya later tonight?” Dean said when his little brother didn’t offer anything.

“Yeah.”
A slow sigh that tapered off into a groan. “What now?”

“Nothing. I’m just studying. It’s fine.” Which was a lie, because literally nothing felt fine. Nothing had for quite some time. But he was getting used to it.

“Nose to the grindstone, dude. Make sure you take some breaks. I swear you’re going to go all Jack Torrance on me one of these days.”

It was tempting.

“All work and no play makes Sammy a dull boy.” Dean added.

Sam didn’t think he was even halfway to a cabin fever kind of break down. Besides, they didn’t even own an ax. “I went out to the movies just the other night.”

“That was almost a month ago.”

Had it really been almost a month since Sam had gone out with Jas?

He ran a hand through his hair, then rubbed the back of his neck. Yeah, that sounded about right actually. They’d made it all the way through March and on into April.

Time sure does fly when you’re having… not fun.

“You need to get out and get some sun.”

“It’s night right now.”

Dean grumbled something that sounded like it would have been rather insulting if Sam was actually listening.

“Tell Cas hi for me.”

“Tell him yourself.” Dean snapped. “Once he’s done balancing the books we’re bringing you a pizza.” He’d never been all that good at resisting playing the role of big brother- it was what he’d been made for after all.

And despite whatever protests Sam interjected, about two hours later he found himself sitting on the floor beside the coffee table, working on his half of a vegetarian pizza. It was hard to be annoyed when all his favorite toppings were smiling up at him.

Dean was up on the couch, hollering instructions to Cas in the kitchen who was supposedly getting them both a beer, but seemed to have just gotten lost- because it shouldn’t take anyone that long to just get a pair of brown bottles from the fridge.

“Do you need help?”

“I am perfectly capable of finding beer. It’s not like there’s anything else in your fridge to serve as camouflage.”

Sam hadn’t seen Castiel in what felt like forever, long enough to make the man’s odd little mannerisms feel new and strange all over again. His shifty eyed non-smile familiar in a way that didn’t set right with the youngest Winchester.

“I couldn’t find the bottle opener.” The accountant announced apologetically as he returned from the kitchen, three bottles maneuvered between his fingers, despite the fact that Sam had said he
didn’t need one.

“Lem’me see ‘em.” Dean shoved the rest of his pizza crust into his mouth and stole one bottle from his friend. He leaned over the coffee table and used the edge to pop the cap off, holding it up like it was the beginning of a very important object lesson. “Sometimes you’ve got to improvise. Like that.”

Castiel managed to not look overly impressed and simply handed the last bottle to Sam. “Your brother is a man of many talents.”

“Damn right I am.”

Sam could be studying right now. Instead he took another slice.

“How are classes?” Castiel was perfect at useless small talk, like he’d invented it. It helped to fill the silence in any case.

Sam glanced at the neat little pile of textbooks that had been moved to the floor beside him in order to make room for the pizza boxes. “Just finished midterms. Things are going ok I guess.”

Eyebrows down low, Castiel seemed to have quite enough of trying to get his bottle cap off and just handed it over to Dean to do it for him.

“How are you?” The man rephrased with some deliberate intention.

“I’m …ok I guess.” Sam shrugged.

Castiel nodded encouragingly, hint of a smile before taking back his now opened beer and indulging in a moderate sip.

Dean gently elbowed the man beside him. “Dude, I already told you he was fine.”

“Brothers sometimes only see what they want to in situations like this.”

Situations like this? Sam grunted in protest, but they were talking about him, not too him, and it was obvious that his input wasn’t requested in the matter.

“He says he’s fine. He’s fine.” Dean protested. “Maybe your jackass of a brother is just easy to get over.”

Sam waved a hand in their direction. “I am sitting right here.”

Dean pointed his beer at Sam. “And you’re doing a great job of it.”

He sneered as best as he could but it didn’t seem to have much of an effect.

“I didn’t mean that.” Cas frowned and set his beer on the table, loosening his tie and shifting uncomfortably. “Nick didn’t handle things well, and when you said that Sam was fine it was just difficult to trust in your optimism.” His frown softened a little as he turned back to Sam. “I’m just glad to hear that you’re doing better than he is.”

“Better than he is?” Sam almost laughed.

Unfortunately a month is more than enough time for even the simplest facts, and most honest feelings to grow corrupt, and twisted and misunderstood.

A month was long enough that Sam’s bitterness at being cheated on and then just sort of forgotten
had kind of turned into occasionally very aggressive and violent thoughts tinged with a great deal of resentment— but it wasn’t an all the time thing. Not even an everyday thing. Just… you know, times like this, when people felt a need to bring up the fact that he’d fallen in love with a straight man who hadn’t really given two damns about him once the novelty had worn off.

And Sam wasn’t depressed.

He wasn’t ruined.

He’d never date another guy, sure, but he’d never really liked men in the first place… just Nick.

And he still did.

Still missed him so much it hurt sometimes— but in the end that only lead right back around to those strong feelings of resentment.

How dare Nick just roll into Sam’s life, rough everything up, confuse the hell out of Sam’s sexuality, and then leave.

“Last I heard he was just fine.” Sam managed to say in a clipped tone. “He didn’t seem to me like he was all that broken up about it.” And he didn’t know how much Castiel knew about everything that happened. Possible very little on account of the fact that Sam hadn’t told Dean anything other than it was over— so in all likelihood there hadn’t been anyone to give a full report on the whole thing. “We had a fight after we left your niece’s christening—”

“Communion.” Came the easy correction which Sam shrugged off.

“Whatever. We had a fight. I apologized and he never called me back, so I went to go talk to him and this… this naked woman answered the door and told me I could come keep her company until Nick got out of the shower.”

“Was she hot?” Was all that Dean took out of that one.

“Nick… didn’t mention …that you’d come over.” Castiel said haltingly.

“I didn’t wait around for him to get out.” Sam did not care for the current feelings he was having. “He wasn’t exactly sitting around missing me, and I realized that I didn’t have anything else to say to him.”

Nick’s baby brother wore a confused, aggravated look. “When was this?”

“ ‘bout two weeks after the fight.”

And Cas was shaking his head, angry disbelief all over him, like he refused to accept that his brother was capable of such actions. “Nick would have just gotten home… he wouldn’t have been up to…” his eyes narrowed suddenly. “Did the woman look like a corporate prostitute?”

Sam let out a startled, bark of a laugh. Very confused and not sure that he’d heard any of that right. The words certainly didn’t make an ounce of sense. “Can you say that again?”

The disbelieving noise that Dean made conveyed a similar level of stunned confusion.

“Did she look like a whore, but one that you still couldn’t afford even if you are making six figures a year?” He let out a frustrated breath when Sam didn’t answer. “About as tall as Dean, very blonde, very blue eyed, tan, fit, very… arian with distractingly perky breasts and no shame whatsoever.”
“Yeah?” Sam answered hesitantly, not sure if this is knowledge he was willing to admit to having.

“Dude,” Dean kind of laughed. “Distracting breasts? I thought you were… you know.” And he made unsteady motions with one hand.

Castiel rolled his eyes. “Just because I am not sexually attracted to women does not mean that I cannot be sidetracked from time to time when a new set of breasts are paraded in front of me.”

A bit of good natured something or other went on between the men on the couch, laughing and a bit of name calling from Dean- and Sam was left alone with his unpleasant thoughts.

“Hey, hey.” His brother was snapping his fingers in front of Sam’s face, suddenly noticing what was happening. “Don’t. Don’t do that. What does it matter if he had some chick over?” Dean demanded of the room, not really waiting for an answer. “He’s an ex now. You’re free, Sam, and better off without the bastard. We never should have set you two up to begin with.”

And at least one part of that was a lie. This right here, right now- this weirdly wounded feeling in Sam was sure as hell not ‘better’.

“She was not some chick.” Castiel said like it should have been a comfort. “That was Nick’s ex-wife. She came to town a while back to drop of their daughter.”

*pThat* was Lilith?

Of course she was.

Why wouldn’t the mostly naked, gorgeous woman in Nick’s apartment be his ex-wife?

God, Sam wanted to just pull the floor up over his head and pretend that no one had ever brought it up. He wasn’t even sure how they got here.

Well… if nothing else, it sort of leaned towards an explanation why Nick had been covertly stressed in the weeks leading up to their fight.

It did not however start to explain why Nick’s former wife had been naked in his apartment first thing in the morning. But from what little Sam had come to realize that he knew about the man- was that Nick wanted any excuse to do anything he could for his daughter.

And you know, it wasn’t really Sam’s place to draw a line for such actions.

Technically he’d still been Nick’s boyfriend at the time it’d happened, sure- but it didn’t seem to matter all that much to anyone other than Sam.

“Is June staying with Nick now?” He heard himself asking, throat feeling tight.

Castiel lit up for a second, the smile on his face startling and unprecedented. “She is. She has her mother’s looks and her father’s attitude and I’m not sure how Nick’s going to survive. The two of them arguing is… it makes me very happy even though it shouldn’t.”

Sam smiled but it hurt in a weird way and he couldn’t keep it up for long.

It must have all been a bit too obvious.

Castiel tilted his head like he was listening to something far away. “They are good for each other I think. And she’s been a real help since the accident. It’s nice to know that someone is keeping an eye on him since… since you’re not anymore.”
“What accident?” Sam had missed something.

Castiel easily took in Sam’s blankly confused expression before slowly turning to look at Dean, eyebrows drawing low in something close to anger. It was actually a bit scary. “You … didn’t tell him about the accident.”

Dean wet his lips and straightened his back, looking ready for a fight. “No I didn’t. Because he didn’t need to know about it.”

“What accident?” And Sam didn’t know when he’d rocked forward on his knees, halfway to standing, this horrible feeling suddenly sinking heavy in his gut.

“He wrecked his bike.” With a sidelong glare of annoyance at Dean, Cas explained with four simple words that shouldn’t have been able to hold the kind of weight that they did. “He was driving home drunk and crashed headlong into a minivan.”

“What?”

“A minivan. They are just smaller versions of normal vans.” He drew his hands close together to emphasize the tininess. “You see them on the road all the time with those little stick figure families on the back windows.”

“I-I know what a minivan is.” Sam forcibly uncurled fists that he didn’t remember making. “Is Nick ok?”

“Yes.” Castiel treated him to a tight lipped little frown. “He’s back at work, and his leg is doing much better.”

“When did it happen?”

Cas started to answer but Dean elbowed him in the ribs and the man looked morally injured. “That was not necessary, Dean.”

“What’s not necessary is making Sam feel guilty for something he had nothing to do with.”

“I was not about to blame your brother for Nick’s stupidity. He always drinks too much- and he drinks more than too much on bad days. I can only assume that breaking up with Sam counted as an exceptionally bad day.”

And the implication was there, glaring and deep and it went right through Sam. What a fantastically painful new feeling that he didn’t know he could manage with such ease.

“How bad was it?”

“See,” Dean gestured broadly at his brother while still looking at the man beside him. “This is why I didn’t tell him about it. Now he’s gunna get all guilty- even though it’s not his fault that your asshole of a brother picked a fight with him then went off and got drunk and wrecked his bike.”

“I never said it was Sam’s fault.”

“Yeah well,” Dean looked over at Sam with that all knowing, harshly judgemental expression that he could pull off so well. “Sammy, you wanna tell the class how you’re feeling right now?”

Sam offered up his best bitch-face and pulled the top off his beer with an angry twist.
He hated that Dean could read him so easily.

Like an open book with large print.

“See, there he goes on his own personal guilt trip.”

“Fuck you,” Sam grumbled under his breath, because he didn’t need this right now.

“I miss Jess.” Dean shot back before hauling himself to his feet and heading into the kitchen. “At least she was cute. And you weren’t nearly as much of a bitch when she left.”

Sam would have thrown something at Dean, but the only thing he had in arm’s reach was pizza and beer, neither of which would have been fun to clean up afterwards.

It wasn’t all guilt that was currently dragging him under. There was some obvious fury in there too.

That counted for something, right?

He glanced back over at Cas, lowering his voice in hopes of not being overheard, because he really wasn’t interested in more ridicule from Dean at the moment. “Is he ok?”

“…is ...Dean ok?”

“Nick. Is Nick ok?”

“Oh…” Cas bit his lip in a small gesture far too reminiscent to his big brother. “He spent a few weeks in the hospital. Most of the stitches have come out since then, but the pins in his leg will have to stay, and he will have to keep the cast for a while longer. I don’t think he’s keeping up with his physical therapy, but he’s always been pretty stubborn about that kind of thing.”

“I…” Sam felt sick.

“He would have been drinking even if you two hadn’t had a fight.” Castiel said simply, seeming to have borrowed some of those mind reading powers from Dean. “Lilith is getting remarried. Might have already done it, I don’t know and I don’t care. I never spent that much time with her, but I feel comfortable in saying that she is evil incarnate, and I feel bad for whatever man she’s managed to get her meat hooks into this time.

“Nick never does well when she gets in contact with him and she’d been calling him fairly often from what I understand. There was something about moving overseas and needing both parent’s signatures for June’s passport. At least that’s what I got out of Gabriel. And we were all surprised at how well Nick looked at Sarah’s communion. No one expected him to be holding it together so well… but I guess he wasn’t really. He’s just gotten that much better at lying to us.”

These were all words that were all probably meant to bring Sam comfort, to keep him from packing his bags for a long guilt trip, but they had quite the opposite effect.

Sam did the only thing that he could think of. He stood and collected his textbooks.

“I’m sorry, Sam.”

He looked over, question on his lips, but he couldn’t seem to find words that could make it past the tightness in his throat.

“For setting you up with my brother. He’s… not always a good man and I don’t think any of us
expected things between you two to go as far or as badly as they obviously did. I’m glad to know
that you’re doing alright though.” Cas lowered his voice to a dead whisper, keeping the next part
just between the two of them. “I know lots of things probably didn’t quite go as you two planned,
and I’m sorry if I, or my bad advice, helped to push either of you into something that obviously
was never meant to be.” Because Cas was the only person outside of the agreement between Sam
and Nick who knew about the original plan. It was nice to know that he felt just as bad about it as
everyone else involved.

“Yeah.” And Sam wanted to add on something after that, but really it was a miracle that he’d
found that single word to start.

He got himself upstairs, books under one arm, beer in hand, and he wasn’t sure how long he just
stood there leaning against his door, staring vacantly at his tidy little bed and well organized desk.

Castiel wasn’t the only person who regretted that blind date back in November and it was almost
some weird kind of relief that it was for the same reason.

Maybe Nick wasn’t always a good man. Sam had heard as much a few times over- but he’d never
actually experienced it first hand.

All he’d ever come to know was a shockingly gentle, reserved man hiding behind a lot of
gruffness and salty language. He was like someone’s abandoned old teddy bear. A bit grubby and
not necessarily appealing at first glance. Bleary eyes and rough lines and… and even if it had only
been for a couple of weeks, and even if it hadn’t been entirely true, he’d said that he loved Sam.

Next thing he knew he was clumsily setting his suddenly empty beer bottle down on the little table
beside his bed, and fumbling his phone from a pocket.

Two rings in and a young girl’s voice answered the uneasy phone call with a cheery, “Hello?”

Sam blinked rapidly, his brain making the quick connection and figuring out who he was talking
to. “Hi there.”

“Are you calling to talk to Papa?” This had to be June, and June had to be almost nine or ten from
the math that Sam had done. Too old to be using a name like ‘papa’, but that only made it that
much more fantastic to hear, a little splash of sweetness in the easy rise and fall of her young,
preteen sass laden voice.

Sam’s chest hurt. “Yeah. Is he there?”

“No.” She said simply with no elaboration.

And Sam… had almost no practice talking with kids, but he had a feeling that he wasn’t going to
have the knack for it.

“Can you tell him to call Sam when he gets back?”

“The phone says your name is Darlin’.”

Wow. Another thing that actually made him feel worse, when here he thought he was already
scraping bottom of the barrel with that particular emotion.

“It’s… Sam.”

“Uncle Gabriel told me not to let anyone named Sam talk to Papa if he called.”
Which sounded completely unfair.

“But Uncle Gabriel is deranged.” June informed him rather simply. “So … right now I’m getting ready for my violin lesson and Papa will be at his studio for about an hour until it’s time to pick me up. You should go tell him you want to talk to him.”

“…what?”

“You’re his boyfriend, right? Or is that another guy named Sam?”

“um…well we were-”

“I saw a picture at Papa’s work of you guys kissing. He told me you that broke up with him. But you looked like a kind of guy who’s too nice to break up with people- even if they’re old and grumpy.”

Sam found himself rather speechless.

“Uncle Cassy told me you’re really, really nice and you and Papa used to be in love.”

“We… we were.” He agreed uneasily, sort of wincing at the bluntness of it all. “You talk to your uncles about a lot of things, don’t you?”

“I am a nosy brat.” She sounded like she was grinning, bright and happy. “I have a lot of questions about this side of my family. They keep giving me answers so I keep asking.”

And Sam noticed that his hand was shaking just a bit as he rubbed at his mouth. This wasn’t going how he expected, but then again, what did he think was going to happen?

“Are... you going to tell your dad I called?”

“Oh no.” She whined. “You’re not one of those really pretty, but really stupid guys, are you?”

“No?”

“Then why are you still on the phone with some kid when you should be going down to the studio and talking to my papa? He won’t be there all night.”

As enticing of an invitation as that was. “He doesn’t want to see me.”

She got quiet before letting out a long sigh. “Look, Sam, I’m only nine and three quarters, but I know a lot about dating. I went out with Tyler Samuels for twenty-three days, so I know that boys get lonely when you leave them alone for too long. That’s why I had to punch him in the stomach—because he cheated on me with Kaitlyn Baird when I went to my grandma’s for a weekend. But it’s not his fault. Most men just can’t handle being alone. They aren’t independent and strong like us women are.”

Sam blinked at his phone, somewhat stunned by the rush of irrelevant information that she had just rambled off at him. If there was something in there that he needed, it was as good as lost, because Sam definitely didn’t have the skills needed to understand what was going on.

“And Papa is a lot stronger than stupid Tyler- but he’s lonely too. I can tell.” She sighed softly. “Uncle Cassy said you made Papa really happy.”

“And what did Gabriel say?” The brief phone call that he’d had with the man weeks back had kind of cemented their relationship, but Sam was still curious.
“He said that you broke Papa’s heart and that if you called or came over I should send you away so you don’t make it worse. But you didn’t really, did you? I mean because he still has your picture at his work, and I’ve seen drawings of you in his book— you don’t do stuff like that if someone breaks your heart. You know, I didn’t keep pictures of Tyler after I broke up with him— and I wasn’t even that sad about it. He was a tool.” She took a measured breath. “But you’re not a tool, right?”

Sam honestly had no idea what was even going on. His phone had turned into a fast talking advice dispenser that kept getting side tracked.

A bit of a headache starting between his eyes. “So... your dad will be at work for another hour?”

“Not at work. God. He’s at his studio.” She said in an exasperated voice that really let Sam know that she believed he was one of those tragically stupid, but beautiful men.

“He has a studio?”

“Well, yeah. He can’t paint at home. He says his current body of work has themes that are too suggestive for someone my age.” She quoted in very bad impersonation of Nick’s grumpy tone. “But I saw some of them, and he’s just painting people. Like, they aren’t even all the way naked so I don’t know what the big deal is.

“Anyways, it’s time for my lesson. I have to go— but I’m going to be real disappointed in you if you don’t go kiss my papa and stay over and make us breakfast tomorrow.” She then proceeded to hang up on Sam, who was left standing there numbly until the laughter that had been building in his chest came tumbling out.

Once he calmed down, an odd tickle still in his stomach, and tears stinging the corners of his eyes, he realized that he was broken. Half hysterical and honestly at the end of feeling this way. He hadn’t been enjoying it. Not by far. He couldn’t keep up this kind of momentum.

It all felt clearer somehow. The world spinning out of his control and this whole time Sam misinterpreting it and just getting more and more angry.

*He told me you that broke up with him.*

They really were both idiots who deserved each other, weren’t they?

But it’s not like Sam had had all that much practice at this kind of thing.

There had only ever been one other person, and Jess… when she left he’d missed her in gentle ways that had faded quickly to a dull ache that happens any time a friend moves on and doesn’t take you with them.

But with Nick?

Sam was still angry. Sure. Angry and hurt and he just… he just… he really missed Nick’s stupid face and his laugh and his rough hands and his tender mouth.

He’d loved Jess like a friend, and from time to time he’d thought of her in ways that were a little more than friendly.

But Sam was in love with Nick.

It was a different beast altogether.
One that was not going to leave him.

Because love isn’t soft like some people say. Love has teeth that bite, and leaves wounds that never close.

He grabbed his jacket and came back downstairs to find that Castiel was still here, unmoved from his corner of the couch, though Dean had returned to him, arm along the back of the high cushions, hand dangling somewhere near the back of his friend’s neck.

Sam managed to summon up some instant disdain for them and their repressed, happy relationship- but he pushed it aside. “Cas, what’s the address of Nick’s studio?”

“No!” Dean let his head fall back with a pained groan. “No. This is why I wasn’t telling him about the accident, Cas. He’s got a martyr complex wider than the Pacific. And we were doing so good. We were free. We were… happy-ish. He was done being homo for your son of a bitch brother. It was great.”

“Shut up, Dean.” Sam grabbed the car keys off the table beside the door.

“I…” Castiel leaned forward, looking uncertain. “I’m not supposed to know where it is. He likes to be alone when he paints.”

And Sam supposed that there had never been any traces of the hobby laying around Nick’s apartment while they’d been dating. Sam honestly didn’t think he could even remember seeing Nick so much as doodle. In fact… Sam had never even seen any of the tattoos that the man had done over the years he’d been working.

Sam held the keys a little tighter and decided that he wasn’t going to dwell on this one more gaping hole from their broken relationship. “Cas?”

The accountant looked divided. Somewhere between loyalty to his big brother and a want to try and fix things. Sam knew that look all too well. Dean got the same one- not right now mind you, but at other times. Like months ago when this whole mess started. Dean had learned his lesson though.

Castiel still hadn’t.

He reluctantly gave the address, talking over Dean’s protests and shouts of “don’t come home crying to me, Sammy. This is fucking stupid and you know it. And you better bring my car back with a full tank, or I swear-”

“I’m not asking for permission- but I’d like a little support.” Sam cut him off.

“Nothing’s changed between the past couple months and the last few minutes.” Dean tried to remind him. “What the fuck do you think is going to happen if you go to him? He doesn’t want you, Sammy. Weird as that must be for you, you’re going to have to accept it.”

Knowing that Nick might simply not want him anymore, and finding out that other people had arrived at the same conclusion was a painful step in the wrong direction.

“I just need some god damned closure, Dean.” He needed to hear Nick actually say it. Otherwise it didn’t count. Otherwise it was just all kinds of self doubt and uncertainty with very little grounds for the claim.

“You just wanna go and feel guilty.” He accused. “You weren’t the one to wreck his bike. You had nothing to do with it.”
“Dean-”

“This is stupid and you know it.”

And he wasn’t wrong.

Sam had a leaded feeling in his gut that this wasn’t going to end well for him. But he still got his shoes on.

All he really had to go on in this moment was that apparently the two of them had spent a quarter of a year secretly wanting to tear each other’s clothes off but both lacked the self confidence or bravery to ever even bring it up. It didn’t feel like too much of a stretch to think that they’d managed to somehow do it again.

And all Sam had to do was try and ignore the fact that if Nick had wanted anything more to do with him he could have called or come over at any point. It’s not like Sam had moved house or changed his number.

But Nick apparently still had the pictures of them from San Francisco.

And Sam had been given the pep talk of a lifetime from a little girl.

So Sam went.

It’s not like he had anything to lose at this point.
I will paint myself out

Chapter Notes

This isn't the nicest chapter
I don't like it. Let's just get it done real quick.
The next one will be better.
Balloons and puppies just freaking everywhere.
I promise

The studio was next to the college. Sam literally passed it every day on his way to school. He’d always thought it was some kind of office building, or an offsite set of classrooms. It was a low, plain, boring looking building with no street facing windows.

Sam parked along the side of the road, sitting there and lightly smacking his hands against the steering wheel, trying to reclaim a bit of the fervor that had pushed him out the front door in the first place. He was half tempted to call June back and see if she had any more encouraging words for him.

He could have sat there all night. Doubting. Arguing with himself. Settling oh so easily back into that same gross manic feeling that he got every time he remembered that it hadn’t been Nick who had answered the door when he’d come over.

And why should it have been?

They’d never made any promises to one another.

What the hell had they been thinking?

Their was not a relationship that was made to last. They had literally gotten together solely with a mutual asinine need to avoid actually having to date anyone. They’d formed a tentative friendship with out much of a foundation, and it had grown, but it had always been a little fragile at best.
And then Sam, Sam had taken literally the only thing he knew about Nick’s past and used it to hurt him.

He supposed that that said a lot more about himself then it said about Nick.

Sam couldn’t blame Nick for wanting it to just be over. A clean break.

They probably weren't good for one another.

If Sam lashed out like that and all the other man had done was make a sideways comment about John, how bad would it be next time?

He ran his hands through his hair, shaking it from his face and putting the keys back in the ignition. Dean was right. Or course he was right. This was stupid. Coming here tonight wasn’t going to change anything.

It was over.
And it would be a healthy step in the right direction to acknowledge that and start making an effort to actually move on instead of dwelling on the fact that Nick hadn’t called him up to apologize. It wasn’t going to happen.

It didn’t need to happen.

Why had Sam even come here?

He couldn’t seem to remember.

He almost drove back home, a grim determination forming in him to accompany the reckless feelings that he’d had since February. The car was on. The heavy, eco-unfriendly engine warming up quickly. But Sam took one last glance at the studio, because he felt that no one in his situation would have actually been able to simply drive off without at least one pointed look back, and saw a rather small young woman wrestling with a heavy portfolio under one arm while balancing what looked like a toolbox, a set of keys, and one of those coffee holders weighted down with two tall, white cups.

She wasn’t going to make it. Something was going to hit the sidewalk, and without even thinking Sam had killed the engine and was out of the car- crossing the sidewalk in quick, long strides to reach her side.

“Here, I got it.” He managed to take the portfolio, which was large enough to use as a card table, and was starting to shift from her the surprisingly heavy tool box when she looked up at him.

A ‘thank you’ died on her lips as her dark eyes went wide. The coffee fell. Both cups hitting the ground with a moist pop slap sound that sent Sam and her both dancing away from the scalding spray and rapidly spreading puddle.

“Oh.My.God.” Despite the decidedly Asian cast to the girl’s features, her words were perfectly shaped to that Northern valley accent which said that she’d been born and raised out here in California.

“I’m so sorry.” Sam apologized in a rushed breath.

“It’s you,”

“-what?”

“You. You’re The Perfect Man.”

And Sam had been called lots of things in his life, but this one was new to him.

“What?”

“You’re the guy that Nick was painting. Oh god. Oh god. Like, we didn’t think you were real- I mean, look at you. Yeah, that’s not what real men look like. And then he was painting over you and we were yelling at him to stop- because you’re The Perfect Man and it was a crime, but he was all like ‘I changed my mind’.” Her mouth turned into a little ‘o’ of surprise. “What did you do to Nick?”

It was a bit much to take in a single breath and Sam struggled to catch up. “We… broke up?”

He mouth turned into a wicked grin. “Shut. Up. Nick is gay?”

“No,” great job here, Sam. Fantastic form. Like always. “He’s… we were… we used to be
friends.”

“Oh, I’ve gotta tell Dianne. She needs to know.” She was already trading her keys for her phone and texting furiously even as she spoke.

“Don’t. Please don’t do that.”

“But you’re The Perfect Man. It’s like finding a unicorn. You aren’t supposed to be real… Oh! Can we take a selfie, because she’s not going to believe it otherwise.”

Sam folded one massive hand around her phone and her rapidly moving thumbs stilled as she looked back up at him, all the way up at him from her five foot nothing height, and her eyes went wide once more.

“Please. I just wanted to stop in and talk to Nick really quick.” Sam spoke gently, not wanting to intimidate, just wanting her to listen for one second. “Is he still here?”

She licked her lips. “He better still be. I was bringing coffee for him and he owes me two bucks… you made me drop all the coffee.”

“I’m really sorry.” Sam let go of her hands. “Can I pay for another round?”

“Well, yeah. You’re getting me a frapachino. And I’ve got coffee all over my boots. So you owe me.”

And really, Sam didn’t think that is was fair. It wasn’t really his fault that she’d thrown everything on the sidewalk- but he thought that the offer might get him somewhere. Like inside the studio.

“I can take your stuff in for you, and give you… a ten? Would that cover new drinks?” He was bribing her. There had to be something unethical about this, but he had seen the key ring, and as close as he was he could see the heavy lock on the door. He wasn’t likely to get in without an invitation. Maybe he could just stand out here and wait for Nick to leave, but he’d lose his nerve if he had to wait again.

“Yeah… I can bring you your change.” She said, not exactly taking the bribe, but at the same time passing off her art things to Sam’s open arms.

“Was he really painting me?”

She grinned again, holding her phone tight to her chest for a moment before quickly scrolling through images. “It wasn’t just a painting. There were preliminary sketches up on his side of the room for months. We thought you might be some kind of French model, of just this amalgamation of ideal man-bits. Here, here,” she held her phone up and Sam frowned before taking it, bringing it closer to his face to see more clearly.

It was a drawing of him. Definitely him. Only Sam never look that good when he smiled. Deep dimples, eyes dark and shining. Open and careless and- and even Sam had to admit that he looked good.

“Nick drew this?”

“Well yeah. I mean, you posed for them, right. He never showed you the finished pieces?”

To his knowledge Sam had never posed for anything. “…them?”

“Yeah, scroll over. I only got a few before he took them all down. I mean, I mostly do landscapes,
but his work is so clean, and his sense of balance and color- it really inspires me, you know?”

Sam looked through the three pictures that she had saved in her phone, seeing himself in a way that he never had before.

The way that Nick used to.

He passed back her phone with the firm knowledge that he couldn’t go in there. Not now.

But the girl was unlocking the door for him, tucking her phone into a pocket of her jacket. “Just leave my stuff next to the blue painting on the far side of the room.” She pointed and Sam kind of nodded and grabbed the edge of the door. Then she was scooping up the wasted coffee cups and heading off down the street to the Starbucks on the corner.

It was a large square room, with no proper windows, so much as the back was just a wall of glass. Old converted industrial space with a ceiling that felt forever away and acoustics that were downright unforgiving.

There was a small fridge and a row of cabinets, a tub sized sink that looked gritty with reddish clay, a weird tall wheel table thing that Sam could only assume was related to the clay, and Nick.

His back to the door, and shockingly orange, chunky headphones clashing with his hair. A black tshirt stretched tight over the slump of his shoulders. It matched the black cast that was wrapped around his right leg all the way up to his knee. Painfully dark and impossible to ignore, his pale blue jeans rolled up over that one leg, putting it on display.

He was half perched on a stool, sort of hovering over it as he leaned into a painting that matched the room in scale. Nearly eight feet tall, and looking for all the world like a door opened to another room, giving an uncomfortably voyeuristic feeling of standing at the foot of a bed, looking at this gorgeous, cinnamon colored woman who was laying on her stomach, slash of moonlight on her bare skin as she looked over her shoulder at the viewer. Shadows were still hazy, the black of her hair melding with the open window behind the bed. Details were lost, only hinted at, like a photo gone out of focus around the edges.

It was stunning.

Sam had had no idea.

He stood there a little too long, looking at her, her looking back, before he finally shook himself free and hauled the art supplies that he’d been entrusted with to the far side of the room. Gingerly setting them down beside an easel holding a painting of a city skyline.

Nick still hadn’t noticed that he had company, even as Sam slowly and carefully made his way over. The man was nodding along with music that only he could hear, softly mouthing words. He had on those thick black glasses of his that he seemed to only take out if absolutely necessary- he also looked like he hadn’t shaved in nearly a month. Stubble dark and making him looked oddly older and somehow all the more inviting because of it. There were scars on both arms now, and that was really the only other difference after all this time. New marks, slick red lines and smears breaking up the once beautiful patterns.

There wasn’t any good way for Sam to announce himself. Nick was obviously engrossed in what he was doing, carefully laying paint, making shadows in the dark folds of the blankets rucked down around the woman’s hips.

Now that he was closer Sam could see that she was probably in her late teens, young enough that Sam suddenly felt marginally uncomfortable for admiring the way that the muscles of her back
hugged her spine, showing off the shallow dimples right above the curve of her backside. With a start, he realized that he recognized her. A bit younger, the shape of her a bit more athletic and less sensual- but it was Gabriel’s wife Rehka. Probably about ten or fifteen years ago. And Sam didn’t know how to feel about that in the slightest.

Nick leaned back a bit, using the wrong end of his paint brush to slip under his cast and scratch an itch, other hand picking up a cigarette that Sam hadn’t even noticed. It didn’t smell like tobacco - but Sam realized that the smell he’d mistaken for incense or something was actually the soft smell of a clove cigarette.

“I didn’t know you smoke.” He said in a way he hoped was loud enough to be heard over the faint white noise and steady thrum of Nick’s headphones.

The man’s eyebrows went down and he half turned to Sam as he took a drag. There was a sharp jolt and he almost fell off his stool, jaw clenching even as his eyes went wide with surprise.

With the long, thin cigarette still between his lips, Nick pushed his headphones off letting them settle around his neck, washing them both in garbled sounding music too big for the little speakers.

“I didn’t know you smoke.” Sam repeated a little quieter now that he had all that attention and no idea what to do with it.

Nick pulled a battered ipod off the little table at his side and the music cut off, then he took a long, slow drag from his cigarette, the tip glowing red hot for a second. “I don’t. I quit a few years ago.”

Sam nodded like he didn’t quite believe that one. The proof, after all, was a bit lacking.

“I had no idea you could paint like this. It’s really… she’s beautiful.”

Nick scratched at his cheek, leaving a smear of deep purplish-red paint behind like a bruise. “How did you get in here?”

“The little Korean girl with coffee let me in.” Sam kind of nodded towards the things that he’d set down in her corner.

“Nari.” Nick said the name like a curse.

“But your brother gave me the address.” Sam passed the blame to someone who he thought could handle it a bit better.

Nick put out his cigarette and cleared his throat. He didn’t ask if Sam needed something. He didn’t offer any kind of hello, or any indication that he was even marginally pleased with what was suddenly happening.

Simply standing here was no good reason for his heart to be racing like it was. “I just found out about the accident. Are you ok?”

Nick looked around. First at himself, at his arms and their fresh, shiny scars, and down at his leg. Then he looked around the room for a few seconds too long to be anything other than sarcastic before settling back on Sam. “Do I look ok?”

“Well, you’re not dead… and Castiel said that you’re doing better.”

“There you go. Cassy obviously knows better than I do. I’m doing better. So why the fuck are you here?” The question hadn’t been asked with any venom, but a tired, resigned voice. It didn’t make it any easier to hear. Or answer.
Sam shrank back. “Kind of got the feeling that calling you wasn’t going to get me anywhere.”

“You should have given it a try. I’d prefer talking on the phone. I really didn’t want to see you again.”

Again, no anger. Just short, harshly clipped words. But his knuckles were white where he had a death grip around his paintbrush, the other hand balled into a tight fist resting against his knee.

Sam, who had never been afraid of Nick for even an instant before this point found that he wanted to shrink away. Anger would have been easier to handle. Sam would have known which way to duck.

“I left messages, but you never called me back.”

“I... never got any messages.”

“Yeah. I somehow got Gabriel on your phone at some point. He didn’t sound like he had any plans to tell you I called.”

Nick mouthed something that looked an awful lot like ‘fuck Gabriel’ before closing his eyes and taking in a slow breath. The wrong end of the paintbrush was used to scratch another itch beneath the heavy looking cast. It was a strangely relaxed gesture in comparison to everything else.

“And the I tried to come over to your palace... back in the beginning of March, but your wife answered the door naked and I... I just couldn’t.”

Nick got oh so very still once more. “Lilith?”

“She wasn’t naked, naked. I mean she had on one of your shirts, but that was it, and she made it kind of clear why you weren’t coming to the door.”

“And why wasn’t I coming to the door?” But from the dead way he asked, Nick already knew the answer.

“Look- I-I get it. You and I’d had a fight, and she was your wife-”

“Ex-wife. She is my ex-wife, and I would blow Michael before I would willingly touch that cumguzzling psyco bitch ever again. And you should know that.”

Irrational little anger coming to the surface and Sam heard his voice unevenly laughing at the idea. “I should know? How the hell am I supposed to know anything about anything because you never talk. If I’d have known who it was when she came to the door I would have been suspicious- but I just found out tonight that that was your- that that was Lilith. I’ve never seen any pictures. You’ve never really talked about her—”

“Why the hell would I want to talk about the worst part of my life- especially with a vindictive bastard like you?”

Sam actually took a step back. Little stagger like he’d been hit. “Excuse me?”

“I tell you one thing. One fucking thing about myself because you begged me to, and then you turn around and shove it down my throat.” Nick took his headphones from around his neck and tossed them onto the table. “Look, I’ve got a type, apparently. Heartless, fucking bitches. And I guess that changing from females to males didn’t make a goddamned difference. Because I know how to pick ‘em.”
And right up until that very moment, Sam had never considered how badly he’d actually hurt his friend. Nick was supposed to be strong. A solid, quiet kind of man who couldn’t get shaken down to his foundations by a few misplaced words.

“Nick. I am so sorry for what I said. I—I didn’t mean it. You have to know I didn’t mean it.”

“I don’t have to do anything.” Which was childish and a bit spiteful and Sam honestly hadn’t expected anything else. Didn’t deserve more than what he was getting.

It wasn’t reassuring in the slightest to know that Nick was just as human and fragile as everyone else.

It was terrifying.

“I’m sorry.” He repeated a little more softly. It wasn’t enough. Obviously. But he didn’t know what else to say.

“Great. Well. Look, I’ve got to work on this painting and then I’ve got some place to be. I really can’t do this right now.”

“Is there a better time? I could come back-”

Nick sighed and rubbed a hand over his mouth. “I was trying to be nice. There’s always going to be something else.” He sat up a little straighter, gathering himself together rather noticeably. “I don’t want to do this and I’m not going to.”

Which was some stunning directness that Sam hadn’t really been expecting. “Nick, I need to-”

“Not. Doing. This.” Nick showed a bit too much teeth. “Any of it. Just no.”

Sam ran his hands through his hair. Wondering how Dean would feel to know how right he’d been about tonight’s chances of success. “You can’t- fuck, Nick. You can’t just say NO.”

“Well, I did. And if you somehow missed it I will say it again. No.”

“Listen. I just…” Just what? Never got to say goodbye. Needed to know that you knew I was sorry for what I said. Wanted to see you again because maybe I could remember how to be mad at you and maybe miss you a little less. There wasn’t a good answer. At least not one that Sam could think of. So he shrugged weakly.

Nick made some long eye contact, pulling his glasses off and baring his teeth for the second time since Sam had come in.

“Sam…” The first time in months that the younger man had a chance to hear that voice say his name. So careful. But Nick looked away. That little hint of a fight going out of him so fast. “It wasn’t ever going to work. You knew that, right? You wanted a mean, old, drunk, bastard because it was familiar and good. But you can do better. You don’t want to be with someone like me. Go find yourself a nice, sweet girlfriend. Someone your brother will approve of. Who won’t remind you so much of your dad.”

Sam had no words. None. What are you supposed to say when you hear the craziest thing you’ve ever heard?

“Just go home. Ok? I’ve really got stuff to work on.”

And, because there was only one thing that Sam was really good at doing, and that was being a
complete jackass who says the wrong thing whenever possible- Sam said something awful, but it was good to keep things going at the same terrifying kilter. “You don’t get to decide what I want. Or who.” He ran his hands through his hair again, making fists tight enough that his scalp hurt. “And I don’t- you’re not- damn it, Nick. I don’t know what glue you’ve been huffing since I last saw you. But you are not my dad. You’re not even fucking close. So don’t you dare.”

But Nick, who’d never once been intimidated by Sam, hadn’t changed over the weeks that they’d been apart. He simply folded his arms over his chest and the hand that Sam could still see rubbed in an agitated way at one of the new scars.

“I- I don’t care what Dean thinks. I just... it’s just you Nick. I don’t want to find someone else. I don’t want anyone else. I want you and your stupid laugh. I want the guy with the soft voice and rough hands that played Thin Lizzies for me in a parking garage like it was a symphony. I want the guy who always starts getting weird about how my hands are bigger than his when he’s had too much to drink.” Breathing hurt, but he kept on going. “And those stupid bracelets that you are still wearing even though it’s been months, and ... and you always play with your lip or bite your thumb when you’re thinking and it’s distracting as hell... and... and it’s just you. There’s nothing deeper and more sinister going on. There’s no psychology. It’s just fucking you, Nick. It’s just... you.

“I was with you because I wanted you. Because I fell in love with you.” He reached out to the other man, but saw that his hand was shaking so he let it drop. “I still do… I still am.”

There was no one in the world quite as good at embracing the silence as Nick. He just sat there, no longer rubbing his scars. Still and completely unmoved by the confession.

Nothing good at all was going to come from Sam being here tonight.

“I guess maybe that’s why I’m here. You’re mad at me- and you have every right. I wouldn’t want to be with me either. I... obviously you’re moving on. And you don’t miss me anymore. But I’m not there yet. And I don’t know if I’m ever going to be. I needed you to know that for some reason.” He shoved his hands down deep into his pockets because it made him feel a little more stable. “It’s a really, really beautiful painting. You’ve got an amazing gift.”

Nick blinked and the muscles in his jaw jumped, but he didn’t even say thank you for the complement.

Sam left.

He even almost managed to go home.

Got himself back to his own driveway in any case, but absolutely could not remember how to get out of the car, or why he should.

How was he supposed to tell Dean that he’d been right?

All that gloating was going to be insufferable.

And Sam hadn’t even remembered to fill up the gas tank.

Hindsight let him know that he should have just gone up to his room to study after Dean and Castiel came over with their pizza. He would have been better off going back over his notes for debate class.

At least he still could have been angry at Nick and managed to get in some good studying.
Angry was so much better than whatever the hell this new feeling was.

His phone was going off. Probably had been for a while. But the little screen said ‘Nick’ and Sam found himself struggling to figure out why it would do something like that.

“… yes?” Oh, that didn’t sound like Sam’s voice though. I was too small and uncertain.

Which was alright, because it certainly wasn’t Nick’s that answered him. “We had a plan, Mr. Sam.” June reminded him sternly.

“Sorry, kido.” Definitely not Sam talking. “I gave it my best shot.”

“Have you ever had Papa make you breakfast?”

You know what? “Can’t say I have.”

“No one can. He has coffee and makes me some instant oatmeal, or a bowl of cereal. It’s not real food. But you seem like a pancakes and bacon kind of guy.”

“Do I?” He was distantly aware that he was still answering like a normal person, even if he felt like some kind of dried up husk.

“Hey. I saw the flannel shirts. I’m actually wearing one that you left here. You’re a lumberjack. And lumberjacks love pancakes.”

Sam felt a small smile tugging at the edge of his mouth as he leaned forward and rested his head against the steering wheel. “Sorry to disappoint. I’m an awful cook too. I’d probably just bring you some cold pizza.”

“Awww, cold pizza would be super awesome.” She sighed. “Papa can do almost anything. Be he’s bad at breakfast.”

“That’s rough.”

June sighed. “So… it didn’t work out?” She would have had a hard time making a bigger understatement.

“Guess not.”

“That’s what I figured when he came to get me and was all quiet and broody.”

“June,” and that was Nick’s unmistakable voice, far away but still clear. “Who you talking to, baby? It’s late.”

“Just a friend, Papa.” June sang.

“Yeah, well, tell her good night. You girls can talk tomorrow.”

“Ok.”

“Ok.” Nick repeated, but much closer.

“I love you, Papa.”

“I love you too, June-bug. But get off the phone.”

“All right.” She clicked her teeth and there came the sound of a door opening and closing. “He
thinks you’re a girl.”

Sam’s eyes felt hot, his throat a little tight, and he didn’t know why. “Yeah, well. You really should go to bed. It’s pretty late and you’ve probably got school tomorrow.”

“I do, but… ok. Do you know someone else that my Papa might like if he doesn’t like you anymore? Someone who can cook, and has nice legs?”

Sam ran a hand over his mouth. “No. Sorry.”

She grumbled. “Alright. But if you learn how to make pancakes you give me a call.”

“Sure thing.”

“Goodnight, I guess.” Resignation and disappointment deep in her voice.

Sam could relate. “Good night, June.”

And just because Sam couldn’t have nice things anymore, there was Dean sitting on the couch when he came in. Just waiting. He didn’t get up, just watched quietly as Sam locked the door behind him and tossed the keys down onto the little table.

Forcing a smile that didn’t feel at all right, Sam nodded to his big brother.

“God damn it, Sam.” Dean got to his feet. “Just sit down.”

And Sam had never really been all that good at following orders, but he didn’t have much in him to do otherwise or any will to fight the gentle momentum that carried him to the couch.

Dean left the room and returned too fast with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

“I don’t want a drink.” Sam muttered half to himself.

“They’re both for me, bitch. I’m going to need ‘em if I have to listen to this heart wrenching bullshit about how terrible your ex is.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” He promised- which roughly meant that there was nothing that he wanted to talk about, and nothing that Dean wanted to hear.

But that didn’t stop Dean from filling the two little glasses with the same poison that was inevitably killing their dad somewhere on the other side of the country, and Sam took the one that was passed over to him.

After all, not wanting a drink and not needing them were two separate categories.

“Do you wanna’ start this off with an apologetic ‘Dean, you were right, like always’ or should I go straight to asking where you think we should dump the body?”

Sam tossed back the shot and coughed slightly as the alcohol flayed his throat raw. “You never should have set us up.”

“Oh, you’re not going to blame me for this one. I did it as a joke, and thought that if you got laid out of it, all the better. I never told you to fall for the bastard. In fact, I remember telling you to dump the son of a bitch pretty early on.”

And for all the world, Sam wished he could have simply said that Dean was wrong, that he’d never fallen in love with Nick. Instead he poured himself another shot and rested his elbows on his
knees.

None of the things he could think to say seemed like good things. No one involved got to keep all the blame. Sam and Nick— and incidentally (and to a lesser extent) Dean and Gabriel were all sort of playing equally important villainous roles in this. In the end it just meant that everyone who had become involved just kind of sucked.

Sometimes there are no good outcomes.

Only some a little less shitty than others.

“We weren’t really dating, you know.” Sam notched his thumb along the lip of the glass, breathing through his teeth. “Me and Nick...we worked it all out together the first night we met, when we figured out what you and Cas were up to. We thought ‘oh, we’ll show them. We will pretend to date and pretend to fall in love and have such a break up, and they will feel so bad for picking on us.’ We were so god damned smart.”

Dean quietly pulled the bottle away from Sam and eyed him suspiciously. “You wanna run that on by me again?”

“We were lying to you guys. We were never actually a couple.”

“That’s a really laugh. First off, you’re not that good of a liar, or an actor. Second, dude was sucking you off on our stairs. That’s some committed lie. Huge sacrifice on your part, Sammy.”

Oh, and Dean didn’t need to keep bringing that one up. It made Sam’s stomach ache. That morning on the stairs, it had kind of been a first time thing for both of the men involved. He couldn’t call it ‘special’ because that made it seem romantic or some other garbage kind of title that it didn’t deserve. Nick had simply suggested it in his off handed way, half joking, and Sam had laughed nervously. A little prodding later and the older man had figured out that Sam had never had the pleasure- and the next thing Sam knew Nick was fumbling at his belt, not patience to even make it all the way up to the bedroom. The sinfully distracting memory of the way that Nick had looked up at him while licking a thin stripe down Sam’s hip… it wasn’t playing well with the current feelings he was drowning in.

Sam crossed his legs and downed the second shot. It wasn’t much smoother than the first and he found himself coughing wetly again while trying very hard not to make eye contact with his brother.

Coming clean was supposed to be liberating.

He should have felt a weight lifting off his shoulders. Some kind of peace.

He didn’t of course. But maybe that would just come in time.

“We sort of… the pretend part of the dating work out like we thought it would.” One more glaring understatement, what difference would it make now?

There was a tightness to Dean. His shoulders hunched. The edges of his mouth turned down. He had never really liked being lied to. “How well did the pretend breaking up go?”

“Oh that part was… is a lot more real than I was expecting.”

“Just how do you manage to get from trying to get back at me for setting you up on a date with a guy- to fucking one on a regular basis?”
“I guess that we just lied about it well enough that we started believing it too.”

Dean took a slow drink straight from the bottle instead of just yelling. So he was obviously taking this a lot better than Sam thought that he would.

The gentle ticking of the clock was the only noise for a bit. Time stretching out to an uncomfortable thinness. Dean took another long drink and set the bottle on the coffee table close enough to Sam to more of a suggestion than anything else.

So Sam took it, and poured himself a half shot and just held it. Wrapping his hands around the little glass until it was out of sight. It helped hide the fact that he was shaking again. Maybe he’d never stopped. Strung out on adrenaline and angst, and starving for another hit.

“You’re... not going to say anything?”

“You don’t want me to say anything right now, Sammy.”

And Dean was already right about so many other things, it only seemed like a safe bet to go ahead and keep on trusting in him.

They just needed a moment. A little time for Dean to sort through what Sam had told him. Time to drink a little more. Abandon a few half formed sentences. And in the end just look fantastically furious.

Which meant that everything was going pretty much exactly how Sam thought that it would.

It didn’t make that aggressive silence any easier to take.

He looked at the familiar walls that he’d helped to paint. The carpet that they’d laid out a couple years back. The ugly furniture that they’d picked out together, scraping up the needed cash and laughing because they hadn’t been able to afford anything nicer.

It felt like a lifetime ago by now, but this was the actual couch that Nick and he had sat on while the older man had charmed him like a snake oil salesman into going along with this plan that was doomed from the start. Sam had been reluctant and he should have trusted in that initial feeling.

“God, I need a drink.”

Dean pointed to the bottle without a word.

“Of water.” The whiskey wasn’t sitting well on his stomach. No real surprise there. He’d never been all that good at drinking.

By the time he came back to the couch, ready to endure the rest of his well earned silent treatment, Dean had managed to knock the bottle down to half way.

It was going to be one of those nights apparently.

As long as they were in it together.

Sam nursed his tall glass of water, glancing towards the clock from time to time, waiting for the liquor to hit Dean hard enough that he’d be ready to yell at Sam- because right now Sam either wanted advice, or a fight. He’d take which ever he could get at this point.

“Dean?”

“No.”
“I think I really, really fucked this one up.”

Dean actually nodded slightly, and it was nicer than it should have been to have that level of confirmation.

“It’s just… he was my best friend, you know?”

His big brother’s words only slurred a little on the edges, impressive levels of sobriety in the face of so much alcohol. But Dean had always been a fairly impressive drunk. “At what point did that son of a bitch replace me as your best friend?”

“Around the same time I realized how awesome it is to have a best friend you can also make out with.” He admitted softly.

Some obvious consideration passed over Dean’s face, bit of a sneer as he sized up Sam. “Yeah, I’m not really into that whole homo erotic, incest-y thing.” He caught the top of the whisky bottle and kind of rolled the neck between his thumb and forefinger. “Can you at least- I mean, without going into detail, tell me you weren’t also lying about who was on top. I can’t handle the idea of you getting pounded by that bastard.”

“…pounded?”

“Up the ass.” Dean clarified.

Which was, for the record, not even close to what Sam was expecting. “Are you… you’re making fun of me?”

“Dude, you lied to me. Lied to my face. For months. But you also ended up getting pretty fucked over in the end- so between the two of us I’m actually the only one who’s doing ok. And you’ve got to admit… it’s kind of funny.”

Sam looked at Dean. Really, really just looked at him. There was a comfortable haze of liquor, a redness to his cheeks, a hardness to the line of his mouth, but everything else was just poorly disguised pity.

Only he didn’t want pity. He had plenty enough on his own without borrowing any.

“You should have told me he’d been in an accident.” Sam spoke quietly. Digging himself a little hole, still looking for that fight.

Dean groaned and toyed with the bottle. “Yeah, you an Cas say that- but what did knowing get you? Didn’t make him any less in the hospital, and didn’t make you and him any less not-dating.”

Which was true.

“I’m not a little kid anymore. You have to let me screw up my own life. And you have to let me pick myself back up.”

“Look, it’s my job to protect you from your own stupid, to make sure that you don’t end up with miserable sons of bitches who don’t make you happy.”

Sam made a bitter noise, leaning away from Dean, holding himself steady. “What are you, the happiness police?

“No. I’m your fucking big brother,” Dean thunked a fist against the back of the couch. “And I
always will be- no matter how tall you decide to get. So get used to it.”

This was also true. But it didn’t mean that Sam had asked for any of it, or that he wanted it.

“Sammy, if you knew he was hurt you would have run to the hospital and cried and held his hand,” Dean kept on going, rambling drunkenly. “He would have apologized and you would have apologized, maybe he could have braided your hair, and you both would have gotten your periods at the same time. It would have been pretty freaking magical.”

Dean’s terrible words from earlier that evening still ringing in him clear as church bells. He doesn’t want you. Just because something was true didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“Shut up.”

“You don’t get it, do you? It was going to happen eventually. But it would have broken you a few months back. You were in it in a bad way.” Dean shrugged. “Tonight you’re doing ok. You’ve had time for your little shell to harden.”

“Dean, I’m ...not ok.”

“You fucking will be.” He managed to make it sound like a threat. Dean knew him. Knew him better than he knew himself most of the time. And Dean saw through the ruffled feathers and the red rimmed eyes that had nothing to do with whiskey because Sam hadn’t really had all that much to drink any ways.

“Sammich,” one clumsy hand smacked him on the shoulder, gripping the collar of his shirt and shaking him like Dean meant to knock something loose. “Tomorrow we are going to the shooting range. We’re going to blow off a few rounds, and I’m going to let you pretend that you’re a better shot than me, because you’re my baby brother an I feel bad for you.”

They hadn’t been shooting since the first summer out here in California.

The offer threw Sam. Unexpected and strangely inviting.

“Then I’m going to introduce you to these twins I met last week. They’re biology… medical intern… whatever. And I can’t tell them apart, but they are both solid tens and I am willing to share with you. You’d like them, they’re out here studying like… sea grass or some shit.”

“No.” Sam said very firmly.

Dean made a face. “You can’t lick your wounds forever.”

“No twins.”

“...can we still go to the range?”

See, Dean was a fixer. And problematically, Sam was currently limping along, just as he had been since the first fight with Nick months ago.

And he’d grown accustomed to it, sort of comfortable with the knowledge that it was never going to feel better, fucking up on this grand of a level.

But maybe be he could do them both a favor and let his big brother do what he did best.

He gathered up the glasses from the table, drinking the half shot he’d poured for himself earlier. “If you’re not too hung over.” He promised.
It was just a simple text message that woke him up early on his Friday morning.

**-I’m sorry. Can we talk?**

Sam looked at his phone. The very awful non-conversation that he’d had with Nick almost a week ago was still fairly fresh in his mind. Had kept him on the edge of distraction for days now, making schoolwork a bit more difficult to focus on than normal.

What was he supposed to say?

He wanted to throw his phone. Maybe yell some obscenities at it.

**-yeah** he typed back instead before tossing it onto the bed beside him. It was a tough kind of choice so early in the morning, but if felt like the right one.

Half an hour later, with a time and a place to meet up sent to him from Nick’s phone, and Sam suddenly had a million doubts. But he’d also had some coffee and a shower and was awake enough to really savor the misgiving of his impulsive response.

He wanted to write Nick off. To move on. To stop dwelling so much, because trying to figure out what the hell had happened the other night had only served to give him a week long headache.

Meeting up with Nick wasn’t going to be a step forward.

They’d already said all the things that there were to say between them.

He went anyways.

It was stupid and he knew it.

But sometimes love is admitting that you aren’t better than stupid.

They’d agreed to meet at a little coffee shop. He’d never been here with Nick before, but this was a college town and they both lived within spitting distance of campus. There were roughly twenty places just like it nearby. All those students needed their coffee after all.

Despite having already had a cup before he’d left home, Sam found himself buying a drink, because it gave his hands something to hold. He sat as near to the back of the cafe as possible, where he could watch the door and wait, knee bouncing beneath the table. Anxious from more than just the double shot of caffeine.

Almost five minutes after Nick was supposed to be there at that little table making uncomfortable conversations with Sam, the young man was ready to give up. But before he managed to get to his feet, the chair across from his was pulled out and he suddenly had company.

Though it wasn’t Nick, the resemblance was a little eerie.

She had the same almost strawberry blonde hair, the same tired looking, sea glass blue eyes, and when she smiled up at him it was the same tight lipped, round cheeked expression her father would always use. The older version of the little girl from the photo Nick kept on his dresser. She even had one of those plastic beaded bracelets that Nick hadn’t been without since Christmas. This one mostly made of stars- all her own, not one of her Dad’s.

Sam would have called her beautiful in the way that some little kids just are. Perfect features, very
symmetrical, with all that long, silky blonde hair pulled over a shoulder, slender and lithe, tan with a splash of freckles- but Sam could see the faded scar that ran down her jaw and neck, not quite hidden by all that hair. And he could see at least two little pink perfect circles on her lower left arm where the rolled up flannel sleeves didn’t quite cover. Old marks that she would have to carry for the rest of her life.

Sam felt irrationally angry, and protective, and a little sick to his stomach.

And she just smiled up at him.

“You’re a lot taller than I thought you would be.”

“June… shouldn’t you be in school?”

Her smile turned into a grin. “Well, I had to meet you, didn’t I? So when I got dropped off at school I just kept walking. I really didn’t know if you would come or not.”

“I didn’t know it was you that had texted me.”

She kept that sharklike grin in place. “If you had, would you not have come?”

Sam felt a bit of the tension easing out of him. He’d been gearing up for the possibility of another argument and now the world as a whole felt anti climactic. He ran a hand through his hair. “No. I probably would still be here- but I wouldn’t have encouraged you to ditch school. I would have tried to meet later in the afternoon.”

“I’m almost ten- that’s pretty much a teenager. I can skip class if I need to.”

“You should be in school. Come on, I’ll walk you back.” He wanted to make sure she got there. The last thing he needed was for her to go missing and Sam to be the last one to have seen her. He didn’t know why that’s where his mind went- but not a whole lot of things felt like making sense to him right now.

June rolled her eyes but got up. “Will you buy me a scone?”

“You telling me you’re not full from your oatmeal this morning?”

“I talked Papa into getting us some toaster waffles… but I’m always hungry.”

So Sam bought her a cranberry-orange scone and a hot chocolate before they started walking.

“You can’t do this again- ok?” He found that looking down at her while they were moving was difficult. Her head didn’t even come up to his chest and it made the angle for eye contact really low and weird. “I don’t think your dad would be happy about this.”

“Well I’m not going to tell him, and you aren’t. So we should be fine.”

“I don’t know if you’re trying to pull some Parent Trap nonsense here, but you can’t do this again.” He repeated more firmly. “You’re dad and I just… we just don’t. And you’re really weirdly ok with the fact that I was your dad’s boyfriend.”

“My mom is a Vegas show girl. She had at least two new boyfriends a week, every one was an A+ creep, but at least they left before breakfast. And Marco, the guy she’s marrying, he’s the worst one. Always asking me to come sit on his lap, and touching my hair. Super, extra creep, you know? But you seem nice and normal. So why would it matter if you’re a guy?”
There was that slightly nauseous feeling again. “...because you’re dad is a guy too.”

“Nah, he’s not a guy. He’s just Papa. He had boyfriends, mom had boyfriends. Even I’ve had a boyfriend. People just have boyfriends sometimes.”

“That’s a... really progressive view.”

“Progressive.” She repeated before taking a big, crumbly bite of her pasty and then talking with her mouth still full. “You talk like uncle Cassy.”

Sam just sort of shrugged.

“I like it. Uncle Cassy is weird really nice. Like... maybe the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

“I can see that.”

“But you know, I was talking to him about it this morning, and we both think that Papa needs someone, and that that someone should be you. Apparently you’re the only person he’s ever dated since he and Mom got a divorce. So that makes you like really, really important.”

“Well, like you said, Cas is weird.” Sam didn’t know if he should take comfort or if he should worry for the fact that Castiel had a favorable opinion on this spectacularly failed relationship—especially since he knew that the majority of it (at least in a chronological sense) had been an enormous lie. “And you’re not allowed to have formed an opinion on a relationship that you never saw. I know you think he’s still got a bit of a crush on me or something- but I talked to him the other night. It’s definitely over.”

She aimed a crooked expression up at him, her little nose wrinkling over a lopsided frown. “Oh... but you’re super pretty. And Uncle Cassy said that you were always sweet to Papa even when he was an ass.” She whispered the last, and Sam had a feeling it was probably a word that she wasn’t supposed to be using.

“Unfortunately relationships are more complicated than just whether or not the two people are nice to each other.” And even if that was the sole basis, they would have failed at it spectacularly.

“I guess... I mean, Uncle Gabriel said you and Papa had a big fight one time and that you were mean. But I don’t think that’s true. You don’t seem mean at all, and Uncle Gabriel exaggerates. All the time. Like he said that Papa couldn’t get custody of me if he was dating a guy- because the judge already hated him, and I think that’s kind of stupid. Him having a boyfriend would be a really stupid reason to not let me live with him. And anyways, I wasn’t going to tell the judge. He had big, weird eyebrows, and it really should just be all about if you’re nice to each other.”

“Sometimes people just aren’t supposed to be together I think.”

For a multitude of different reasons.

Like when someone picks their daughter over you, and you just have to kind of learn to accept it.

Sam thought that maybe this new knowledge should have made him angry. He really wished that it did. But he just felt all the more like Nick was justified in calling it quits.

“This is my school.” June gestured broadly, arms wide like she planned to embrace the building. “Isn’t it ugly? My old school was so much nicer. And it had all my friends at it.”

“That’s rough. But you’ll make new friends... cool California friends.”
“No one says cool anymore.” She looked up at him with a disappointed expression.

“I moved out here from Kansas just a few years ago. It sucks going to a new school so far from home. But the weather out here is nice, and you’ve got the beach, and all kinds of… really interesting family.”

She tugged on the straps of her backpack. “I’ve never been to the beach before.”

“Really?”

“The ocean doesn’t reach Las Vegas.”

“You should ask your dad if he’ll take you once school is out for the summer. He used to go with his brothers when they were younger, and burn all their old homework.” Sam found himself smiling in a way that didn’t even remotely feel like happy. “I bet he’d love to take you.”

“Really?” She lit up. “That sounds really cool.”

“I thought no one says cool anymore.”

“Well, now it’s retro. Retro is cool.”

“Go to class, June.” Sam instructed through a laugh.

“Can we get scones and cocoa again next Friday?”

He shook his head. “No. Come on. It was great to meet you. I know that your dad loves you very much and I’m happy that you two have each other. But he doesn’t like me- for good reasons that you don’t really need to know about. And we can’t hang out and get breakfast.”

“Come on.”

“He might actually kill me.”

“You’ll be fine. He’s a lover, not a fighter.”

“Do you even know what that means?”

“I know that you’re nice, and if I wait for you next week at the same time at the same coffee shop that you might show up to walk me back to school.”

Not knowing Lilith, it was hard to say if June took more after her mother or father. But either way she clearly knew how to work a system.

“I could just tell your dad what you’re doing. Ditching school, hanging out with gross old men.”

“Yeah, you won’t tell him.” She leaned into Sam for a moment, her shoulder and the crown of her head hitting the bend of his elbow. “I’ll see you next week, Mr. Sam.” And she waved and ran up to the school, long blonde hair whipping behind her like a flag.

Sam stood there reeling with new, curious feelings that he didn’t like at all, before realizing that he was loitering in front of an elementary school and very likely to actually get pegged as a ‘gross old man’ and that was going to be really hard to explain to Dean when his big brother came to pick him up down at the police station.

He made his way back towards the coffee shop, in the direction of his own school, thinking that he could go hide out in the library for a while and try to get a little studying in- because if nothing
else, for those few minutes of clarity when he was actually able to focus every now and then, he enjoyed being a student again and not wallowing in self pity over all the things that he’d let go horrifically wrong these past few months.

Over the little things that he started letting go wrong every Friday morning.

First at about eight-fifteen, then (after an early text to let him know of the time change) closer to seven-thirty. Apparently Cas drove his niece to school, and thought it was more ethical and safer to just drive her straight to the coffee shop with enough morning left to get to school on time. The adults didn’t talk about the arrangement, and Sam had his suspicions that it was for plausible deniability if they ever got caught.

Not that they intended to get caught.

But Sam had never had all that much luck with well laid plans.
“But it’s your birthday.” Dean pointed out for possibly the hundredth time this afternoon, and it oddly, still didn’t make any kind of difference. “You can’t study on your birthday.”

“I can if my finals start next week.” Sam pointed out, stubbornly clinging to his textbook, least Dean try to take it from him again. It hadn’t ended so well last time.

“It’s Saturday night.” Which was also not new news.

Sam sighed and picked back up his highlighter.

Dean threw his hands in the air. “You’re a damn disappointment. You know that, Sammy? All the other big brothers are going to give me shit about this at our next big brother meeting. Come on.” It had been going on like this for hours now. Dean’s arguments slowly making less and less sense. “You can’t spend your birthday with your face in a law book.”

“Yes. I can.”

“But it’s your twenty-second birthday. Double twos. This means something.”

And that might be right, however Sam just shook his head and refused to be moved by the insults or insane ramblings. There were more important things than going out and drinking with his brother.

Not that he had been able to convince Dean of this. But the fact remained.

“You’ve got to at least take a break, man. This isn’t healthy.”

“It’s finals.” Sam countered with a well worn sigh. “They aren’t meant to be healthy.”

“Dinner. Let me take you out for dinner at least.”
Sam glanced over at the clock above the stove. It was almost eight at night. Last he’d checked the time it had only been a little after three. How had it gotten so late? Who was supposed to be keeping track of the time?

He sat back and looked reluctantly up at his brother, who instantly got that grin of his, knowing that he’d finally worn Sam down, through need of food alone.

“I guess I could take a break—” he reluctantly pushed the words through his teeth. “Just a short one though.”

Dean smacked him on the back. “What are we sitting around here for? I know a place that has great wings.”

“We’re not going to Hooters.” Sam stood up anyways, figuring that they could take the argument on the road, because now that food had been mentioned he realized just how hungry he actually was.

“Great food. Great girls. How can you honestly say no? Besides, I bet that they would be willing to do something real special for the birthday boy.”

“You really have a one track mind, don’t you?”

Dean grinned and nodded, grabbing his keys and heading out to the car.

By the grace of God alone, Sam managed to talk Dean into going to a ‘real’ restaurant- though in the end he found that it didn’t make much difference. There were still females working there, and Dean had never been able to help himself when it came to females.

Or when it came to Sam.

Dean did practically everything to their waitress short of actually writing down Sam’s cell number and tucking it into her pocket.

As it turned out, Sam had spent three months ruining a perfectly good fake relationship in the vain hope of avoiding Dean trying to set him up with strangers in strange places- then just as long trying to pull himself back together once that masterful plan had fallen apart.

And here he was right back at square one.

Nothing at all to show for the half a year of hell that he’d dragged himself through.

“Knock it off.” Sam hissed at Dean, once the cute redheaded waitress left to go fetch their drinks.

“She’s got an ass like a Christmas ham.” His big brother muttered almost to himself, half leaning out of his chair, twisting awkwardly to watch her go.

“Real classy.” Sam stole Dean’s pickle from where it had been pushed it off to the side. “I’m sure all women love being compared to festive meats.”

“They love it.” Dean laughed warmly and swatted Sam away from his food. “It’s like catnip to them, man. You don’t even know.”

“And this right there is why you’re still single.”

But with a big grin, Dean simply shrugged, “yeah. And you’re one to talk.”
Which was a cheap shot, but Sam did his best to just let it roll off of him.

It had been well over a month since he last saw Nick. The weather had changed. The days were getting longer. The nights shorter and significantly less cold.

And honestly, that saying about time healing all wounds? Maybe there was something to it after all.

No misunderstandings though.

He still missed Nick.

Especially during those late, dark hours when he was lying alone in his bed, and the ache to have someone (a very specific someone) beside him became a physical, gnawing pain.

But if hurt... less. As if that were some kind of consolation.

Sam couldn’t have asked for, or really expected, any better than that.

Their waitress came back, very efficient woman that she was, with two beers and a sweet smile for the brothers.

“Can I get you boys anything else?” She popped her empty tray against a hip.

“Actually? Yeah.” Dean drawled in that slow, knee weakening way that he typically saved for girls in much tighter pants. “You could let my brother here know when you get off tonight?” A smile like his was just as good as any lethal weapon. Many lesser women had fallen to it without much of a fight. “He could use a nice break from all this studying he’s been up to. Maybe you two kids could... go see a movie, share a drink. It is his birthday after all.” Real subtle like. As was Dean’s specialty.

She turned her gaze in Sam’s direction, sizing him up. There was a hint of pity there somewhere in her smile, she could tell that this had not been any idea of Sam’s. And maybe that’s why she didn’t just turn and walk away. “But you two look like you’re having so much fun. I wouldn’t want to break up this nice masculine bonding thing you’ve got going.”

Dean ran a thumb along the edge of her tray. “You know I’d miss him, but leaving him in capable hands like yours...I think he’d be alright.”

It was difficult to tell if he was flirting for Sam, or for himself at this point.

By the way that she was smiling at Dean it was obvious which brother she was starting to lean towards.

Absolutely no complaints from the audience.

Sam honestly preferred it this way.

Only seconds after their waitress left with a smile and a bit of a giggle, off to go check on her other tables, Dean was leaning in and giving Sam that awful big brother look that he always did so well. “So no redheads. But come on. You can pick anyone you want. I’ll be your wingman tonight.”

“I don’t want anyone.” He lied with a bold, straight face. “I just want to pass my finals.”

“Yeah, right.” Dean chuckled and worked on his beer. “Everyone wants someone.”
Sam picked up his own beer and pointedly refused to dignify such a statement.

Otherwise dinner was good.

Not good as in healthy for either of them, but still good in ways that mattered. As Dean very clearly pointed out, *calories don’t count on your birthday, you big girl, so just try to actually enjoy yourself for once.* So they ate. They ate good things, and over the next hour or so Sam systematically vetoed every woman within eyesight of their table, much to Dean’s dismay.

“Well then… didn’t realise you were suddenly going to get so picky on me.” Dean leaned back in his seat, muscles going loose and easy as he started on his third beer.

“I’ve always been this picky.” Sam reminded very, very softly. “You’re the one who doesn’t care who he’s sticking it in.”

And that got Dean laughing, warm and carefree just like the rest of him. “Nice.” Like he approved wholeheartedly of the insult. “Very nice.”

“Come on. Finish that up so we can get back home.”

“Dude. I am in no fit way to drive.” He shook the mostly full brown bottle in Sam’s direction. Not that three beers was really any kind of mile marker for someone like Dean, but it was an excuse. And Dean was really good at excuses.

“Then give me the keys.” Sam still had most of his first drink sitting there, sweating little rings onto the table top beside his empty plate.

“Oh my god. One night out of the year, Sammy. It’s all I’m asking for here. It’s not much. Just sit back and enjoy the god damned scenery with me.”

Sam cast a cursory glance around the very moderately priced chain restaurant that they were sitting in. The scenery was nothing at all exciting or worthy of a word like *enjoy.* At the same time though he could see that stubborn look on the edges of Dean’s eyes. Not willing to let this whole ‘birthday thing’ go without a fight.

Rubbing grit from the edges of his own eyes, Sam surrendered. “Can we at least go to the bar down the street where they have something better than eight dollars for some watered down house draft?”

“Now we’re talking the same language.” Dean grinned like a maniac and flagged down their very nice ginger waitress who had already put up with so much from Dean tonight.

The Winchesters ended up leaving with her number after all. Though due to the fact that she slyly tucked the little scrap of paper into Dean’s shirt pocket when she brought them their tab, Sam felt comfortably in the clear.

They walked side by side down the line of dark storefronts, towards the comforting neon glow of one of the many, many little bars in their quaint college town. Dean whistled tunelessly, hands shoved way down in his pockets, swaying just a hint more than usual.

“I think that worked out as best as could be expected.” Sam decided out loud.

“Hell yeah, it did.” You can’t fake confidence like that. Dean had just been born with it. Easy as breathing. “She would have been wasted on you anyways. A girl like her needs… well, not you. But cheer up, Sammy. The night’s still young and I aim to show my favorite birthday boy the good time he deserves.”
“I’d settle for nursing a scotch for the rest of the night and watching you drink yourself stupid while getting shot down by every girl in the place.”

“Since when do you drink scotch?”

“Nick, uh, he… he drank scotch sometimes. Mostly whiskey, but on good nights he’d get out the scotch.”

“Oh god.” Dean tossed back his head with an anguished groan. “You guys had your own drink? Next you’ll be telling me you’ve got a song too.”

Sam laughed a little too tightly. It wouldn’t be right to tell Dean that every time he played his Thin Lizzy’s tape in the car, all Sam could do was remember how much better the notes had sounded played on a violin somewhere in a parking garage in San Francisco. But maybe that was just a matter of taste.

By the end of the night, Sam got his simply spoken birthday wish. He got to feel warm and sick by the unfortunate amount of scotch in his stomach while watching Dean’s increasingly clumsy efforts to snag a suitable companion for his obviously disinterested brother.

Somehow they made it home, but the process was hazy at best. All Sam knew was that come mid morning he was nursing a wicked hangover that was keeping him successfully pinned down in his bed, and Castiel of all people was the one setting hot coffee and aspirin next to him.

He grunted softly, and found that he didn’t really care if it came out clearly as a thank you or not. Only for his birthday did he let Dean wreck him like this. It made his brother happy. And if you can’t make your only brother happy on your own birthday, then why bother having one?

“Are you feeling better this morning?” Castiel asked the obviously pained and nauseously unwell man.

To which Sam managed another well placed grunt as an answer.

“Good. You were… less than your usual, composed self last night.”

“Dean?”

“He was…a little worse than you, but he is... recovering.”

Which coaxed a feeble smile out of Sam. “Thanks.” He managed to shape the word, struggling to find some kind of clarity in the midst of the pounding in his head and the aching in his gut. It was something of a comfort knowing that when it came to Dean, if it happened that Sam wasn’t up to the task, that there was some reliable backup to be had.

“I will admit, I was rather surprised to get the call to come pick you two up.”

The coffee burned his tongue, but he got those little white pills down and found the strength to sit there on his bed while the room tilted sharply and the sliver of light from his window glared as brilliant as any dying sun. “I don’t even remember calling you.” Sam admitted.

“You didn’t.” Castiel dutifully went to the window and pulled the curtains tightly together without even being asked. “Nick did.”

Any other morning, Sam might have been able to put together a subtable rebuttal for that. As it was he could only watch blearily as his brother’s friend padded softly out of the room, leaving a great big empty space that would not be answering any questions.
Sam fell back against his pillows with a groan, not wanting to think about what fresh hell he’d opened himself up for somewhere between his second and third glass of scotch where things got too hazy to piece back together.

No hangover clouded memory from last night served as a possible explanation as to why or how Nick would have known that Sam was out drinking with Dean- so there was nothing but mild fear as to how Castiel had managed to get a phone call about it.

Patting around his bed and then the nightstand, Sam discovered that he had no idea where his phone had been put. No phone in his pocket either, though there had been some hope since by the smell alone, the jeans and tshirt that he’d slept in were definitely the same ones from last night, with that musty, slightly sickly smell of smoke and alcohol that always seemed to linger around bars. And it’s not like Sam really wanted to see his phone, because all it could possibly do for him was to affirm that he’d actually called Nick while drunk. Which was frankly a level of stupid to which Sam would prefer not to own up to.

Head still pounding, he dragged himself to the shower instead, pointedly looking for a distraction from that painfully self destructive feeling that was trying to overtake him.

Around the time that the water started to run a bit cold, the pills that Cas had benevolently given him started to kick in. Sam came out of the shower, dressed in something only remotely more clean, with a promise to himself that he’d do some laundry today between studying and eating, pausing in the hall to listen to the arguing coming from downstairs.

On account of the fact that Dean had always been notoriously the first one to escalate disagreements into actual yelling, added with the fact that Sam couldn’t even begin to imagine Castiel raising his voice- it sounded like a rather one sided fight so far. Dean’s was the only voice making it up the stairs, the sentence structure getting a little lost, but the righteous outrage behind the words was coming through very clearly.

Sam braced himself and came about halfway down the staircase, holding onto the banister as he wobbled just a little, head still not all the way clear, despite how hard he was trying to convince himself that he was fine.

“I hardly see how this is my fault.” Castiel laid out in a bland, unshaken tone. Standing there in the living room with his arms folded over his chest, completely unphased by the fact that Dean’s own body language was just this side of homicidal.


“Which you made perfectly clear that I am not allowed to drive.”

“Fucking hell, Cas. You can’t leave her in downtown overnight either.”

The little accountant just looked blankly at Dean. Still not even halfway towards intimidated. “The contingencies weren’t laid out for me at the time. You just said no .”

Dean was breathing through his nose. Sam could hear it from all the way back where he was standing.

“Would you like me to drive you to your car or not?” From the way that Castiel bit the words off, so clean and measured, it was clear that this was not the first time in the conversation that he’d asked the question.

Sam personally was fairly impressed at the depth of the friendship that had formed between his big
brother and this fearless man who had stepped rather square into the middle of a damned if you do, damned if you don’t, sort of situation.

Leaving the Impala unattended, overnight, in a some random parking lot? Terrible idea at best.

Driving Dean’s car when he told you in no uncertain terms not to? Suicidally stupid idea.

And yet, there was Castiel, just waiting for an answer to his question. Did Dean want the damn ride back to his car or not?

“You’re making it up to me later.” Dean said finally.

Sighing, Castiel actually had the gall to roll his eyes ever so slightly. “I already told you I would drive you to your car.”

And then, much to Sam’s shock and horror, Dean took Cas by the collar of his shirt, pulled him close and pressed a rather aggressive kiss to the other man’s mouth.

By the way that Cas just easily went along with it all after only the smallest of startled noises, hands coming up to rest against Dean’s sides, it was uncomfortably apparent that this was not their first time doing such things. And Sam felt for all the world like he’d walked in on his parents doing something that no child should ever walk in on their parents doing.

Dean felt a need to clarify between kisses that he wasn’t talking about getting a ride anywhere, “No. You are making it up to me later.”

Castiel just made a small ‘oh’ kind of sound against Dean’s mouth, and Sam realized that he’d already witnessed far too much to get any kind of good night’s sleep for the next week or so.

Face and neck feeling hot, and stomach churning more than just a little, he took quick and quiet steps back up to the relative safety of the hallway.

It’s not like the Winchesters had ever been all that open about their sex lives. They knew each other had them to some extent, and really, that was far more than enough when it came to what you would ever want to accidently imagine your sibling doing.

But holy hell.

Sam had just assumed that Dean would tell him something like this.

Then again…

Yeah.

This was actually exactly what Sam felt that he could expect from his brother. Dean had given him way too much grief for having dated Nick, and for falling so hard and so painfully. Dean wasn’t the kind of guy who would want to rub it in by parading around the fact that he was getting to rub up against Sam’s ex’s younger brother.

Oh, but Sam longed for the time when he never could have even imagined having problems like these.

When he finally felt it was safe again to go back downstairs, that maybe the horror show had ended (he’d heard the front door closing, followed by a car pulling out of the driveway), he was surprised to find that his cell phone was sitting on the dinner table. A post-it note stuck to it saying simply ‘you told me not to give it back to you until you were sober’. It wasn’t in Dean’s
handwriting. Which let Sam know that apparently Cas was good at tending to both brother’s unique problems in turn.

Sam almost wanted to tell the guy thanks again- but at the same time, he felt that Dean probably had all the bases covered at this point.

All of Castiel’s bases.

Eww.

Sam groggily made some toast, hoping that it would be bland enough to not bother his still queasy stomach (which was almost wholly from the drinking last night and not residual anxiety over finding out why Castiel spent the night sometimes). His phone was left to sit alone on the center of the table, carefully and cautiously avoided like some kind of venomous creature.

Sam knew.

He knew like a self fulfilling prophecy that as soon as he flipped his phone open and looked at recent calls he would only see Nick’s name there mocking him. But he couldn’t avoid it forever, and his curiosity and dread eventually evened out, as he sat down with his toast and picked up the seemingly innocent little phone.

And yes.

Right there.

In big blue letters.

Nick.

Sam had called him last night.

Not once.

Not twice.

But eight times.

Each one no more than a minute apart, all missed calls, except the last one.

Sam put his face in his hands and his toast sat and got cold on the edge of the table beside his elbow.

But cold toast was ok, just bland, crunchy bread really, and Sam couldn’t just teeter on the edge of such a delightful abundance of anxiety for too long. He had finals starting tomorrow, and that meant a rather limited amount of time to cram in a few more hours of studying. It seemed like a good idea to just get this out of the way, to put the feeling out of it’s misery.

So, in a moment of absolute clarity, without any of the hesitation that needed to be there, he hit the redial button and pressed the phone to his ear.

Nick picked up surprisingly fast. “Sam?”

Ah, there was that horrified sense of self preservation that would have helped him out immensely a few seconds earlier. Hitting him like a physical weight, knocking the breath from him as he struggled to deal with the fact that Nick still sounded just like himself, and Sam had somehow managed to forget just how much he enjoyed the sound of the man’s voice.
“Did you make it home alright?” Nick pressed when Sam failed to have any kind of verbal response to his greeting.

“I… yeah.” Great and glorious, eloquent use of words being dragged out out of him. “Last night did I, um-”

“You did.” Nick assured in a way that didn’t sound at all amused. “Now can you do us both a favor and lose my number?”

And then there was a dial tone ringing softly in Sam’s ear.

It would have hurt a lot more if he wasn’t still reeling in the upside down, tumbling feeling caused by the fact that Nick had answered and actually sounded worried for a few seconds.

Today wasn’t going to be the day, and tomorrow wouldn’t be either. Hell, years from right then might still not be enough time to clear the air, because Nick really, really struck Sam as someone who was good at holding a grudge.

But maybe the man didn’t hate absolutely everything about Sam. And maybe, just maybe, things wouldn’t always have to be horrible between them.

Not if Nick still worried.

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Dean was frowning at them just like a little kid whose parents are going out for the night without him. Telling him to be a good boy while they were gone. “But, I wanna go too.”

“It’s an art gallery,” Castiel tried again to explain why it was that Dean had not been invited to come along with him and Sam.

“Mostly landscapes.” The younger Winchester reminded. “No naked girls.”

Without a glimmer of understanding, Dean just kind of grunted at them, “Then why are you guys even going?”

“Because life can’t always be just naked girls.” Sam rolled his eyes. “We’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Hours?” Dean was openly disgusted by the suggestion.” Hours with a bunch of paintings of trees? You two sure know how to suck the fun right out of a good time.”

Which was a fair point.

But they left any ways.

They left Dean pouting on the couch, and Sam almost felt bad for intentionally not inviting his brother, though he honestly wasn’t even sure why he’d agreed to go along with Castiel in the first place.

He just knew that Dean would have been bored out of his mind, and them leaving him behind was a mercy. For everyone involved.

As it had been explained to him earlier today, apparently the accounting firm that Castiel belonged to also did the books for a few of the little art galleries in town, and one of them had a big show
that was opening tonight.

At first Sam had been confused as to why Cas had invited him to come along. He certainly couldn’t remember ever telling the guy that he had an interest in art- just like he couldn’t remember ever forming much of an interest in art in the first place. But the oddness of the invitation had quickly turned into kind of a warm, affectionate familiarity.

Castiel had extended the invitation like they were friends.

And how things had been going lately, Sam wasn’t about to pass up having a friend.

Cas wouldn’t have necessarily been his first choice. The guy was… he was odd at best. And there were some uncomfortable kinds of moments, little smiles and aborted laughter, when Sam found himself reminded of someone else all together.

Funny how a half brother who wasn’t even raised with Nick could still smile in the same tight lipped, dark humored kind of way. Or how they had the same overly large nervous kind of hands that fidgeted endlessly.

Granted, Cas didn’t pick at his lip, or bite his thumb. He was a bit more subtle in his movements than his big brother. But Sam was stuck in a car with him while they drove downtown, and couldn’t help but feel anxious at the other man’s almost endless fidgeting.

Tugging at the steering wheel cover as he drove.

Clicking his nails together lightly at each red light.

There were signs that something was odd about them going out together, and Sam stubbornly refused to acknowledge them. Mostly out of self preservation. He just wanted something normal. He needed it. Needed to not see a giant conspiracy in the offer of basic human interaction.

The last of his finals had hit a few days ago, breaking up the nice clean rhythm that Sam had built up for himself the past few weeks. Wake up, go to class, do some homework, pointedly not think about the people he wasn’t dating, study, sleep, then repeat- except on Fridays when getting breakfast with June fell between waking up and going to class.

And as strange, and confusing as his time with the kid always seemed to be, even their walks had started to find a way to feel routine and comfortable to him.

Tonight kind of shook things up a bit.

It was healthy for him though.

Probably.

It was certainly different if nothing else.

“How have you been?” Sam broke the not quite comfortable silence of the night darkened car as the houses outside gave way to industrial complexes.

Castiel looked at him sideways, confused little tilt to his head- like he hadn’t been expecting anyone to ask. “Fine.”

Hardly more than a week ago Sam had stood as an unwilling witness to some rather unexpected activities between this man here and Dean. And oddly he still hadn’t come up with a good way to breach the subject. Though, perhaps it was something best left alone. There was very little chance
that any conversation beginning with ‘so have you had sex with my brother yet?’ was going to go in a direction that Sam would enjoy.

Truth be told, he was dreadfully curious about it. Not enough to ask. But so, so very curious now that the shock had worn off. It’s just that Dean had always stuck him as a one hundred percent, heterosexual, womanizing, son of a bitch. Maybe it had all just been years of over compensation.

Sam watched Castiel’s worried hands fretting with the steering wheel again, and made the decision that Dean really could do a lot worse, and there was nothing wrong with just leaving it alone for the time being.

The gallery wasn’t all that far away. In a town this small, nothing was.

Now, Sam liked to think that in comparison to his family members he was the most refined one (not that John or Dean had put up much of a competition for the title), but other than a couple of museum field trips when he was still in grammar school, Sam hadn’t stepped foot in any kind of art gallery in about a decade.

He didn’t know what he’d been expecting to find after so many years.

Not wine.

Strangely, beverages hadn’t been offered to him and his fellow ten year olds when they’d gone to the museum of modern art in Kansas City.

It must just be one of the perks of growing older he supposed.

Castiel nodded towards the tray with the the plastic glasses half full of a pale something or other that didn’t smell like it was going to go down all that smooth. “I’m driving later, but if you would like to…”

“I’m not much of a wine drinker.”

“I don’t think it’s much of a wine.” He picked up one of the glasses, after some narrow eyed consideration, before handing it over to Sam.

If it was anyone else, Sam might have accused him of trying to get him drunk. But this was Castiel, and it was half a glass of watered down wine, and there was nothing too sinister about it.

So he took the glass with a smile, shaking his head, looking at the milling group of people who were probably mostly students. They certainly had that tired, determined look about them as they talked and laughed and looked at the paintings that hung at even intervals around the oddly shaped room. Sam could tell that the space went back much farther than he originally thought, with these little half walls jutting out now and then to provide interruptions to the visitor’s line of sight, making the room seem like many small rooms put together. Odd little halls this way and that, set up so you couldn’t see the back of the building.

And here were the promised landscapes. Lovely tree lines that were oddly soothing to look at. Not exciting, but Sam hadn’t really been hoping to find excitement here. Just a nice mental break.

Cas walked with him and together they did what everyone else was doing. Standing at what seemed the ideal art viewing distance, looking for a while, then nodding and moving on to the next piece. They did this for about five whole minutes before Sam caught on that this was not a one person art show.

He figured it out about the same time that they turned one of the corners and Sam came face to
face with a really beautiful painting of a little boy sitting on a bus seat beside a ThunderCats backpack almost as large as he was, his little narrow back turned to the viewers as he looked out a night dark window, pale face half reflected back in the glass. It was a completely different flavor than the landscapes. Considerably less peaceful, and significantly more like like a stolen glance into a place that Sam should not have gone.

He could have easily moved on to the next few paintings, admiring each of them in turn simply for the obvious skill involved. But no. Sam happened to glance at the little piece of paper to the right of the painting of the little boy to see that it had been titled ‘Because I was too young to argue’, which was followed with a little notation of ‘oil paint on birch board’, and a damning artist name of ‘N. Shurley’.

Sam could actually feel his brain reject that last line of text. Refusing to acknowledge it as anything that should mean something to him.

The next painting was maybe only two feet tall, but probably six or eight feet long. More nighttime, starlight falling on low waves and wet sand. There was the hot glow of a bonfire on the far side, the flames casting long shadows of three gangly figures who were silhouetted in the dark, their arms raised up like they were challenging the sea and the night and anything else that might be foolish enough to dare come against them.

‘Because we were young, and knew everything’ was typed in neat little letters beside it.

Sam rounded a corner, coming to a short stop beside quite a few other people who were standing in quiet awe, dwarfed by the next painting. And he’d actually seen this one before, but the lack of newness didn’t detract from the impressive skill of the painting. Rich, soft looking blankets pooling around softer looking hips. Textures and shadows so careful and precise and clean that Sam wanted to step in closer and tuck her in. To do something to alleviate the oddly anticipatory, and still nervous expression that the girl wore.

This one was called ‘Because she was supposed to go to prom with my brother but he took someone else’. Which was a significantly more specific and personal kind of title than Sam had been expecting.

He swallowed down the last little bit of wine that he’d started working on back when they were still looking at trees, before turning to the man who had brought him here for now painfully obvious reasons. “Cas,” Sam could hear the plea in his own voice and he hated it. “No.”

And the accountant had the audacity to look innocently confused. “What?”

“Your brother painted these.”

For a second it looked like Castiel was actually going to keep up the ignorant act, but then he just kind of sighed and offered Sam a gentle, guiltless smile. “Some of them. Yes.”

“I shouldn’t be here.” Which was a bit of an understatement.

“Well, he’s not here.” Came Castiel’s clearly well thought out argument. “And you needed to see these.”

Sam seemed to have found himself in another one of those situations where nothing good could possibly come from participating. He could practically see the ground rushing up to meet him as he stepped off this particular cliff- but it still didn’t stop him.

Their time together had long since past him up, and Sam had proven that he couldn’t handle the responsibility of knowing anything too personal without using it with some kind of malicious ill
intent. He felt that he had no right to pry Nick open at this late of a point, but he still couldn’t help himself.

Mainly because he really, really wanted to see the rest of the painting- and what was good and right could be damned.

For Sam it was like he’d missed the first half of the movie when he’d met Nick. And yes, it was over now. The credits had rolled, and everyone else had left the theater. But someone had taken the time to reload the reels, and suddenly here, right here, was the beginning.

All those things that Sam had missed the first time around.

And sure, they were only paintings, but they said a lot more about Nick than Nick ever said about himself.

He moved quietly, from painting to painting- there weren’t that many. It wasn’t a whole life’s story here. Just a baker’s dozen of little windows into things that Sam had never been brave enough to ask about, things that were too personal to share, just laid bare for strangers to admire and talk about while they stood with friends and drank cheap wine.

Cas had very little to say about any of them. Nothing at all until Sam stopped and looked for what felt like forever at a painting of a rather young, messy haired, bruised eyed, kid. Sitting on well worn porch steps, holding an orange popsicle awkwardly in hands that were scabbed and scraped. Smiling out at them with a smear of drying blood under his nose and over his split lip.

Sam glanced over at the real thing Castiel. The man was older now. No bruises, and wearing a considerably more subdued smile. But the resemblance was unmistakable.

“How old were you?”

“I was sixteen.” He glanced at Sam and took a sharp breath before practically giving a speech. Stringing more words together at a time than the younger man had ever heard him say. “I’d only just come to live with them… my father and my brothers. I was… strange when I was younger. A new kid in a new school, without any friends, and for some reason this made the other boys hate me. They would follow me home. They did it for weeks- and unfortunately for them, one day Nick was home when I got there.

“And he was almost never around. He had a job, and school, and really hated being anywhere near us it seemed. It was just odd coincidence that he happened to be there when they were pushing me up the sidewalk.” And Castiel smiled, just as big and as crooked as the painting looming over them. “I thought that Nick was going to kill them. I think they thought so too. But all he did was bloody them up a bit and chase them off. Then we sat on the porch… for hours. It was the first time I think that we’d ever really spoken… it was the first time I felt like I belonged there with them, and that this terrifying man who brought me a popsicle, because he didn’t know what else to do to make me feel better, was really my brother.”

And, as stupid as it seemed, Sam wanted to hug Cas. He didn’t. Because the man didn’t sound sad about this event that had happened to him a decade before. Just oddly content to share the knowledge that he had a big brother whom he was rather proud of.

Sam could relate rather strongly to that feeling.

With a shuffling little step, Cas came to stand in front of him. The lack of respect for personal space only slightly setting Sam on edge.

“They let me come in yesterday while they were hanging the pieces.” He explained as he placed a
hand on either of Sam’s shoulders and started steering him, walking him backwards and to one side. “I want you to see this one over here, and I’d like you to explain it to me, because Nick wouldn’t.”

Despite the frown that he could feel forming between his eyes, Sam found himself laughing. At this point in his life he really felt that the one thing that he was not an expert on was Nick. Being asked to explain something, anything, when he was still struggling to untangle the fight that he’d had months ago, there was no way that he was going to be able to-

Cas squared Sam up to a rather small painting. The smallest one he’d seen so far tonight. And for a few horrifying moments Sam was at a complete loss for words, because that right there on the wall, was a painting of him.

He may have been doped up well and good on cough syrup at the time, and his brain fried due to a high fever when Nick had taken the apparently rather inspirational photo with his phone- but that didn’t mean that Sam had forgotten about it.

Just like it didn’t seem to matter all that much that Nick had promised to delete the evidence.

Apparently the man just had a very, very photographic memory.

Which was not fair.

Not fair at all, because now there was a painting of Nick’s rather pale hand fondling Sam’s equally pale ass, the long line of his back with those stupid little dimples, his pants tugged a bit too low, hips settled snugly between Nick’s thighs, hung up on a wall in a gallery for strangers to see.

“I feel like it’s easier to take in if you stand back a bit farther.” Castiel said simply, and Sam was too stunned to say anything in his own defence as the shorter man nudged him back two more steps- which was just far enough that Sam bumped into someone, jarring him into overcoming some of that stricken horror.

He half turned to apologize to the person behind him, but he couldn’t make it that far- because for just a second he caught scent of them, and most of Sam’s higher functions simply quit on the spot.

It’s not like Nick even wore aftershave or cologne or anything like that. It was just the subtle mix of his shampoo, and deodorant, and the scent of his skin had become deeply ingrained in some of the less easily ignored parts of Sam’s mind. The smell of waking up in Nick’s bed, tangled in the messy layers of blankets, sharing a single pillow despite the fact that there were others.

And the memories came unbidden to him, rushing over Sam like feral waves. He could see Nick laying in his arms. Could feel the soft gravel of his low laugh prickling along his skin. He knew the curve of their bodies, and how they could fit together like two perfect circles. The way that Nick would breath against him in that ragged way while dragging his teeth along Sam’s bare skin. How in the mornings he tasted like the coffee that he always had in place of food. The feel of his rough hands pulling at Sam’s clothes. His soft content sighs when they were tucked together late at night after all the lights were out and they’d lost their words to the peaceful draw of sleep.

Those and a million other memories, moving through him like a living thing. All so involuntary and painful, and too fresh to be nostalgic, but too colored with longing to be anything else.

It was all he could do to look down at Castiel with an expression that must have roared betrayal, because the little accountant was shrugging, and mouthing the words ‘I lied’ before letting go and ducking around a corner and out of sight.

“ ‘m sorry.” Nick said easily from behind Sam, really obviously not yet aware who it was that had
bumped into him—who was still standing at his back, with their shoulders and arms touching

And it was almost funny how Sam could tell the exact moment that Nick must have actually
turned around to see who it was. The sharp breath and sharper click of teeth were sign enough.

Sam figured that he could just not turn around. That he could simply march out the front door with
never actually looking back. Running from the situation as a healthy alternative to whatever was
inevitably about to take place.

But he didn’t have a car, and all it would have gotten him was some quiet time standing alone
outside until Cas took pity on him. And seeing as the traitorous little accountant had been the one
to very blatantly facilitate this whole thing, the chances for pity weren’t looking too good.

Bracing himself and drawing a nice deep breath (which oddly didn’t help with the fact that Sam
wanted to just turn and press his face into Nick throat and breath him in), he chose the very adult
option here of saying rather softly, “Just because we’re not dating any more doesn’t mean that you
can show strangers my ass.”

Nick laughed, this choked off, brittle sound.

Between looking at the rather uncomfortable painting and looking over at Nick, Sam stuck firmly
with his first choice, admiring the nice warm colors that had been used to shade his all those
pleasant muscles that he didn’t really know that he’d had, tightly corded along his lower back.

“I mean it.” He said in the least feeling way that he could manage right then.

“Hate to break it to you, dar…” Nick lightly cleared his throat, “Sam. And don’t take this the
wrong way, but I don’t actually give a flying fuck how you feel about this one.”

“Don’t you have to have my permission or something to paint me?”

“What makes you think it’s even you?”

The noise that came out of Sam was supposed to come off as offended and annoyed at the fact
that this man was being just as intentionally as difficult as always. Even to his own ears, it
sounded too much like a startled laugh. Not a happy laugh. But instead something wounded and
panicked. Defensive.

“You’re making jokes?” He struggled to keep his tone even and under control. “You can’t just pin
me naked up on a wall for fucking anybody to see.”

It was a confusing situation to be in, missing someone so much that it hurt, but still managing to
feel betrayed, and at the same time want more than anything to turn to them, pull them in, and kiss
them senseless.

“Really? You want to do this?” The weirdly bitter humor was still strong in Nick’s voice, coming
from just over Sam’s right shoulder, buzzing softly in his ear, raising the hairs on the back of his
neck. “I mean, I can see how you could get so offended. Here’s a painting of an ass that only you
and I know the owner thereof, that literally has no affect on you, or how anyone who looks at it is
going to view you because there is no possible way for any connection to be made between you
and it— but for me, it’s a self portrait. It’s a public announcement that I gleefully indulged in a lot of
sex with another man. It’s my name on it, and it’s my friends and coworkers who have been
asking me about it. But yeah. You go ahead and get all offended. You are very, very good at it
after all.”

Which shut Sam up rather thoroughly.
“No. Go ahead.” Nick insisted, nudging gently at Sam’s shoulder with his own. “I’d love to hear it.”

From where he was standing Sam could just make out the little tag beside the painting.

‘Because I didn’t want to keep pretending that I hadn’t fallen in love’

And how the hell was he supposed to yell at Nick with words like those printed out so crisp and unmistakable? He stood there, mute as a rock, letting all those things that had been whispered against him sink in. Imagining what it would have felt like to go back to Kansas, to stand in front of his old friends that he’d grown up with, whose opinions still mattered on some strange level. To look at his uncle Bobby, or his aunt and cousin, and just boldly say ‘I used to date a guy. We had a lot of sex and fell in love- not necessarily all in that order’.

It was almost paralyzingly terrifying.

Like when he’d told Dean that what his brother had thought was a real relationship had actually been a fake one that had gotten grossly out of hand, and that he’d actually fallen ass over teakettle in love with this wonderful and terrible train wreck of a man.

Sam sidestepped so that he could actually see the Nick from the corner of his eye without fully facing him and feeling too vulnerable. Which was a grossly inadequate gesture, because as it turned out, Nick was wearing one of Sam’s shirts.

At least, Sam was fairly certain that it was his. It looked suspiciously like his favorite shirt that had gone missing months back. That simple fact paired with that he was willing to bet money that Nick didn’t own a single plaid shirt.

And it was such a startling development that Sam hadn’t been prepared for, that he really had no idea which problem to address first.

That was most definitely his ass up there on display.

And that was his shirt.

And Nick smelled really, really good.

Apparently all that careful working through his feelings and learning to cope with and ignore most of them completely fell apart when Nick got close enough to touch.

“How are they taking it?” He heard himself asking in a hollow sounding voice.

“One of my employees actually quit. And now Anna’s not talking to me.”

Sam blinked, turning just a bit more to look at Nick’s face, see if he was being serious. “But she already knew about the whole us ‘dating’."

“She knew we said we were dating, and she thought it was just something I was pretending to do to make Michael mad. You see, she’s an upsettingly observant woman.”

“She thought we were lying?”

“She did.”

“Well, we were.”
“And then we weren't. And she’s... she's not happy with me.”

“It’s not like you did it on purpose.”

“Sure as hell didn’t.” Nick agreed.

“I’m... sorry.” It didn’t feel like the right thing to say. Sorry didn’t quite fill the space of what Sam was currently experiencing, but he couldn’t find the right words, just like he couldn’t help himself but to reach out and brush his fingers over Nick’s stolen sleeve.

The man finally shifted, taking a small step away, moving just out of ‘accidental’ reaching range.

“How was your birthday- aside from the obviously ample amount of liquor?”

It felt wrong that Sam wanted so much to just pretend that he lived in a world where Nick happened to remember what day his birthday fell on. That he could actually be that kind of important to this man- when in all likelihood, Sam had probably announced the fact that he was officially older when he’d talked with Nick during their mysterious conversation a few nights ago.

“I had a lot more to drink than I’d planned. I-I don’t even remember calling you.” Which, considering that he hadn’t started out the night with any kinds of thoughts towards alcohol or Nick, it was a bit of an understatement.

“Some people have all the luck.”

Sam frowned, crossing his arms over his chest, feeling like he was somehow being picked on suddenly- and it wasn’t as fun as it had always been before.

“I mean it. I had to listen to you wax poetic about missing my smile, and laugh, and then I got to listen to you getting worried that I didn’t know how much you missed the sex too. Apparently I have a real nice laugh when I fuck.” One of the greatest skills that Nick had (that Sam had picked up on in the half year that he’d known him), was his amazing ability to deadpan his way through the most ridiculously embarrassing and inappropriate phrases.

Sam’s face felt hot, and he would have traded just about anything to be able to deny what Nick had just told him. To simply shrug it all off as nothing that he would ever consider saying. Only... those words were a staggeringly accurate accompaniment to the warm and unwelcome memories that Sam kept having as he stood here in a crowded room of strangers and tried to stay focused on the fact that he and Nick weren’t really... they... they weren’t really much of anything to each other right now.

He pulled around him the sheltering parts of his brother that he’d internalized over the years as a self defense mechanism. Something to make himself feel safer and more in control of things, if only just a bit. “You’re a real son of a bitch sometimes. You know that?”

“It’s been brought to my attention more than once, yes.”

There was not a good place to rest his eyes. Not on Nick, and certainly not on the painting hanging in front of him. Sam settled on looking to the far side of the room, trying to see where Castiel had run off to. “That’s my shirt you’re wearing by the way.”

Nick chuckled, still standing close enough to allow the sound free range to shiver through Sam.

“First it’s your ass, now it’s your shirt. Anything else you want to claim while you’re here?”

No safe answer to that presented it’s to Sam.
The dull white noise of the two dozen or so people milling around that neither of them knew sort of settled between them. The fact that neither of them was saying anything became more and more obvious until it almost hurt.

Nick broke first though. “Why are you here?” Uncertain, almost gentle voice, like he wasn’t sure if he really wanted the answer.

“Your brother tricked me.” Which was the short version, but Sam felt that it summed it up nicely.

“He’s certainly getting better at it.” Nick observed evenly. “Hey, you think we should pretend to start dating like we did last time he did this?”

It was thrown out there so casually, like a back handed slap. Sam felt his throat get tight and he honestly couldn’t say what sort of emotion it was that he was feeling, only that it was strong. Almost too strong to get any reply past.

“I think I’ll pass this time around, if it’s all the same.”

“Probably a good idea.” Nick said after a halting kind of pause. “But you always were the smart one, weren’t you, college boy?”

Months since he’d heard that particular nickname, and Sam found that his gut reaction to it was best shoved back down from whatever dark corner it had roared up from. Punching Nick right then really wouldn’t have made anything any better.

It probably wouldn’t have made anything any worse though either.

“Why are you still carrying your backpack if you finished school?” June asked as she blew on her hot cocoa. It was the end of May, and in Sam’s opinion, warm enough that they were well and truly past hot beverage season. But June knew what she wanted, and Sam had rapidly learned that it was best not to argue with her.

Sam had his last final almost a week ago (which June found unfair, seeing as she still had three weeks of school). “I’m going to try and sell back the books I don’t need anymore.” He said, adjusting the bag again.

She frowned, like she either didn’t believe him or just didn’t understand why this is something that he would do, but she changed the topic just as fast as she always did instead of questioning his actions. “Since you don’t have school then can you walk me home?”

“Isn’t Cas picking you up?”

“He doesn’t know it’s a half day of school.”

“What about your dad?”

“He’s not allowed to drive- and he doesn’t have a car anyways.”

It was Sam’s turn to frown. It didn’t surprise him that Nick might have lost his license, but that didn’t explain why he suddenly didn’t have a car. “He can’t walk you home?”

She looked up at Sam in that disappointed way that she did so well, like she still, after all these weeks had a hard time accepting just how stupid he could be. “He just got his cast off, he can’t walk that far.”
“How were you planning on getting yourself home if I say no?”

“You’re too nice to say no.”

Which was true, but that didn’t mean that Sam was willing to simply give in without a fight. “How did you tell your dad you were going to get home?”

“I said that I would walk with a friend.” Which was followed by a brilliant smile, leaving little to no doubt who that friend was going to be if she had any say in it.

Sam shook his head and pushed the button for the crosswalk, waiting while the morning traffic moved a few feet away from them. “Your dad’s apartment has to be like… five miles from your school. They make you walk that far?”

June tilted her head in a remarkably good owl impersonation, blinking up at him with almost visible knots being worked out through whatever problem was in her mind. “His apartment…?” She licked her lips before smiling a smile that looked like a real struggle to keep under control. “I walk to uncle Casey's house. It’s not far at all.”

If Cas was giving her rides then it kind of made sense to just go to his place, and suddenly her request seemed ten times less suicidal. “Yeah… I can walk with you.” It’s not like he had other plans later today. And without a chance of accidentally running into Nick, he really couldn’t come up with a good reason to tell her no.

“What have you ever been to Uncle’s house?”

“… no?” Were as he and the other man got along well enough, even after the whole tricking Sam into talking to Nick thing last week, they weren’t really at the point in their relationship where they went to each other’s houses for the sake of going to eachother’s houses

“Great!” She grinned at him over her cocoa.

And if Sam hadn’t been beaten and ground down to a numb mess from his finals, he might have really felt the sinister threat in that small child’s inexplicable joy.

It’s not like it wasn’t disturbingly obvious to Sam that he shouldn’t have let himself get attached to June, or let her get so attached to him. There were all the reasons in the world why it was a bad idea. And there wasn’t even a point of commonality between them. Sam had never in his life been an independent, strong willed little girl, nor did he plan to be at any point. He had very few female friends, and none of them were even close to June’s often reiterated ten years of age. But he liked her. He liked their Fridays, and their slow walks towards her school.

At first, Sam had tried to come up with a good reason why he let himself get involved, and worry for, and laugh with this kid. He knew that he should be just about anywhere else every Friday morning, while he waited for her at the coffee shop with a hot cocoa in hand for her. But once a week, that’s where he was. Sometimes she would link arms with him while they walked. Sometimes she would walk backwards so she could watch his face in an overly intense kind of way while asking him questions about his distant homeland of Kansas, and if he always wanted to be a giant while growing up, and if he was happy now that he could look clouds in the eye.

But as time went on, he found that he loved the way that she rambled, like the world was too big and exciting to focus on any one thought for too long. He also loved how she would talk about her Papa. She made Nick sound so happy and unlike himself.

Sam could easily pretend that it was someone else all together. A wonderful sort of father for the
tiny blonde monster who never stepped on the pavement cracks while they walked. Someone who had let June buy a puppy with the money that her mother had left with her to buy a bus ticket to her grandmother’s house once she’d grown tired of living out here. A kind of dad who was teaching her to play Elvis songs on his violin, because The King deserved some kind of proper homage that she planned to pay him in any way that she could.

Whatever the reason that Sam wasn’t quite willing to acknowledge or accept, he met her after school that afternoon. She ran to him, long hair flying every which way as she wove through the other students towards the man who literally towered over everyone else out on the front sidewalk.

“I was worried that you would change your mind.”

“Hey, I told you I would. So here I am.”

She grinned like a lunatic, all teeth and soft dimples on her freckled cheeks. “You're dependable. I like that.”

Sam shook his head and gestured away from the school in a broad, sweeping motion. “Lead the way and I’ll try to keep up.”

Passing her well worn, and obviously second hand backpack to Sam, she started walking, shrugging out of the blue and grey plaid shirt that she’d been wearing over what looked to be two or three tank tops of varying colors. She knotted the sleeves around her waist looked rather pleased with herself and her shedding of layers. It was one of Sam’s old flannels (apparently he’d left quite a few of them behind at Nick’s place months ago), and she wore it almost every morning that he’d seen her, just kind of swimming in the shirt with her narrow little shoulders and thin arms. It looked almost like a skirt with how she was wearing it now.

“It’s too warm for sleeves,” she explained as she took back her book bag. “But school’s got this stupid dress code that says you can’t have bare shoulders.”

Sam nodded like he understood why this was an important topic, even though it hardly pinged on his radar, because looking down at her he was reminded again that she had a couple of scars similar to her father’s. Little pink burn marks on her arms.

“They’re from the chickenpox.” June offered in a sideways kind of way, taking note that he was taking note.

He almost asked if the long silvery pale scar that ran from her ear down over her shoulder was supposed to be from chickenpox too, but the painfully obvious lie needed to be left alone. It wasn’t anything that he could fix for her. And she was living with her dad now. Safe and sound.

“Did you know that we have an end of the year field trip to your school? I told the teacher that it’s closed, but she said that they still give tours. That’s like the lamest field trip ever. If I wanted to go look at a boring old school then I’d have you take me.” She barreled on to whatever thoughts were running through her mind, hardly waiting for Sam to catch up. “Back in Vegas we had much cooler field trips.”

“Did they take you guys to the casinos and just set you free at the penny slots?”

“I wish.” She giggled. “We did get to go to the zoo this one time and I saw a real bear. They do not look like the stuffed animals.” And so on their conversation went. Bears lead to camping. Camping to scuba diving somehow in a way that Sam couldn’t quite figure out- and that lead to cage diving with sharks off the coast of Africa. By the time they’d reached Cas’ house they were arguing about whether or not giant squid would taste good or not, which was underlined with the
disagreement on if it would even be worth the effort of catching. The rambling kind of conversations wasted time marvelously and Sam was a little sad when he realized that they were done.

June was digging her house key out of her backpack as she lead Sam up the sidewalk to the modest little single story with flower beds of bushy blue flowers. “Do you want a drink of water or anything?”

“I should probably get back home.” Sam excused himself easily enough. Not that anyone was expecting him back soon. Dean would still be at work for a few more hours. It was just that… well, he was already very overly aware that he was overstepping his boundaries of an ex-boyfriend by walking June home. Going into a house with her just felt like a terrible plan for some reason.

“Come on. It’s hot out. You need to stay hydrated.”

It smelled like a trap. Not that Sam was a naturally suspicious kind of guy, but he felt that he knew June just well enough to see that she was up to something.

He went inside anyways.

The house felt almost like the more lived in version of Nick’s place. Castiel owned things. Things other than books and a lumpy couch. Not as much of a minimalist as his brother, but obviously not any more interested in decorating or entertaining. Though, there was a tv, which would have looked normal in anyone else’s house, but just seemed weirdly out of place for Castiel to own. Sam wasn’t going to judge.

Like leading a lamb to be slaughtered, June marched in the direction that one could presumably find a kitchen, with Sam in tow.

“How about a manatee?” She asked over her shoulder as she grabbed a cup and filled it with water from the sink. “They’re called sea cows and look a lot easier to catch than a squid.”

Which was an interesting proposition, though Sam doubted that it would be easy to market manatee burgers. He was just about to let her know when his ankles were suddenly accosted by a small ball of black fur that was snorting and huffing and bouncing around on his toes.

In all likelihood it was a dog. June seemed convinced at least as she handed Sam his glass of water and scooped up the dog that was roughly the same size as Sam’s shoe, maybe a bit smaller.

“This is Meatball.” June gently shook the dog upward in Sam’s direction.

And whereas he’d never been all that interested in pugs, he couldn’t argue that it was possible the cutest little wrinkly furball he’d seen in a long while. “She’s adorable.” He gave his approval while holding a hand out for the little dog to snuffle and lick.

“Papa wanted a bigger dog- but I love her and she’s perfect. Aren’t you?” June burried her face in Meatball’s back while the tiny dog filled the air with happy little snorting noises. “My perfect little princess.”

Sam felt thoroughly weakened by the adorableness of this sight. He’d always wanted a dog, a real dog, not a piglet pretending it was a dog, but still.

“June-bug?” A rather familiar and out of place voice called from down the hall. “You home early?”
Back going ridged, Sam froze in place.

“Yes!” June yelled in the direction of the door.

Why was Nick here? He wasn’t supposed to be here. Specifically Sam had agreed to walk June to Castiel’s house because it had promised to be a Nick free zone. By the unapologetic smile that June was wearing, the fact that the two of them were not alone in this house had not come as a surprise to her.

An almost overwhelming feeling of betrayal came over Sam. They were supposed to be friends (as much as you can be friends with someone who is half your age). “You-”

“I’m such a good helper.” She insisted, holding her dog up before her face like a shield, using the animal to try and hide her wide grin.

“This isn’t helping.” Sam whispered harshly, looking around to see if there was a back door to the kitchen. Some way to slip out so he could avoid the very bad thing that was about to come down the hall and find him where he should not be.

“You’re welcome.” She half curtseyed to him, flicking out the edge of the flannel around her waist like a skirt, before scampering well out of arm’s reach over towards the only way in and out of the kitchen. “I told you it was a half day, Papa.”

“I don’t remember that.” And Nick sounded closer. Sam could actually hear the soft, shuffling walk as the man came down the hall towards them.

“My friend came home with me.” June looked over her shoulder back at Sam with a positively gleeful grin. “Did you want to meet him?”

“Him?” So much threat put into a single word, it was amazing. But then again, Nick had always been a rather talented man when it came to the subtle emphasis that he could put into his words.

And Sam had just a few seconds to brace himself, before Nick came into the room, sliding a protective arm around his daughter’s shoulders as he did, and by the way that he stumbled when he saw Sam standing there in the middle of the kitchen, as obvious as a circus parade, that he was expecting just about anyone else at that moment.

“Oh.” A bit of surprise in his voice that faded far too fast into something dark and fairly menacing. “Oh.”

“This is Mister Sam.” June explained needlessly, from the comfortable looking shelter of her dad’s side. “He’s super nice.”

“June, go to your room.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes.

Nick looked down at her, bending almost in half so that he could say it from her level. “Go.”

“Come on-”

“Go. Go work on your homework. I don’t want you and Meatball seeing me kill Mister Sam, June.”

“It’s Friday. I don’t have homework.”
“Then go practice your violin. Or read a book. You just can’t be in here for a bit.”

“You’re not allowed to be that mad.” She told him very sternly.

“You want to bet?”

“Fine.” She shifted her grip on the happily wiggling dog in her arms. “But don’t kill him. He needs to buy me breakfast again next week.”

Sam rubbed at the headache that was growing steadily between his eyes, marveling at how effortlessly this child could dig such a pretty grave for him.

Both men watched as June slipped past her papa to leave them alone with whatever horrible thing was about to happen between them. And Nick waited. He waited until they could hear a door close down the hall, and a few seconds later the tortured cat sounds of a violin being tuned.

“There’s a really good explanation for this.” Sam tried to start things off first, too keep the higher ground, wanting to get out some clarification before things got any worse.

Nick’s head snapped back to him and the man’s pale eyes narrowed into slits. “Either you knew she was my daughter and you followed her home, and we’re going to have to have some very strong words- or you didn’t know she was mine, and you’re just in the habit of going home with fifth grade girls, and if that’s the case we will have some very different words and then I will actually have to probably kill you.”

Which was fair.

“I tried to call you once, a few months back, right after I found out that you’d been in an accident, and she answered your phone.” It seemed like Sam should have worked out the explanation for this months ago when he realized what a stupid thing he was doing that he we bound to one day have to explain to a very protective father. “She… talked me into going to visit you, and you basically told me to go fuck myself. Week later she pretended to be you and asked me out for breakfast. Apparently she wanted to meet the guy that her uncles kept talking about.”

“And now you walk her home?”

“No. I… I just walk her to school on Fridays.”

Nick stared at him like he’d never seen him before. Like this was some stranger standing here in the kitchen and saying these unwelcome things in his direction.

“What, are you hoping for an apology?” Sam squared himself out, knowing that there was only going to be one way out of this room. “Her and Cas are both in on this together. I know they were.” Blaming someone else was always an option.

For a few seconds it seemed like it was going to work too, if only because Nick hadn’t advanced on him with raised fist.

“She was walking from school after Cas dropped her off to this coffee shop a few blocks down the street. It didn’t seem safe to let her walk alone.”

“You could have, I don’t know... not encouraged her? Maybe told her dad what she was doing?”

“I wasn’t trying to encourage her, and I was pretty sure that if I tried to explain it to you then this right here would happen. It seemed safer all around to just give in and go along with it.”
With a trembling breath, Nick ran a hand over his face, peering out from between his fingers at Sam.

“I’m not doing it on purpose.” The younger man promised. “She said I was walking her to Cas’ house. I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“Castiel and I switched homes after I got out of the hospital.” Nick let his head fall back for a moment. Eyes closed. Collecting himself. “He doesn’t need all this space and I wasn’t up to all the stairs.” The anger was gone just as quickly as it had come. But that was just Nick. Temperament like the sea. Storming one moment and then calm again in the next. He just sounded tired now. Like he wasn’t at all up for this fight.

And Sam for one was happy to let it go. “I wasn’t trying to… to anything. She just sort of talked me into it all. I met her and then the next thing I know I’m buying her hot cocoa and she’s telling me what time I should be there next week.”

“It’s not about June.” He informed the ceiling in a soft, defeated kind of tone. “At least if she’s running off with you I know she’s safe, but… fuck, Sam. You can’t keep doing this to me. First the phone, then the gallery, and now you’re standing in my god damned kitchen telling me that you have a standing breakfast date with my daughter, and all I can seem to think about is…” he trailed off, the adam’s apple in his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard, cutting himself off, letting whatever that idea was die a soft, unfulfilled death.

They’d only been together, as friend or otherwise for a few months, and Sam didn’t even come close to considering himself an expert on how to read this man. Nick wasn’t an open kind of guy. He didn’t even really embrace happy the same way that ‘normal’ people do. It was all reserved smiles and guarded chuckles. You could see the feelings passing through his eyes, and in the slump or the tightness of his shoulders if you knew how to look. But it was only on really good days, in special sharp kinds of moments that he suddenly would open up. Sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and sometimes there was this.

Out of all of Nick’s carefully cultivated and protected feelings, Sam hated this one the most.

Lucky for them both it didn’t last longer than a few seconds before rather visibly, Nick put himself back together though. Rubbing at his face, clearing his throat. Patching up the cracks and shaking himself off, because Sam had lost the right to stand witness to such things, and that hurt in a way that the younger man hadn’t expected it to.

Nick limped carefully across the kitchen to sink down into one of the chairs tucked beneath the table, his bare feet weirdly obvious where they peeked out from the edge of his dark washed jeans. Long toes hugging the linoleum.

Each step had been slow and cautious, like Nick feared to put too much weight down on his right leg, and Sam felt a pang of sympathy.

“How bad is it?”

Rubbing a hand over his mouth, half muffling the first few words, Nick hesitated to answer. “Cast has only been off two days. The doctor thinks I need a cane or something, but the fuck does he know?”

“You weren’t this bad at the gallery the other night.”

“The cast was stronger than my leg apparently. It was easy enough to just balance on.” He slumped in his chair, a shadow of pain passing over his face for a moment. “I was also coming
“I could mean them.”

The man sitting over there at the table was nothing more than a sheep in wolf's clothing. Luckily Sam was smart enough to realize that he’d only dig himself a shallow grave if he suggested such a thing out loud. And again, he felt like he was one of the least qualified people to try and translate the nonverbal cues of this man and his rough, but well contained, emotions. Even still, he couldn’t help but read into the way that Nick was watching him were he was using the counter as an anchor on the far, safe side of the room.

“I could mean them.”
“But you don’t.”

“I think we’ve actually had a few fights, and I do remember winning them.”

“We wrestled on your couch, and you’re ticklish, and I won. Wouldn’t exactly call that ‘you winning’, old man.”

And unless Sam was very mistaken, that was a hint of a smile catching at the edges of Nick’s mouth.

“And I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘wrestling’ or ‘tickling’ but,” he shrugged lightly, “that’s just semantics I guess.”

“Oh my god, Nick.” Sam laughed and the sound was startling to his own ears. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Are you two in love again?” June peeked her round little face in from the hallway. “I heard laughing. You can’t laugh if you’re mad at each other.”

Sam looked away, out the window to a small lawn with overgrown grass that looked like it needed a bit of attention, as he tried to get the funny light feeling fluttering in his chest back under control.

“June-bug,” Nick called his daughter over with a sigh. “Come here.”

“He smells nice and he’s going to learn to make pancakes so we can all eat together in the mornings.” She informed her dad as she came to stand beside him, her little dog dancing in complicated patterns around her feet.

“Who told you about Sam in the first place, because I know I didn’t.”

“Uncle Gabriel.” She rattled the man out so easily. No loyalty at all, and that was kind of nice. “Back when I was living with Mom I’d asked him if you were dating anyone, and he told me you had a beautiful boyfriend. And then I got here and he was just gone, and Gabriel said that you two had to break up because the Judge hates you. Then I asked Uncle Cassy, and he said that Mister Sam was gone because you two had a big fight- but he didn’t know what it was about.”

Sam knew the answer to that one all too well. He could probably have written a term paper on it. Five thousand words about how he couldn’t be trusted to be responsible with other people’s insecurities.

But Nick didn’t say that. He could have. He could have simply stated that Sam just got mean when people brought up his own dad and that he’d taken a quick, thoughtless jab at the biggest fault in Nick- but he didn’t.

Instead, he tucked some of his daughter’s mane of hair behind one of her ears and said simply, “we didn’t have a fight. Your mom had just been real mean to me for a few weeks, and I was having a bunch of bad days, and I realized that I was going to have a lot more bad days for a long time, and that Sam would be better off with someone who could be as nice to him as he deserves.”

“But Uncle Cassy said that Mister Sam and you made each other really happy.” June looked to Sam for backup, but he was trying too hard to figure out what it was that Nick had said to give any kind of legible answer.

“We did.” The man assured her softly. “And maybe we might try to be friends still, but we’re not in love, and he’s not staying for breakfast.” These things were all stated so surely. A nice neat little
list of facts that were as unshakable as the mountains in the East.

It wasn’t great, but Sam was too afraid to ask for anything more. They’d made good friends, he couldn’t argue with that one. And if Nick was offering, then Sam was gladly taking.

Only he didn’t feel good about it. He felt like he’d been kicked. Maybe it was because of the honest open way that Nick talked to his daughter. So straightforward, nothing kept from her. It meant that when he said that they weren’t in love, that they really weren’t.

At least not anymore.

Sam just kind of hoped that his own discordant feelings on the matter would eventually fade from disuse and lack of nurturing. And that probably wasn’t how these things worked, but being in love with someone who obviously didn’t love you back wasn’t going to take him far or to any place good, so from where he stood the original plan that he’d come up with for himself a few months ago was still the best plan.

Because Dean had been right, and Nick had gotten over Sam. It didn’t leave the younger man with many more options other than to try and do the same.

“Will you, Mister Sam?” June asked in a volume not usually used indoors.

It snapped Sam back to himself, enough to realize that he’d sort of checked out for a few moments, during which the conversation had continued on without him.

“Will I what?”

June sighed and looked to her Papa. “Is he always like this?”

Nick’s eyes were soft, a warm kind of blue for the first time in forever as he looked from his offspring over to Sam in an almost apologetic way. “Sam’s got things on his mind. He likes to think a lot. Don’t you?”

“Too much sometimes.” He ran a hand through his hair, finding it a bit too difficult to match Nick’s gaze in that moment.

“Will you come with us to the beach when I’m done with school?” June restated her question with some force behind it. “I mean, you finished school too, so you kind of have to come. It’s tradition.”

Sam looked from her to her dad, at their uncannily similar expressions and realized that even if he wanted to try and say no that it probably wouldn’t stick.

Chapter End Notes

and now I kind of want to add another chapter to the Quiet Things
You won't mind, right?
So fragile and thin

Chapter Notes

look at this terrible gift I have for all of you.

you are welcome

There was no good way to tell Dean that you planned to be taking his car somewhere without him. And really, you had to **tell** him, because if you asked it gave him the chance to say no. Sam’s goal was to avoid that ‘no’ as best as he could. So when he grabbed the keys off the little table beside the door and Dean looked up from where he was sitting on the couch, sucking on his morning coffee, Sam felt the white lie readily forming in the back of his mind.

Ease into it.

“I’m taking the car for a few hours.”

Dean’s blink was slow, but not stupid. He was still fairly tired after pulling a double shift the day before. God only knew why he’d dragged himself downstairs so early in the morning- much to Sam’s disappointment- because his brother being sound asleep would make this all much simpler.

“No.” Came the clear dismissal, and so much for Sam’s goal of getting through this without incident. “I’ve got to rotate the tires later.”

“I was going to drive down to the beach for the day.”

Dean frowned darkly into his mug. “You hate the beach.”

“True, but the girl I’m taking with me is pretty excited about it.” And here is where the lie started. So simple, you’d miss it if you didn’t know where to look.

It worked like a charm. Dean suddenly lighting up like a Polish Church. “Well, alright, Sammy. A girl. Finally.” So much pride and relief and joy, all in one sleepy brother.

“I’ll be back later today.”

“Dude, if the girl’s even marginally attractive, keep her for the night. I’ll worry about the tires tomorrow.”

“You sure?” Sam was trying not to smile.

“How hot are we talking here?”

Sam pretended to consider this question deeply before shrugging. “Very blonde, mess of freckles, big blue eyes, and legs for days. I would say that she’s aggressively cute, at least.”
And the smile Dean wore was well worth it. “Then I’m sure. You’ve got my blessing. Go, and promise me you won’t behave yourself.”

Sam grinned, because it was the response his brother was looking for, and he left the house with the Impala, and only a small amount of guilt because he’d sort of left out the fact that June was only ten and that her father was coming with them, which inevitably would have been a deal breaker from Dean’s side of things.

Some things were best left unsaid though.

Driving down to Nick’s house, wincing at the summer sun that was cutting like a clean razor blade, and regretting his lack of sunglasses, Sam found himself just enough time to start to reevaluate exactly what the hell he was doing with his Friday morning.

Yesterday had been June’s last day of class, and she’d called him on her walk home, asking when he’d be by to pick her for their sojourn up to Santa Cruz.

Sam had made some argument about the fact that he’d only half agreed to go with her, and nowhere at all had he volunteered himself to drive. But Nick didn’t have a car, and June had practically threatened to start crying over the most broken of hearts should Sam back out of their trip now.

So he pulled up into the driveway of Nick’s borrowed house, squinting into the morning light, wondering what the odds were that his ex might have a spare pair of sunglasses laying around.

His ex.

It was the first time that he’d really thought of Nick under that particular category heading. Sure. It had been there in the back of things for a few months now, but even his subconscious had started to make it official.

There weren’t enough seconds for him to really let the title sink in before June plastered herself to the driver’s side window. Her palms smooth and pink, her nose pressed flat.

“Your car is giant.” She informed him, the words fogging white against the glass.

“Hi, June.” Sam smiled and made a mental note to clean the window before bringing the car back to Dean—because his brother would surely have questions about the child prints all over the side of his baby.

“Can me and Meatloaf have the back all to ourselves?”

And the dog hadn’t been part of the original deal. Dean would start considering fratricide if he found out that there had been a dog in his car. But it was a small dog… and Sam was going to have to clean everything before he came back home anyways.

“Sure… you wanna hop off the door so I can open it?”

She grinned against the glass, wolfish and remarkably resembling the impish kind of expression her father used to give, before hopping back. She was already dressed to go. Once more rocking Sam’s old flannel, which he’d given up on ever getting back, a black one piece swimsuit, cut off jean shorts, and some flip flops with little plastic candy skulls on the straps.

Sam lumbered his way out of the car and kept his previous assessment of this kid. Aggressively cute, and nothing less. “Is your Papa ready to go too?”
“... maybe?” She offered with an ambivalent shrug. “He’s kind of slow in the mornings.”

Which was an unnecessary bit of info, because Sam was well aware of what a slow starter Nick could be. They’d spent quite a few slow mornings together in bed. Sam trying to instigate anything good, and Nick slipping back into unconsciousness again every other minute despite the younger man’s best efforts.

They found Nick laying on the couch, a fat little pug sleeping on his chest. The two of them breathing deep rumbling breaths together in a pleasing harmony.

“Pa PA.” June sang as she grabbed her dad’s feet.

Nick snorted softly and opened a single, pale eye while one hand came up to sleepily cover the dog on his chest in an almost protective gesture. “Yeah?”

“It’s time to go. Mister Sam is here.”

That got the second eye open as well and Nick seemed to be forcing the world to come into focus, finding Sam where he’d stayed standing back in the front hallway.”So he is.”

“Have you seen his car, Papa? It’s like a big black Cadillac. Like what the King would drive.”

Nick sat up, letting the sleepy dog on his chest slip down to settle into his lap with a yawn, it’s little tail starting to wag. “It’s a Chevy, and it’s his brother’s. But, yeah. I’ve seen it.”

“It’s pretty.” June reminded him. “And I get the backseat all to myself. Haha.”

“Fantastic.”

“And I’m gunna’ stretch out and enjoy the scenery and you two have to be mooshed together in the front.”

“Fantastic.” Nick repeated with even less enthusiasm. Meatball was set on the floor and immediately began to prance around June, and then Sam. Sniffing at his ankles and making a collection of strange little dog noises. Sam paid an awful lot of attention to that dog instead of watching Nick pull himself up off the couch with a slow, lazy stretch that exposed just a hint of his very lovely hips.

“Do you have a towel, and sunscreen?” He asked June while keeping his eyes very firmly locked on the dog.

“I’ve been ready for weeks.” June scooped up Meatball, and looked rather impatient. “Can we go now?”

“She gets it from your side of the family, you know.” Nick pointed a crooked finger in Sam’s direction, a joking kind of accusation, like a wife would rag on a husband for an unruly child. “Always go, go go. Never, please, or thanks for giving us a ride, Sam. She’s a very impatient child.”

Sam just stood there dumbly, watching Nick go shove his feet into a pair of boots (perfect for a day at the beach, by the way), and grab up his house keys.

“I told him thank you. And please.” June insisted, looking up at the two of them, lingering on Sam for back up. “Right?”

Honestly? No. She said an awful lot of things, and all of them in a rather sweet, but very
demanding kind of way that he didn’t really mind.

“Please can we go now?” June tried. “And thank you, Mister Sam for driving us in your cool car, and for buying me ice cream for lunch, and.”

“What ice cream?” Sam asked with a laugh.

“Oh, you promised us both ice cream.” Nick agreed, nodding along with June’s eager smile.

And Sam was reminded for a second time this morning what kind of trouble he’d agreed to let himself get dragged into. He’d never been able to stand up to Nick for too long, and it always just seemed like a wasted effort to disagree with June.

A day alone with the two of them though?

He couldn’t see a way that this was going to end well for him.

But then again, he liked it.

He liked the trouble. He liked the way that despite her offense at the fact that none of Dean’s cassette tapes were Elvis or Cher, June was ok to settle for some Johnny Cash, and sang along to almost every song during the long drive up the coast. Just as Sam liked the way that Nick was joking with him again. Kind of tentative, certainly not anywhere close to where they used to be, but it was still noticeably there. Like the man was testing the waters. Trying to see if they could find a comfortable place between them that could still be mistaken for friendship. It would be a nice kind of place if they could figure out how to get there.

Nick spent most of the ride slumped in his seat. Arms crossed over his chest, and head back, eyes closed, because it was still a rather cloudless day and he’d given his sunglasses over to Sam who had needed them more as he was the one driving.

“How is it,” Nick rumbled softly, “that the majority of speeders in this country are statistically young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, and that you have a car that supposedly has a max speed of a hundred and twenty miles an hour, and yet you still manage to drive like a little old lady?”

“I do not.”

“What are we doing, ten, twenty miles under the speed limit?” He asked without even glancing at the odometer.

“Are we in a big hurry to get there or something?”

“Yes!” June cheered, and Sam cracked a smile.

“We’ll get there when we get there, geez, you two.” He chuckled and changed over to the leftmost lane to pass a slower car.

“It’s going to be dark by the time we get there.” The edges of Nick’s mouth had crooked up with the taste of a smile.

It would be less than half an hour more and the man had to know it. Not even lunch time yet, but apparently Nick had never gotten tired of teasing Sam.

“Well, then it will be just like old times, won’t it?” He glanced at the passenger seat, trying to gauge the older man’s response. “Just keeping up with the tradition.”
And if Nick’s smile going crooked was any kind of sigh, then it was still a socially acceptable amount of teasing going on. “You going to make it rain for us too?”

Had it rain both times that they’d gone to the beach? Sam couldn’t remember that clearly. “No… but if you like we can go through a car wash on the way home and you can pretend it’s raining.”

“Oh, darlin’, you know all the best ways to have fun. Don’t you?”

And they weren’t allowed to joke around like this if Nick was going to start calling him names. Sam wasn’t ready for name calling yet.

So he got kind of quiet and just listened to June singing Folsom Prison Blues, and tried to figure out how long it would take before Nick calling him ‘darlin’ wouldn’t make his stomach feel like it was crawling with moths.

“Oh my God.” June kicked the back of Sam’s seat. “Do you see it, Mister Sam? Do you see it?”

“See what?” He glanced in the rearview mirror at the child who was smooshing her face against the inside of the window this time around.

“The freaking OCEAN.” She giggled like a lunatic. Like someone who had never seen the ocean before- which, to be fair, she was. “It’s.So.BIG!”

And true enough, through the dunes and the scraggly cypress and pines that were oh so very unique to the coast, there were glimpses of the endless shining Pacific.

“Dude,” her grin was a flash of white in the mirror, “I’m going to pee in it as soon as we get there.”

Sam started laughing so hard his chest hurt. “What?!”

“I’ve got a goal, Mister Sam. I am going to pee in every major body of water on this planet.”

“You…” Sam couldn’t get the words around his laughter. He glanced at Nick for help, but the man’s mouth was a tight line as he fought to keep a straight face. “You must be so proud.”

Nick made a soft clicking sound in the back of his throat and soundlessly mouthed the words ‘I am’, but that seemed as far as he was able to get before he was overcome in a surge of broken chuckles.

Meatball was lifted up so that she could get a good look at the ocean too. “Before I turn thirty.” June kept on like she hadn’t heard them or noticed that both men were not taking this news well at all. “That’s twenty years, and seven seas. Which is roughly one trip every two and a half years.”

“Sure.” Sam couldn’t reign in his snickering.

“Or one now, then two every six years after this, because there are some that are a lot closer together and would be easy to put in the same trip.” She explained like it was just the most natural thing possible.

“You know,” Sam bit his lip. “You dad does weird math like that too.” It was actually really, unsettlingly cute how alike they were.

“Does he?” June rested her chin on the back of Sam’s seat, eager and happy.
Except the only example Sam had was when Nick was figuring out the percentage of times during their fake relationship in which Sam would get to supposedly be on top during all that sex that they weren’t having. And you know, there was no good way to explain that one to the man’s daughter without feeling super uncomfortable.

He glanced to his right for some kind of help out of the corner that he’d backed himself into, but Nick had a hand over his face, his eyes narrow and bright with laughter.

“Yeah. He… he likes percentages, though.”

“He’s real smart.” June agreed. “You know he was going to be an engineer? They know all the best maths.”

“I…” Sam glanced one last time from the road to Nick and back. “I thought you went to school for art.”

“Who goes to Stanford for art?” Nick cleared his throat and bit his lip as he did his utmost to get all that laughter back in check. Adjusting his seat belt in a way that almost belayed some kind of awkwardness. “If that’s what I wanted I would have just stayed in Frisco.”

“But…you’re doing tattoos, and you’re an amazing painter.”

“Yes, and thank you.” He folded his arms back over his chest, settling in and finding a neutral kind of tone. “And it’s what I like doing, so it’s what I’m doing now. I used to like math, but I got over it.”

Sam dug his fingers into the grooves on the back of the steering wheel and tried to process this new information. It didn’t change how he thought about Nick- but it certainly was a strange, new thing to consider.

Young Nick, without his tattoos, wearing his stupid glasses while buried nose deep in engineering textbooks.

Which inevitably lead Sam to thinking about what he would have done if he’d met such a Nick in school. Between then and finding a spot to park a few blocks from the beach, Sam found that he’d run through and assessed just about every scenario in which he could have come across such a strange, younger version of the man beside him. What classes they might have had in common, or how they’d maybe share a table in the library late one night while studying for midterms. Each and every one of these daydreams took very sharp, warm turns and Sam had to keep steering his mind back to safer territories that in no way involved pinning a very blonde, very feisty man of his own age against the tall stands of research books. Kissing Nick while running his fingers over the clean little labels on the spines of the books, pressed together somewhere between six hundred-twenty, and six hundred-twenty nine point two.

Not that Sam has super specific fantasies like that or anything. No. That would be just inappropriate at this point, not to mention irresponsible.

The engine had barely ceased its rumblings and June was popping open the door and dancing out onto the sidewalk, Meatball on a leash at her side, sniffing the sharp salty air and wiggling happily.

Sam joined her, stretching his long legs and smiling, because even if he didn’t really care too much for sunny, summer beach trips- as someone who’d grown up land locked by endless, dirt colored farmland in every direction, he could admit that this was a nice change of scenery.

“You two kids go on ahead.” Nick told them, shouldering his daughter’s beach bag and taking
Meatball’s leash. “We’ll catch up.”

“You sure?” Sam frowned, grabbing at June’s sleeve to slow her down, because she believed in her dad and felt no need to wait for any more permission.

“Yeah. I don’t want to slow you guys down. I’ll be fine.”

His leg.

Sam felt like an idiot. Sure, Nick was stubborn, and good at pretending that he was still just as fine as always. But it was stupid of Sam to forget that the man was still very much recovering from a rather major injury.

“Damn it, Nick. I can drop you guys off up at the Boardwalk and come back out here to park.” Sam felt like an ass.

He waved him off so easily, shaking the leash, letting it jingle. “Nah. We’re already here. I’m good. Go.”

“He said we can go.” June twisted against Sam’s grip. “Come on, come on. I can hear the waves.”

“You going to be able to find us out there with all those people on the beach?” He found himself getting pulled reluctantly down the sidewalk, one concrete square at a time.

“You’re a little too tall to miss, darlin’.” Said the blonde man with a limp, wearing a child’s backpack, and holding the studded leash of a bouncing ball of fur.

Sam figured, if nothing else, he should be able to find Nick in a crowd. So he let June pull him along, towards the non too distant call of sand and surf.

And there, Sam got to stand witness to the wondering awe of this small child’s first real confrontation with the sea. She stood still for the first time since he’d met her. Little flip flops sinking into the hot white sand, taking deep, hungry breaths, and then she broke free of Sam and took off running like a cannon ball.

“June!” Damn it. And she was small enough to get lost in all those happy families enjoying the perfect weather and the perfect beach, and Nick would actually kill Sam if he actually misplaced the man’s only child.

He found her flip flops and discarded flannel in the sand before he found her. She was standing almost hip deep in the foamy water along with about twelve other kids, letting each wave lift her up a few inches as they rolled in around her, laughing wildly each time. Completely fearless.

“Come on in, Mister Sam.” She called to him. “It’s so cold.”

“That’s ok. I’ll wait here for your dad… and guard your shoes.”

“Suit yourself, lame-o.”

“Hey ,”

But June was bouncing and laughing and talking happily to the other kids who had waded out with her, and had no time for Sam to feign offence to her insults.

It was fairly surprising when, about half an hour later, Nick actually found Sam where he’d sat
himself down in the sand. Well, Nick didn’t find him. Meatball did. Jumping and barking and poking at his side with her small, pointed feet. But there was her owner, taut leash in hand as the little dog tugged relentlessly on the end of it.

“Where’s June?” In place of a hello, as the man squinted into the bright white sun reflecting off the water.

Sam pointed to where the girl was crouched low just beyond the reach of the surf, beside two boys near her own age. They were helping her dig a moat to what would soon be a magnificent castle (as June had informed him when he’d questioned why she’d suddenly started bailing sand and water out into the waves).

“Those are boys.” Nick said sharp and slow.

“My, god.” Sam gasped, putting a hand to his heart in mock horror. “You’re right. What will we do?”

“She’s not allowed to know about boys yet.” Her father insisted.

“They are brothers. Nine and twelve years old. Named Sean and Anthony. Their family is from Fresno and I already explained to them that if June left my line of sight I would hunt them down and feed them to the pelicans.” Sam had, as temporary acting guardian, already given the boys a swift once over when June brought them by to introduce them and ask if they could all go off together to build a sand castle.

Nick frowned a little more before carefully lowering himself to the sand beside Sam and scooping up Meatball who was dancing erratically from side to side as she suddenly realized that there were quite a few birds nearby that she could be chasing. “Brothers are the worst kind of trouble.” Which was possibly very true, but Sam let it go, because he was equally fixated on the horribly protective feeling that he had right now, and the way that the young boys were laughing and smiling with June.

“What kind of ass thought it would be a good idea to invent little boys?”

“You do know that we were both little boys at some point, right?”

“Oh, and don’t think for a moment that I don’t know exactly what goes on in their twisted little minds.” He growled. “Depraved monsters.”

“They are building a moat for a sand castle.” Sam eased.

“That better be all they’re building.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know.” Nick turned his head to see Sam, a hint of confusing underlying the grumpiness. “But I’m sticking with the whole ‘boys are evil and she’s too young’ thing.”

“It’s just a castle, Nick.” He soothed. “And if either of them so much as looks at her sideways I’ll help you catch ‘em- you can decide what to do with them after that.”

This offer was considered long and hard before the man finally gave a sharp nod and he passed the pug over to Sam. “Deal.”

Awkwardly juggling the small mammal in his too large hands, Sam wasn’t entirely sure what he
was supposed to be doing with the thing that was curiously sniffing at his stomach and crotch and any other part of him that she could shove her wet, flat nose.

“Sand’s too hot for her feet.” Nick explained as he slowly drew his knees to his chest and folded his arms around his legs, easily reading the flustered look that Sam must have been wearing. “She needs somewhere cool to sit.”

“And that’s my lap?”

“Best seat in the house.” Nick rested his chin on his knees and had his head tilted in a way that he could manage to keep an eye on his daughter and those obviously nefarious young boys who were helping her.

Sam decided that it was best to not acknowledge such a statement, because whatever exchange it might lead to would certainly not do him any favors at this particular junction in his life.

A different approach was what they needed right about now.

“You smell like cigarette smoke.” Sam could remember only too well the oddly sweet smell of clove cigarettes that he would now forever associate to that lovely, brutal conversation that they’d had many months back when he’d come to visit Nick after his accident.

“‘s one of the reasons I let you two go ahead. June doesn’t like it. So I don’t do it around her.”

“But... you don’t smoke.” They’d practically lived together for weeks at a certain point near the end of their relationship. And he knew, he knew that this man had a lot of interesting, and some very bad habits- but smoking simply wasn’t one of them.

Nick was still looking away, Sam could only see the line of his face in broken profile, eyebrow drawing low, edge of his mouth twitching.

“Look, I’m not drinking anymore, and God knows I’m not having sex either. But my hands just start shaking so damn bad sometimes, and my mouth goes dry, and I can’t- I just can’t… I need at least one little addiction that I’m allowed to feel guilty about in my life, or I’m not going to make it.”

Sam took that all in, chewing over the words and the spike of ire dug deep into them.

“I didn’t know that you ever felt guilty for… drinking.” Sam changed his mind at the last second, watching his own step, half panicked at what he’d almost let himself say to this man- and when they’d been getting along so well up until this point too.

Nick still didn’t look over, so Sam was forced to watch the man’s posture shifting, the curl of his shoulders suddenly riding a bit higher. “Sometimes, yeah. But … not with you.”

Sam really wished that he knew whether or not they were actually talking about drinking.

And aside from later in the day, when Nick leaned over to steal a bite of Sam’s ice cream cone (despite the fact that he was literally holding on to one of his very own and had no reason for such open mouthed thievery), nothing else that happened that afternoon really stuck to Sam. Just a warm blur of sun and sand and noise.

At some point he’d stripped out of his jeans and tshirt, to just the swimming trunks he’d wore under his regular clothes, and he’d waded out with June into the waves. He’d made sure she could swim first, then spent about half an hour throwing her out to see while she laughed and screamed.
There was also some lecturing from the little girl to her father when she found out that he hadn’t bothered putting on sunscreen since they’d arrived. She read to him the back of the bottle that said it needed to be reapplied every two hours, then grumpily coated the man’s already pink face, neck and arms with the gooey white stuff. It was a bit hard to tell who the parent and who the kid was in those few minutes. June lecturing on how Nick was far too pale skinned to be outside without sunscreen. He wasn’t tan like her or Sam and he was going to get a sunburn and she wasn’t going to take care of him tomorrow when he was all sore and grumpy.

Nick had laughed through the whole thing, which only made his daughter all that more adamant of the fact that tomorrow she was going out to play with friends and he could just be red and peely and she wasn’t going to feel bad for him. Not one bit.

It wasn’t until after dinner time, when the sunlight was waning, turning golden and rusty where it touched the horizon, as Sam pulled the Impala up into the driveway back in Stanford, that he looked over at Nick and realized that the man really had managed to get himself a truly spectacular sunburn across his nose and cheeks. The thing had taken its time setting in, and by the look of it, it was sure going to hurt like a bitch sooner rather than later.

Sam knew. He used to burn when he was a kid. One good scalding at the beginning of every summer when him and Dean would go out to visit their Uncle Bobby and spend days on end swimming in the nearby lake. But the red would peel away and he’d just soak up the sun until the dirt stains on him were indiscernible from the warm brown he wore across his shoulders and chest.

Nick would not be so lucky.

“Does it hurt?” He asked as he killed the engine.

Sleepily blinking, Nick turned in his seat, giving Sam a confused kind of look. “My leg…?”

“The sunburn- but yeah, your leg too. I mean, you were walking around a lot today, and getting pretty slow by the end.”

Two different answers crossed over the man’s face. Sam could see them both so clearly for only a heartbeat. The grumpy ‘of course it fucking hurts’ that naturally wanted to roll off the man after such a long day that had obviously taken a toll on him.

But what won was the less obvious reply of “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.” Complete with a small smile, oddly rather charmed by the fact that anyone would even bother asking him.

Sometimes it was just nice to know that someone worried.

Meatball made a soft chuffing sound behind them, wanting to be freed from the backseat. Glancing back, Sam realized that June wasn’t going to be helping her little pup any time soon.

The kid had been rather uncharacteristically quiet for the last half hour or so, and apparently it was due to the fact that she’d fallen asleep. Slumped beautifully against the window, with her mouth hanging open just a touch, and her hair windswept and mostly escaping from her long ponytail.

“Aw.” Sam chuckled. “I almost don’t want to wake her up.”

“A ska band standing in the yard wouldn’t be able to wake her up.” Nick said rather affectionately as he undid his seatbelt. “When she’s out, she’s really out.”

“Worse than you?”
Nick bit his lip for a second, catching his smile before it could get away. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘better’ than me. She’s a very skilled child.” He opened his door and kind of hesitated. “Catch the damn dog for me so it doesn’t make a break for it. I’ll carry June in.”

Which sounded like a feasible enough plan- only despite the fact that June couldn’t have weighed ninety pounds even if she’d stuffed her pockets with rolls and rolls of nickels- Nick’s leg almost gave out when he tried to gently lift her.

A rather colourful string of expletives escaped the man and he cradled his daughter to his chest, but pressed his shoulder and head to the side of the car for support.

Without really thinking Sam was there, gently tossing the dog back he’d been holding to his chest into the backseat of the car and taking June from her dad before he dropped her. “Hey, hey. I’ve got her.”

Nick looked a little stunned, arms suddenly empty, bitterly frowning at Sam who was obviously in this moment much more capable than he was.

“Show off.” He grunted and managed to catch Meatball before she could get all four of her fat little legs going at the same time and take off down the street as she seemed so eager to do.

“Can you go get the door, Nick?” Sam eased, trying not to rub in the fact that holding onto June was practically effortless for him.

“Can you go fuck yourself?” Came the surprisingly salty answer as Nick walked rather slowly up the driveway, trying very hard not to favor his leg so much. Lest there be any more open signs of weakness.

Pointlessly stubborn.

And really?

Sam couldn’t think of two better words to describe this man.

“I’ve carried her to bed before without any problems, you know.” He told Sam while juggling his keys and the door and the dog.

“I believe you.”

“Don’t condescend me, you overgrown moose.”

Sam took a measured breath and just waited. Apparently hurt Nick was very much like hurt Dean. Aggressive and defensive, and Sam had done this too many times before to be dumb enough to acknowledge or engage.

The door was finally opened and Sam waited for Nick to go in first before gently asking where June’s room was. All grumpy dad gave in response was something half mumbled that didn’t sound so much like directions as it did a jab at Sam’s hair- which was uncalled for, by the way.

So Sam pulled a face at him, and let his feet take him towards the back parts of the house that he’d never been to. There were only two bedrooms, and he felt some confidence in laying June down in the one with the purple paisley blankets and the Elvis poster. He didn’t bother tucking her in. The house wasn’t cold, and frankly, she was filthy. Sand on her legs and in the folds of her clothes. There was no need to get that in between her sheets.

He lingered in the hall outside her room, peeking into Nick’s, feeling confused to glimpse the
same old worn bedposts that he’d thought he’d seen the last of. Apparently when Nick had switched houses with his brother he’d left all his old furniture behind, except for the bed. And Sam felt a strange curl of happiness to see that bed again. He had good memories of that bed. Of many pleasant hours in that bed.

A rather rough few months had rolled over Sam since February. Some serious, slow passage of time to get him to that exact moment, where he found himself standing in a hallway, feeling sentimental over a bed that he wasn’t going to be allowed to touch any more.

He’d honestly thought that he had been well and truly on his way to getting over Nick (at least as much as he would ever be).

But he’d spent the better part of this afternoon pointedly not watching the other man’s mouth. And sure, maybe the body and mind were both willing, but apparently neither were up to the task. Wanting to stop wanting someone- and actually being able to do it were two vastly different things.

The water from the bathroom tap was cold and a little brassy tasting. Sam splashed a few handfuls of it over his face, feeling the warmth of his own skin. Wishing he could just blame the heat and his addled thoughts on too much time under the sun. He tried convincing himself that he was just fine- but there was a rather large portion of his thoughts devoted to contemplating what sort of outcome he’d likely get if he was brave (or dumb) enough to go back out to the front room, push the other man into a corner and attempt to remap out the lines of his body using his mouth alone.

Nothing good.

Nothing good would happen.

Nick seemed tentatively interested in trying to remain friends, but hadn’t given any indication of any ulterior desires most darkly. Not like what Sam was feeling.

It didn’t have to be as complicated as Sam was making it though.

What was wrong with being friends?

The two of them had made frighteningly good friends from the night they’d met and the moment they’d realised that they would probably both always be at the petty and sometimes well meaning whims of their brothers.

They weren’t made for each other, or anything nearly so ridiculous. But there were definitely some well worn grooves in both of them that fit each other rather nicely.

Sam dried his hands on one of the towels and smiled at himself in the mirror over the sink. It was a good smile. So good he almost believed it himself.

Now. Most importantly, Nick hadn’t kicked him out yet. That was a good place to start. Also, the man was hurting and sore and feeling a bit defensive about all the above. So, Sam needed to do what a friend would do to try and help him out.

But what would a friend do?

Same thing as a boyfriend would- Sam decided- only with a hundred percent less kissing.

He found Nick in the kitchen, chest and shoulders pulled tight with his arms hooked over the back of the chair he was sprawled in. He almost looked at ease. He would have made a perfect picture
if it weren’t for his rosey sunburn and the pinch of pain lingering between his eyebrows.

“I’m making coffee, and ordering pizza.” Sam announced and placed two rather different bottles onto the table. One small brown prescription bottle half filled with little white pills. The other a tall clear plastic one filled with almost lime green colored aloe vera.

“Coffee… and pizza?” Nick opened an eye, disturbed at the offered combination, but then he caught sight of what Sam had set out for him. “Now you’re going through my medicine cabinet?”

“Someone has to take care of you, and June’s sleeping right now.” He pointed out as he got water for the coffee pot that lived on the counter. Sure, it was said with some authority, but it was all for show. Sam was bluffing. Expecting any moment for Nick to just tell him to get lost.

Instead, the man popped open the smaller bottle and fished out a single little pill, tossing it back and rubbing a hand over his mouth. “What kind of pizza?”

“The kind that delivers?”

“Fair enough.” His pale eyes tracked Sam from the other side of the room, slow, almost lazy flickers. “Just make sure you order enough for June to have some tomorrow.”

“…not tonight?”

“She sleeps like she means it.” Nick got a hint of a smile, just a thin little matchstick flash of white teeth. “I’m worried one day the house might catch fire and we’ll both just sleep through it.”

Sam chuckled.

“’s why I let her get the dog. Figured that Meatball could do the Lassie thing if we needed it. You know, wake us up, save the day.”

Sam looked off down the hall to see that the little pug had gone to sleep at the foot of June’s bed, little feet twitching now and then as she dreamed. That was not the kind of dog that was liable to save anyone.

The coffee maker begged for his attention, making it strange percolating noises.

“Where are the mugs?”

Nick pointed and Sam set about making them both their own drinks just how they liked them.

“That’s the real problem.” The man took the offered mug, cradling it gently between his hands. “It’s hard to get rid of someone when you know they know how just how you take your coffee.”

You don’t have to get rid of me. Sam thought a little too desperately, but he hoped that his outer calm stayed a bit better intact.

He couldn’t think of anything good to say in return, so he busied himself with digging out his cell phone and ordering them two pizzas. Which killed off about three minutes of time all together, and left him with the promise of half an hour standing awkwardly in this kitchen waiting for the delivery man to come knocking.

With a sharp hiss, Nick put down his mug. “God, even the steam hurts.”

Sam latched onto the complaint as a welcome distraction. “Put some aloe on, you stubborn old
goat.”

“First off, do I look like the kind of man that would buy, much less use anything called aloe? And second, I’m fine.”

Whether Nick had bought it, or if it was by the grace of his oddly protective daughter, or simply a relic left over from when Castiel lived here- Sam had found the aloe- and it was going to get used.

He set his own mug beside the sink and came over. In an easy movement he took hold of Nick’s wrist with one hand, and with the other he slapped a painfully white handprint into that fresh, red sunburn on the man’s forearm.

Nick choked, biting back some rather interesting words as he struggled to pull away. “God damn it. Why?” Demanded through his teeth in a half whimper.

“Because you’re hurt and you’re not winning any masculinity points by pretending you’re not.”

“Fuck masculinity points.” Nick wrenched his arm away and blew on it as if that could somehow help. “That’s not even a thing.”

Sam popped open the aloe bottle and grabbed at Nick’s arm again- and not surprisingly the man fought him this time. With some luck and no small amount of coordination, Sam managed to squirt a liberal amount of the goo onto the cheerfully red burn somewhere south of the man’s elbow, and almost immediately he stopped fighting.

With a shaking sigh, Nick managed a small “oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” Sam repeated in a way that was half mocking, half tender. “Some nice pharmacist made this stuff just for occasions like this- and it’d be a real shame to waste it.”

His eyes had drifted half close in a blissful, hardly appropriate kind of way. “They made it for when stubborn bastards don’t remember to reapply their sunscreen even after they’ve been told to?”

“So you’re a bit senile and forgetful in your old age.” Sam made sure to evenly coat the man’s whole arm, even his hand, in a snail slime slick coating of aloe before moving on to the next one. “But lucky for you, forgetful means you won’t remember to feel stupid about this later.”

“I would say that I’m looking forward to it, but I guess by your logic, I’ll forget to do that too?”

“Almost definitely.” He assured and tried not to think about the way that his hands slid so familiarly over the curve of Nick’s bicep.

If it was at all weird to the other man, he didn’t say anything. Nick just sat there, unflinching as he watched Sam work so carefully over his burnt skin, not even bothering to keep up some kind of self defense against the teasing.

But there was only so long that Sam could pet this man’s arms before they’d absorbed as much aloe as they were going to. “Look up.” He instructed with more authority than he felt.

Reluctantly, Nick tilted chin towards Sam. “I don’t want that garbage on my face.”

“Is your face burned?”

“... yes.” His nose wrinkled and it made him wince. “But I-”
Sam placed his aloe slick hands on the man’s cheeks and gently rubbed his thumbs down over the bridge of his sunburned nose. Taking his job very seriously, because he was afraid what he might let himself do if he didn’t give himself fully to the task at hand.

This is what friends do though.

They take care of each other.

And Sam was strong.

And Nick was stubborn.

“But it’s my face.” Came the muffled protest.

“Does it feel better?” Sam asked as he smoothed his fingertips up over Nick’s high forehead.

“That’s not the point.”

“It’s exactly the point.” He got more aloe on his hands and carefully slid his them down Nick’s throat while the man glared up at him. “I’m not sure where your ancestors came from, but it wasn’t a place that got a lot of sun light.”

“I’ve never had a good relationship with the sun.” He admitted as Sam finished off aloeing him with a careful swipe to the back of his neck.

Sam went to the sink and rinsed the slick residue off his hands. “Not to start shit, especially since things have been going so… ok- but have you ever had a good relationship with… with anything?”

“Define ‘good’.”

Which made Sam look back over his shoulder, as it wasn’t the almost too comfortable answer that he was expecting to get. “Uh, healthy I guess.”

“Healthy?” Nick laughed as sharp and as bright as broken glass. “Never even considered giving it a try.”

“I-” Sam caught himself, not really sure where he was going. Not sure if he was going to be brave enough. But this was just Nick. Just a friend of his. Someone he knew better than most people. Someone he used to be very relaxed with. “How did you do it?”

Arms hooked back over the back of his chair again, strange angle as he looked over his shoulder to where Sam was just standing there with the tap still running. The lines of his face had gone easy, relaxed, either the aloe was really that welcome, or the pain killer had started to kick in.

“How did I what?”

“Oh, but that was a completely blank and uncomprehending expression being directed at him.

Sam turned off the water and dried his hands on his jeans, buying himself a little extra time while he wondered why in God’s name he’d decided to bring this up now. But it was bothering him just how effortless this all was for the other man. Driving him crazy in fact. How could it be so easy for Nick when it had taken Sam months to chase himself in a circle and find himself exactly where he’d been back in February.
“It.” He tried to put more emphasis on the word, but realized how stupid he must sound. How like a needy, little kid who was wanting reassurance, and advice and pats on the head. But this was Nick, he reminded himself. Just Nick. And despite the many things that Nick was not- he’d always been fairly honest when asked direct questions. Uncomfortably honest. And that’s exactly what Sam wanted right now.

Because you don’t always want nice things.

Sometimes you want to hear someone tell you that they never really loved you in the first place- not that it wouldn’t hurt like a son of a bitch to hear it- but it would make things easier in the long run.

And good lord, but was he really this insecure that now he didn’t trust either of them?

He crossed his arms over his chest, but that didn’t feel right, and he ended up running his hands through his hair instead.

Maybe he was this insecure. Maybe it was because he’d never had a healthy relationship with anyone either, and it would be almost reassuring to know that what had happened between him and Nick could still fit comfortably into that little column and that their relationship had never had a chance of working out the way he wanted it to anyways. That he hadn’t somehow fucked up a good thing. That there was no ‘good thing’ for him to fuck up in the first place.

And it would be nice to hear someone else say it. To give some confirmation to all this fantastically horrible neurosis that he’d been fighting off for so long.

“Everything.” He tried to elaborate and felt like an idiot. “How did you just get over us?”

That cleared a bit of the haze from Nick’s eyes and he cultivated a frown. “Us?”

“Damn it, Nick. Me. How did you get over me so fucking easily? Because I could really use some advice here on how to do the same.”

Startled, Nick laughed again, that tight, brittle sound that he did so well.

“Never mind.” That horrible clenching in his gut hadn’t eased and all Sam felt was worse. “I’ll… I’ll catch up I guess. It’s just still awkward for me right now.”

With a long, shaking breath Nick sat up a bit straighter in his chair. “I got over you?”

But Sam didn’t hear the question in it. All he heard was a factual statement. One that he didn’t really needed reiterated. Because he needed the how, not the what. He already knew that part.

Because it gave his hands something to do, Sam picked up his coffee. Didn’t drink any of it, but he held it. Shifted the handle from side to side rather anxiously.

“All that college, and you’re still this stupid?” Nick choked on his laugh this time, the sound of it rather painful. “You should ask for your money back.”

“Sympathy isn’t an emotion you do well, is it?”

“Fucking-” Nick ran his hands through his hair and made a face as his still slightly aloe slick hands made a mess of things. “Did you know that Gabriel hasn’t spoken to me in months?”

Which was a fun fact, but Sam honestly couldn’t see what that had to do with anything going on right now.
“You’re supposed to ask me why, darlin’.”

“Can you… can you just not call me that?”

The tip of Nick’s tongue flicked over his upper lip in a way that wasn’t the least bit distracting to the other man in the room.

“Fine.”

The kitchen got really quiet and Sam realized that it was supposed to be his turn to say something.

“W-why isn’t your brother talking to you?” Not that Sam cared. He was too caught up in the fact that he’d only wanted a simple answer and here he was being hauled up on dry land and left struggling to learn how to breathe. But according to the clock next to the fridge there was still about ten minutes until the pizza guy was supposed to arrive, and words filled the time as well as anything.

“Well, obviously it’s because of how well I got over that whole dating you thing. Just a little casual fling that didn’t mean shit.” He waved a dismissive hand in Sam’s direction. “You were just another little notch in my belt and my brother is just damn pleased with how well I’m handling just everything so damn well.”

And Sam wasn’t that low. Wasn’t so broken as to not hear the self mockery in the man’s words. He didn’t mean them. Not all of them at least. “You seem like you’re doing ok.”

“Pfft. I’m the picture of mental health. I’m not going through withdrawls bad enough that I’ve got to see a doctor for them. Or having to take the bus everywhere because I wrecked my bike, and sold my car so I could by my own fucking kid which apparently I’ve had joint custody over for years but my family communally decided that I couldn’t be trusted with the responsibility so they just never told me.” He made just the barest hint of eye contact before dropping his gaze to the table which seemed more agreeable. “I’m not pinning like a lovesick anorexic over the only person I ever fell in love with who I can’t even figure out how to talk to anymore. My brother who can’t even hear the word balls without laughing his ass off has officially written me off as a lost cause. So, yeah. I’m great. Let me just sit here and give you advice on how to be as fan-fucking-tastic as I am, darlin’.”

If Sam held the mug any tighter he was going to break it. He set it on the counter where it might be a bit safer. After all, it wasn’t his mug and it would just be mean to go into another man’s house and break his crockery. “Well congrats, Nick. I’m glad you’re doing ok.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“And I was being intentionally difficult because I don’t know what else to say.” He found himself very interested in the patterns on the floor tiles. “You’ve got a lot of crap going on in your life right now and here I am, whining at you about how my feelings got hurt.” He felt like such a little kid right now. And maybe Dean had something with the whole not talking about feeling because it obviously didn’t do anyone any favors. “I guess I needed a little perspective.” Needed to pull his head out of his ass because maybe this wasn’t all about him and he’d do well to remember it once in a while.

“Perspective.” Nick snorted softly. “My leg’s still killing me, Sam. Go- go to the front room and grab my violin case for me.”

A blindsiding kind of request that came from seemingly nowhere.
“Uh… not that I don’t still have wet dreams about the last time that you played for me- but now’s kind of a weird time for a musical interlude.”

Nick cracked a smile. “Just got get the damn violin case for me.”

And from the night that they’d met, Sam had found it almost impossible to tell this man no. So of course he went and got the violin case.

With surprisingly adept fingers, Nick popped open the little copper clasps and lifted out the gorgeous instrument. But he didn’t play. Didn’t even pluck the strings. Just set it oh so gently down onto the table and then set about pulling up the velvet lining around the inside of the case.

“See now, back when I was in the hospital, right before they let me out, Cassy went through all my things to make sure I didn’t have anything too exciting squirreled away for later. The kid knows all my best hiding places though and he found this.” Nick pulled out a flashy little something from the hollowed out violin neck support. He set whatever it was down on the table with a solid sound- and despite how long the younger man stared at it, he couldn’t make it make sense.

“There’s your perspective, Sam.”

Apparently they were making perspective in the shape of gold rings these days.

“This is why Castiel’s been trying to shove you at me- and this is why Gabriel won’t fucking talk to me. This is how well I ‘get over’ people.”

No one made a move to stop him, so Sam lifted up the ring. It was small and cold and heavy. It was just a ring, but it made everything make that much more sense.

He felt like he finally understood Nick.

Sam understood why such a stupid fight over practically nothing had been enough for them to simply not be dating anymore. They’d certainly never had any official end to it. They’d just stopped.

And Sam got it.

“You still have your wedding ring.”

The only person Nick had ever really been in love with. Sure. Obviously. Guy falls for a girl back when they’re in highschool. Never really gets over her no matter how much hell she drags him through.

“My wedding ring?”

Sam put it back on the table. It wasn’t his. He shouldn’t be touching it.

“My god. What the fuck is wrong with you and Cassy? Just assuming that I’m somehow that fucked up.” Nick let his head fall back as he groaned. “I threw my wedding ring into the Pacific about ten years ago. Gabriel was with me. We made a whole night of it. He still sends me an anniversary card every year in memoriam.” He sat up a bit straighter, jaw set as he took a turn holding the ring, rolling it between his fingers. “This one I bought just a few months back.”

However, Sam’s brain chose that moment to shut down, and all he had was a whole lot of nothing.
“I’d help you hide a body.” Nick read softly. Little words etched into the inside curve of the ring—and Sam just had to believe him, because from the few safe feet back that he was standing all he could make out where the barest of scratches in the otherwise smooth finish.

“Do you remember that?” He didn’t look up. “We were both sick— and you told me that you loved me. Not enough to help me hide a body, but you wouldn’t call the cops on me either. And I know you were just joking around, but damn it, if it wasn’t the single sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me.” He bit his lip. “I- I don’t know. It seemed like the right thing to put- but you should have seen the jeweler’s face when I asked him to engrave that on the inside.”

“Nick… I don’t.”

“I can’t tell you how to get over anything because I don’t know how. But you’ll get there soon enough on your own. I believe in you. You’re a smart kid. Then you can set me down and explain how to me, because I’d love to know.”

The pizza man chose that moment to finally show up. Knocking at the door like an unwelcome wake up alarm. Sam shook his head at Nick— not that it meant a damn thing. Not a yes. Not a no. Not a ‘I have any idea what you’re getting at because I still have some level of self preservation left at this point’.

It was just a ‘give me a second’.

He just needed a second.

So he went and paid for the pizzas, passing a couple twenties to the kid on the porch with an forced cheerful ‘thank you’. Then he got to stand there with his back to the door, holding two very warm boxes and trying not to have some kind of cataclysmic break down because it suddenly dawned on him for whom Nick had bought that ring.

Emotions came and went, faster than a riptide— and Sam felt almost nauseous by the time he settled on something solid and tactile that he could work with. A nice clear emotion that didn’t make him feel muddled or confused.

He tossed the pizzas down onto the counter, and turned to this man who had caused him so much grief.

“I thought about it— and you know what? Fuck you, you giant jerk.”

A flash of confusion bloomed over Nick’s face, and then the man was suddenly grinning up at him. “There we go. I was wondering when you were going to get mad at me.” An almost eager laugh. “All these soft, sweet, tender feelings scare me shitless. But mad I know how to handle.”

“You lied.” Sam felt white hot. Like this was the biggest insult that he could manage.

“I would never lie to you, Sam.” So smooth and sincere, and Nick could go to hell for all Sam cared.

“You- you told June you didn’t love me.” Which, if it had been said in any other tone of voice would have sounded weak, injured. But for now it was just self righteous and indignant.

“Really? That’s what you’re going to lead with?” And Nick rolled his eyes. “Have you never actually had a fight before?”

“You lied to her.”
He groaned again, obviously not taking Sam’s open anger seriously. “I try not to on principle- but it’s what she needed to hear right then.”

“Why?” He bit off the word.

“Because she’s too damn young to understand that some people just aren’t meant to be together. That it doesn’t matter if I’m still ass over tit in love with you, because it was never going to work.”

“I’m not too young.” Sam came to stand over him. “So go ahead, Nick. Why won’t it work? I’d love to hear this. Tell me. Tell me why I have to go to bed at night by myself. Tell me why you haven’t kissed me in months. Tell me why you’d buy me a ring but never ask me a question. Because I honestly can’t think of a single good reason why you’re doing this to either of us.”

“It’s because you are young, Sam. You’re young and you’re stupid- and I know this because I was young and stupid, and time only fixed one of those problems for me.”

Oddly, these were not comforting or endearing words. “I’m not stupid.”

“Yes, you are. You think you’re in love with me, but- but it’s just a crush, Sam. And all crushes feel like love, right up until the point that you get over them. And I can tell you from experience, you will get over it.”

Which was probably not meant to be even half as insulting as it sounded. “What, so you get to be in love. But not me. I’m just confused and don’t know any better?”

“Yes.” And more than anything, Nick just sounded relieved that Sam was finally starting to understand. “My God. Why would you ever want to be in love with someone like me in the first place? You could do so much better. How do you not see that? Because I sure as hell do. Everyone does. And don’t get me wrong, I was fully prepared to scrape my sorry ass off whatever curb you were going to kick me to once you realised it too- but I’ve got June to worry about now.” He ran a hand over his mouth, shaking his head. “She was asking me last night if I thought you’d mind her calling you Uncle, instead of Mister. She’s gone through enough shit in her life without having to get herself emotionally attached to the perfect man, only to have him leave her to start a real family with some nice, intelligent, attractive little college girl whose perfect for him.”

It was too ridiculous to make sense. “At least this fictional woman I’m leaving you for gets to be good looking?”

“Well she wouldn’t be some scruffy, scarred, old man, with an alcohol problem, that’s for sure.”

Sam pressed his thumb to the headache he could feel starting at his temple. “Are you really telling me that we broke up because you decided that I was going to break up with you at some distant future point- and you wanted to just get a jump on it?”

Nick sucked on his teeth. Soft distracted kind of noise as he visibly got his thoughts back in order.

Sure, Sam was reeling. So mad his hands were shaking. But Nick was doing a rather admirable job in keeping his calm. Like he’d been waiting for this argument for forever and was almost relieved to just get it out.

It’s damn hard to argue with someone like that.

But he was going to try.

“You don’t get to decide these things, Nick. Just because we had one little fight- which I
apologized for doesn’t mean that I changed my mind about you. People have fights. They disagree. They say stupid things. It’s normal. What’s not normal is taking a few stupid words said in a stupid moment and making a giant life choice around them.”

“Someone says ‘I love you’ so you marry them. Someone says ‘I don’t’ so you don’t. It’s actually very human to make giant life choices around people saying stupid things that they don’t mean.”

“I never said ‘I don’t’.” Sam bristled in his own defense. “I said… I said you’d make a terrible father- which I didn’t mean, and obviously I was wrong about. So please just let it go already.”

“It’s not about that. Coming back from the church- you didn’t say a damn thing to me that my brothers haven’t been telling me for years. I was mad, sure, and I left to go lick my wounds. But it wasn’t anything new.” Nick used his good leg to push himself away from the table. The wooden chair legs making clattering sounds as he moved to more fully face Sam. “But then I drove my bike halfway through a minivan, and it gave me time to think… I had a lot of time to think. And maybe I lied to June about still being in love with you, because she’d too young to understand that I’m protecting her. And I’m protecting you.”

“Protecting-” Sam repeated the word. It meant nothing to him. Nothing at all. “What the hell were you protecting me from?”

“From all the fucking stupid shit I’m going to put you through. That I put everyone through. I’m a train wreck. I’m a miserable son of a bitch and you deserve someone who's good to you.”

“You were good to me.”

“I was never even half as good as you deserved and you know it.” Nick managed to sound so very bitter. Openly hating whatever part of him he was letting out right now. “Somewhere in the back of that big brain of yours, you know it. And sooner or later you’ll just-” Nick made these odd little starburst movements with his hands, tight fists and then splaying his fingers wide.

“You selfish-” Sam huffed sharply. “You can’t just-” this little heart to heart had done nothing at all to make him any less angry at this situation. His breaths coming out of him shallow and furious. “Of all the stupid, fucking miserable- I don’t know if I want to kiss you or punch you in the fucking face at this point.”

Nick leaned back in his chair, arms wide open, defenceless. Saying with his expression alone ‘take your best shot, I’m right here’. It wasn’t an offer that Sam was prepared to pass up. In a rush of anger fueled adrenaline, he caught Nick by the front of his shirt, dragging him halfway up out of his chair and kissed him roughly. Forcefully. Like he intended to leave an imprint behind that Nick would never be able to erase. He kissed him like a goodbye. He kissed hard enough to leave bruises- and Nick didn’t so much as flinch.

Sam let go, trembling, standing up straight and trying to catch his breath. He looked down at Nick. At the man just sprawled in his chair with a utterly stunned expression.

“I… thought you were going to kissed back.” Sam confessed uneasily, marveling at how badly he’d managed to overstep himself.

“I thought you were going to punch me.” Nick raised a hand to his mouth, lightly touching his lip before looking at his fingers like he half expected to see blood.

Sam fought down this wild, panicked, tearing laughter that he felt rising up in his chest. He wanted to say something, but Nick was touching his mouth again. Tongue flicking out to catch
whatever taste Sam had left behind. Distracting and derailing as all hell.

“Well… this is a bit awkward then. Isn’t it?” He asked, more a question for himself than for the man looming over him like a storm.

“Yeah.” Sam couldn’t help but touch his own mouth too. Wondering what it was that Nick was feeling for. Curious if he would be able to find it any easier. “I, uh- I have a suggestion though… if I may-” he sort of let the proposition linger between them.

Nick gave a vague ‘go ahead’ gesture, reminiscent of the one he’d given less than a minute before. An arm open like he was ushering in whatever stupid idea that Sam might have- because it had already come apart rather spectacularly. This was simultaneously the weakest and the most infuriating fight ever had by two men.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world though (because in that moment, for Sam it was. It was the only thing that he wanted), he grabbed Nick again. With one hand on either side of his jaw, he held Nick in place and kissed him. Tasted him. Bit at his mouth until the other man groaned and finally pressed back against him.

His mouth fit against Sam’s, opened fast and deep because evidently Nick did not fuck around when it came to fucking around. Tongue sweeping into the younger man’s mouth as he pulled him down and held him there with long fingers threaded through Sam’s hair, tugging at him almost desperately. He tasted like salt, like the sea, like coffee and corruption and the bitterness of his damned cold heart.

He tried to stand, to come up out of his chair, but Sam wouldn’t let him. Sinking to the floor between the man’s knees, his own hands catching at the back of Nick’s shirt, his fingers fitting into the trenches of his spine.anchoring him. Holding him. Holding him because he hadn’t been allowed to in months and part of him knew that the chance might be taken back away from him as quickly as it had been offered.

It wasn’t a rising kind of passion between them. It didn’t build. It just exploded into existence. It was as tangible as a third person in the room. There and upon them and violent and abrupt- just as present as it had been absent for so long.

An almost painful contrast, and Sam found himself half sobbing with relief as Nick broke their kiss to bury his face in Sam’s throat, tongue soothing in long lines, tracing over all the dents that his teeth were leaving.

Pizza and coffee were long forgotten in favor of just the pure pleasure of getting to reacquaint themselves with the other’s body. Nick’s warm chuckles as Sam’s hands slid up under his shirt to those ticklish spots over his hips. The way that the older man would grin viciously every time that Sam bit his lip. Nick pulling Sam’s hair to turn him towards better, deeper angles that were of benefit to their frantic kisses.

Sam loved this man. Loved him so much it hurt. So much it made him stupid- but none of that was here right now. It was all surface stuff. Just carnal and physical and god, but he’d missed being touched. And Nick had always been very, very good at touching him.

He found himself swearing rather uselessly when Nick caught his hands, dragging them away from his belt, rather forcibly holding them further south, closer to his knees.

“No.” The older man said in an almost believable tone, breath trembling out of him in short bursts.

Sam looked up from where he’d mouthed a wet spot on Nick’s shoulder. Perfect little crescent
from his teeth dark against the fabric of his tshirt. There must have been something of all that perfect abandon on his face because whatever else Nick was going to say to him devolved into a poorly enunciated “fuck me.” Not a request so much as a general statement of how very screwed up this whole thing was.

His thumbnails slid so easily up the inner seam of Nick’s jeans, coasting along the line of muscle underneath. “No?”

“Please don’t make me try and be the voice of reason here.” He begged as one of Sam’s thumb nails clattered down over his zipper.

“Why the hell not?”

“Because friends who fuck isn’t going to work for us.” His eyes were dark with lust as he fought to find logic in his own request. It was a visible struggle. “I- I can’t disassociate that well, and you fucking can’t either.”

There wasn’t enough blood in Sam for him to think clearly and to be as hard as he was. And all he could manage to do was shake his head but it wasn’t an answer and it sure as hell wasn’t an agreement.

“I’m an all or nothing kind of guy.” The words were halting, pained.

“Then it’s All.” There wasn’t anything to consider here. He’d made up his mind months ago. “I want All.”

“I can’t, Sam.” Nick whispered. A confession. A secret. “I’ll lose myself in you and when you leave I won’t- I can’t.”

Sam got this hooking sensation in his stomach, his throat suddenly thick. He couldn’t look at Nick anymore, staring at the center of his chest instead. “I’m not leaving.” He squeezed the man’s hips because that just so happened to be where his hands had drifted to. “Do you see me trying to leave?”

“You already did once.”

Which struck him like a slap, bringing Sam a little more clearly to the here and now. “You told me to.”

“And… and I’m doing it again.” Nick’s hands left his wrist where they’d been rather useless, sliding slowly up Sam’s arms, catching his elbows, pushing so gently. Not at all like he meant it. It was a feeble attempt at self defense.

So insincere, but still so present that it hurt to see.

Sam felt staggeringly stupid, almost willfully blind— that it had taken him this long to really read the cracks in this man, to see how deep the faults ran. Irreparable down to his foundations. And there wasn’t going to be a way to patch him back up. Nick had been left and let down too many times over for Sam to say anything that was going to be believed.

He’d come to this party years too late. He’d missed last call. Missed it by a long shot.

Stunned, he sat back on his heels. Catching his breath. Reigning his mind back into some kind of order. He’d been kneeling up until that point, keeping his height around that of Nick sitting. But he didn’t need that now. Tugging his wallet from a back pocket, Sam fished out a small piece of
paper with slightly curled corners, the edges worn soft from having ridden around in his wallet for so long.

“I’m cashing this in.” He said almost defiantly, handing it up to Nick for inspection.

The man’s eyes went a little wide as he took the handmade coupon that he’d given Sam for Christmas. “I- this isn’t really the right time to use this.”

“It specifically says it has no expiration date.”

“Sam-”

“I’m not saying sex.” Although that’s what the bit of paper promised, illustrated with little stick figures and all. And it was besides the fact that despite Sam’s best attempts, his body hadn’t fully switched gears yet and sex still sounded absolutely amazing, thank you. “I just want to stay the night.”

“Shouldn’t… shouldn’t you be getting your brother’s car back to him?” Looking for any excuse, and it wasn’t like Nick. Not this way. He was backing himself into a corner and it made Sam want to just scoop the man up and hug him.

“I told him that I was taking a cute blonde to the beach. Dean told me to stay out all night with his blessing.”

“Of course he did.” Nick said in such a pained way.

“Give me one night… Nothing special.” He made promises he didn’t want to keep. “I’ll even let you pick the movie.”

Nick sagged, a beaten look to him. “Are you enjoying this? Is it fun for you?”

“Not in the slightest.” He’d never been more honest in his life.

“You’re- you’re not laying in my bed like that… just so you know. I wasn’t going to say anything, but you taste like salt and sand- and I just washed my blankets.” The walls were going back up, and Sam recognized this as the man that he’d pretended to date for months. So carefully guarded in all the worst ways. Joking and rough in the oddest of places because apparently that was somehow better than being open.

“I’ll take a shower.” He promised, pulling himself up to his feet, needing to use the table for support.

Nick was still holding that folded little bit of paper, watching Sam move like he’d never seen the likes of it before. Alien and mistrusting. “You can borrow some sweats… top drawer of my dresser.”

“I know.” And Sam wished that he didn’t.

But he did.

He knew exactly where to go get a change of clothes because he’d seen Nick do it so many times over. And he took a shower, hating that the soft blue towels smelled just like he remembered they would.

What was he doing here?
He stood watching his dark outline in the fogged up mirror as he shook water from his hair. His skin scrubbed free of any lingering hint of the day that he’d had. And he knew in the pit of his stomach that he should just leave like he’d been asked to. Like he’d been told to. If he cared at all about whatever flimsy supports that Nick had built up around himself in an effort to keep his footing- then Sam would be in his own home right now. Probably sharing a drink with his brother or something equally as stupid and useless to this very messed up situation.

But Sam was treading water here and not yet willing to give up and simply sink down into the darkness.

He found Nick simply sitting on the edge of his bed. Apparently having abandoned the kitchen after eating a few slices of pizza and then tossing the boxes into the almost otherwise empty fridge. It was a slow and hesitant hunt and it ended with Sam just standing there in the doorway to the room, feeling too stupidly big for his skin. Awkward and half dressed in just the borrowed pants.

Glancing up from the tablet cradled in his lap, Nick’s gaze danced over Sam’s face, then down over his bare chest. He smiled like a mask, the expression not quite reaching his eyes.

“You do know that lawyers aren’t supposed to be built like you are- right? They’ll take one look at you and flunk you on the BAR exams on principle.”

“You know… you’ve told me that before.” The words clumsy in his mouth. “But I think it’ll work as a good intimidation tactic in the courtroom.”

“Is it really ethical for a lawyer to take his shirt off during his closing statements?”

“I don’t think there are any rules against it.”

The smile became a bit more genuine, even if just for a few seconds.

“So, uh- what are we watching?”

“We’re watching you and me make complete asses out of ourselves.”

“Oh… but I’ve already seen that one.” Sam sighed with some manufactured disappointment. “Recently, in fact.”

Nick chuckled, his feet kicking back and forth almost idly as he set the tablet aside, the screen dark. “You make me a complete mess. You know that?”

“I have it under some authority that you were this way long before I got to you.” Sam took a tentative step into the room. Not at all sure of the stability of the ground he was walking on.

Nick watched him. Unnamable things passing through those eyes of his that were still far too dark to trust. “Come here.”

Which sounded like a trap if Sam had ever heard one. “I-”

“If you’re staying then turn out the light, close the door and get the fuck over here, Sam Winchester.”

Sam did as he was told, mostly because he couldn't think of a good reason not to. Nick was just there, watching him. Waiting expectantly. And for someone who’d just shot him down with so much painstaking care, there was far too much leniency going on right now.

It was the nature of their relationship though.
Sam had never really knowing if he was coming or going. Right side up, or tumbling down, down, down.

Nick held a hand out to him like a peace offering- or a consolation prize. Just a warm shadow in the dark of the room, hardly discernable in the faint starlight that was creeping through the crack in the curtains. And Sam reached for it. There wasn’t any other alternative left in him.

Then Nick was using it as a lever, steering Sam with the weight around his wrist. Pulling him down to the bed. Pushing him. Crawling over him, a knee slotting between Sam’s as Nick kissed him. None of the urgency from the kitchen. Just slow. So painfully slow, with one of his hands cupping the side of Sam’s neck, feeling the pulse of the younger man thundering beneath his skin.

They didn’t have sex.

After all, Sam had made some kind of sideways promise that he wouldn’t try for it. That it’s not why he wanted to stay. But they kissed like they hadn’t in any recent memory, and every time that Sam tried to say something Nick would shift against him, startlingly rough friction where the sharp edge of his hip would grind down against Sam, causing the younger man to gasp and forget his words. Every single damn time. It was a dirty tactic- but really, they’d both run through the gammat of everything that they’d had left to say earlier, back in the kitchen. Anything Sam had now was either just a tired argument, or something that Nick simply wasn’t going to allow him to give voice to.

And they stayed like that. Laying wrong way across the bed, both of them with their legs half dangling off the mattress and so much wasted space because they’d tangled themselves together instead of risking spreading out. Kissing and touching in place of talking- but in time they ran out of that too. Tired and probably a little bruised.

Nick was this solid, comfortable weight against Sam’s chest. And a hand that was still kind of cold, skin clammy despite the fact that it was early summer (and hot enough that Sam could feel the sweat pooling in the hollow of his throat), was tangled in his hair.

With his eyes closed, Sam kissed the man’s wrist where it rested along the side of his face. He listened in the darkness to the sound of Nick’s breaths slowly even out. He waited until the last possible second, to the point that Nick must have been teetering on the brink of sleep, surely too tired to cut him off.

“I love you.” He whispered, and even that was far too loud in the otherwise silent room. “You know that, right?”

“Sam, don’t.” Nick mumbled into his chest.

The words crawling against his bare skin, making him shiver despite the heat. “No. You have to say it.”

The man grunted defiantly as he held onto Sam a little more solidly, curling against his side.

“You told me you wouldn’t ever lie to me.” Sam spoke with his mouth still against Nick’s wrist, feeling those raised, new scars pressed against his lips. “So, I love you. And you know that. Right?”

“I know you think you do.”

Sam bit him, very gently.

His fingers tightened in Sam’s hair. “I know you do.” Nick admitted reluctantly.
The younger man didn’t have the heart to make Nick return that dreaded, three word confession. He probably could have. Could have coerced one last ‘I love you’ out of his friend. But he didn’t. He just listened in the darkness, to the gentle sound of Nick falling asleep- and that was good enough.
I'll shove all my little love notes to you guys right here so that when you get to the end of the story you can just settle into it without my interruptions. I want to say so much, but really? It all just kind of breaks down to 'thank you'. Thanks for the support and the comments, and for sharing this fandom with me. It's a good ship that we sail, my friends, and I would never want to go it without you. It's been over a year since I started this story, which is horrifying and really exciting to me, because really? this is novel length. Which sort of gives me the courage to pick back up some 'real' stories that I've had on my back burners for a while because I honestly just didn't think that I had it in me to work on something of that scale.

Along those lines, I'm taking a real break this time, and working on some of those other projects. But expect to see me back in a few months with another chapter for the 'Those Quiet Things' to serve as kind of an epilogue, and then possibly two more stories for this 'verse. One of young Nick and Gabe, and another that's the Destiel side of the whole equation. And then, and then... I've already got like... 3 other Samifer stories started (because I need an intervention), so those will be popping up sometime in the next year or so.

And again, just so many thank yous. I'm an introvert of the highest caliber, so I rarely say things directly to you guys, and I apologize for that. But, hey. I honestly don't feel all that deserving of all the love I get from you guys so it's hard to find the words to reciprocate. Thanks. Thanks for everything. Thanks for the concern from one particular lovely in Russia when my sate caught on fire last summer. Thanks for all the birthday wishes all those months back. Thanks for the good vibes in my direction when my kitty almost died. Thanks for the fan art and the anonymous love letters on tumblr and just everything. It means so much more to me than you probably realize.

Sam came awake like he’d been hit. Eyes going wide as he flinched away, curling up to protect himself from whatever his unconscious mind had decided to perceive as enough of a threat that he needed to not be sleeping. It was almost pitch black in a room that felt very wrong for that fact that it was not his. The bed was wrong. The feel of the blankets were wrong. The way that his legs were dangling off into space, half numb from sleeping so long at such a strange angle. And he was half panicked because he had no idea where the hell he was in those first few seconds. No idea what had woken him. Just that none of this was right.

Slowly, as his eyes adjusted to the pale slash of early morning light that had managed to wedge itself in between the curtains, and he recognized bits and pieces of his surroundings, he felt his
He was at Nick’s house. This was Nick’s bed. Nick’s pillow half under Sam’s head. Nick’s blankets tossed haphazardly over him. And it was Nick that was not there beside him.

Just Sam’s cell phone in all that empty space.

It’s what had woken him up, and just like it wanted to prove a point, the text message alert went off again, same jarring sound turned up to maximum volume, that had startled him only a few seconds before.

And Sam had fallen asleep with a bristly man over on his side. Not his phone. He was just awake enough to realize that this didn’t bode well. Not after everything that they’d said last night.

Uneasily, Sam picked up the phone as it went off for a third time, feeling the bottom of his stomach dropping out.

He read the texts, mouth slowly forming out the words that his brain was refusing to recognize as English and therefore something that he should understand.

Sleep was rubbed from his eyes, and Sam sat up, taking a shaking breath, and reading all those words a second time through without much more luck.

Not willing to acknowledge how he was shaking, Sam set the phone down and ran his hands over his face, up into his hair.

It didn’t matter that he’d always been a bit of a morning person, because the clock beside the bed said it wasn’t even seven AM yet- it was just the simple fact that Sam had given his heart away, to a complete self sabotaging jackass and coward, was still a hard pill to swallow regardless of the time of day.

He probably spent about half an hour just sitting there, the blood pooling in his legs as they woke with pins and needles, and his head slowly cleared. Cleared enough for him to go from startled, to worried, to sick to his stomach with pain that had no right to manifest so physically, then angry, and finally just settling somewhere in this perfect sea of calm.

He got dressed, stealing a pair of Nick’s jeans and the man’s favorite t-shirt. If Nick was going to kick him out via text message then he was going to have to be prepared to lose a few important things.

Fully clothed, he felt vaguely more prepared to do what needed to be done, and he was pleased to see that the shaking had left his hands by the time he came back to his phone.

Baby steps.

He could do this.

Just one thing at a time.

Livingroom first, to check under the couch where he knew that Nick liked to hide things. It took a bit of digging, but he found what he was looking for, then he pulled out his phone and got into his recent call history and hit redial. Pressing his phone to his ear, he padded lightly to the kitchen, pulling down the little orange post it note on the table that Nick had left for his daughter.

- had to go to work for a few hours- pizza in the fridge- take dog on walk before tv- love you-

Nick’s very deliberate handwriting, leaving a much more tender goodbye than Sam had received.
The phone stopped ringing after what felt like an eternity. “Dean, hey, sorry to wake you but-”

“He’s still sleeping.” Castiel said in a rather slow and tired voice, rougher than normal.

Sam looked at his phone like he’d never seen one before. “Hi?”

“Do you want me to wake him?”

“Cas... why are you answering Dean’s phone?”

“Your brother found out that I’ve never seen a movie called The Good, The Bad and The Ugly.” The man yawned. “We stayed up very late watching it because apparently he did not want to be held accountable for perpetuating such a crime.”

“And you stayed the night…” It wasn’t a question, he just needed to say it outloud because it didn’t make sense just bouncing around in his head.

Another yawn. “Yes.” So easy- like there was nothing at all strange about this.

“Cas-” Dean’s voice came faintly over the receiver. “Who’s that?”

“Your brother.” An answer that was followed by some scrambling and a few harsh words.

“Hey,” Dean cleared his throat as he reclaimed his phone. “Uh… good morning I guess? What the hell time is it?”

“Almost eight.”

“The fuck is so important that you’re waking me up on my day off at eight in the- my baby? Is she ok? I swear to god, I only let you take her because you needed to get laid and-”

“The car’s fine.” He didn’t know if he should be relieved at the rapid return to normalcy, or offended that Dean thought that Sam could possibly be dumb enough to let something happen to the Impala. “I um… I need to know how to make pancakes.”

Which stopped Dean right in his tracks. A few moments of silence as his big brother’s sleep addled brain caught up, then just warm chuckling. “Sammy, you dog. Making her breakfast and everything. Ok. Ok, here’s what you’re going to need-”

:::

It wasn’t like Sam had never had a fight. Throwing down with Dean happened every few months since they’d hit puberty. It was simply part of their life. They’d rub each other wrong, someone would say something stupid, and one of them would take an inevitably well deserved swing at the other. It didn’t really matter who started it, because it always ended the same way.

When it was all over, no matter what else, they were still brothers.

Nothing else that happened could possibly change that.

They would always be brothers.

Fighting With Nick couldn’t guarantee the same kind of permanence once they got to the other end of things.

The two of them simply didn’t have the same kind of history to promise anything even half as
dependable.

Last night Sam had doubted himself. Maybe he knew how to argue. He knew how to fight. But doing it with Nick had been horrifying in a unique new way. Sam had done the best he could, but honestly? He knew that he’d misstepped. Left out a word. Missed some cue. Knew it as clearly as he knew that he’d woken up alone.

That was last night though.

And this morning his mind was clear enough to remember that in reality he hadn’t had anything to lose for quite some time now. So really, holding back and watching what he said was just a waste of time.

Even still, when he found himself standing outside of the tattoo shop, that flutter of hesitation came back.

The little neon sign in the front window was dark. The door was locked. There were no cars on the street other than one in the fifteen minute parking outside the coffee shop next door. Too early on a Saturday morning for anyone to be out yet. Well, almost.

Sam was still out here- though he seemed to be the only one. He rapped his knuckles against the glass door but didn’t see any stir of movement in the dark shadowy insides of the shop. And it was always possible that Nick could be hiding somewhere in the far back, recognizing Sam’s silhouette pressed between sunlight and tinted glass. But after a few minutes of just standing out there on the sidewalk that was already too hot for so early in the morning, Sam considered the fact that he was an ass for coming here. Lying to himself in a blind kind of hope.

What exactly had he hoped to achieve?

If they talked then they would have just ended up saying all the same things that they’d said last night. Maybe they would have even tried some variation if the mood struck them. But it wouldn’t change anything

Wouldn’t change the fact that Nick didn’t want this.

Not Sam per se.

He’d made it quite clear that he was still interested in the younger man on multiple levels (some of which were a little more physical than emotional). Nick just didn’t want the apparently imminent, unavoidable end to their relationship that he seemed so convinced was looming on the horizon.

Which was a little too pessimistic in Sam’s opinion. But then again, that was just sort of Nick in a nutshell.

With a sudden and rather stunning streak of stupidity, Sam pulled out his phone and called the man who’d obviously lied in the note to his daughter about where he was headed this morning. And as surprising as it may have been, Nick didn’t answer. Acting almost like a rational adult, Sam did not then throw his phone, or yell at it or anything.

He did stand there, leaning up against a closed tattoo shop, with the sharp edge of his cell phone pressed to his forehead while he tried to rack his brain for the next great plan that he could throw himself headlong into.

Not willing to just give up (because it would only give some credence to Nick’s dismal outlook on things between them- which was something that Sam flatly refused to do), he tried giving Castiel a call.
And unlike his miserable brother, the accountant actually answered.

“Hello again, Sam.” Just as cheerful as he’d been an hour ago. Apparently he was a morning person.

“Hey, uh-”

“Did she like the pancakes?” Castiel asked almost eagerly.

“I’m not as good a cook as Dean, but June didn’t complain.” The memory of the overly enthusiastic breakfast they’d shared coaxed a little smile out of Sam. “But I didn’t call about the pancakes, Cas. I… if your brother was going to suddenly have some kind of emotional panic attack and then run away… where would he go?”

For a few fragile breaths, Castiel didn’t say anything. Then came a muffled, “excuse me for a moment. I need to speak with your brother privately.” Which was followed by some disbelieving laughter from Dean and some kind of half heard reply, then Cas was back with a measured sigh and an almost accusatory, “You two are such an unbelievable mess.”

“It’s not my fault this time.” Sam closed his eyes. “If I had any say in this we’d still be in bed kissing.”

“Yes?”

“We had fight last night. A real one, with yelling and everything.”

“And then you ended up in bed kissing?” Castiel honestly sounded baffled as to how one could lead to the other.

“It happens sometimes.” It was weird enough talking to another person about this, the fact that he was standing on an empty stretch of sidewalk didn’t make it any less strange. “Just… he was gone when I woke up, and now I can’t find him. He didn’t go to work like he’d told June and I need to talk to him, Cas. Please. Do you know where he might have gone?”

“Sam,” Castiel simply sounded pained now, like he was fighting back a terrible headache. “I would love nothing more than to see my brother happy for once- but I can’t in good conscious let you keep doing this to yourself. You’re a very nice person. You should consider saving yourself before he drags you down with him.”

With a bitter kind of laugh Sam just shook his head, not even caring that the other man couldn’t see it. “He bought me a ring, Cas… like, a wedding ring… and I really just… I just need to talk to him.”

It got kind of quiet, and he had to look at his phone to make sure that the call hadn’t been dropped. The little counter in the corner was still going, even if no one was talking.

Someone came out of the coffee shop next door and got into the only car on the street. They drove off and then Sam got to enjoy another stretch of silence that seemed to go on forever.

“Did you tell him no?” Castiel’s rough voice was fairly jarring after such a pause.

“He didn’t ask.” Sam swallowed kind of thickly. “Just told me what a mistake it was to have even tried. Said he didn’t want to give me a chance to change my mind about him. Said that he wished we’d never been introduced, and could I please not come around any more.” Which was a brutal paraphrasing of the text that he’d received this morning, and it oddly hadn’t been any easier to
hear himself say out loud than it had been to read.

The sound that came down the phone line was half a comfort that you’d give an injured child, and half a rather blasphemous kind of curse directed towards someone who wasn’t there to appreciate the weight it had coming from Castiel. The feeling passed, or was shoved down into whatever pit that the man kept all the brewing frustration that he must have for his brothers, and he huffed before asking, “would you have told him no?”

The street was empty other than Sam, leaning against a darkened storefront, awkward, but he’d been awkward all his life and it was nothing new.

The tshirt he’d stolen that morning was a little tight though the shoulders. There were keys and a wallet jammed rather tightly together in his front pocket, because all the others had holes in them. And then there was the rather poignant weight of a ring on finger that had never worn jewelry before.

He turned his face up to the cloudless sky, blinking a little too fast. “If he’d actually asked me instead of just telling me how stupid we both are for even considering… I- I don’t… no. I wouldn’t have told him no.”

Wouldn’t have necessarily said yes either. But it’s not like he’d been given a chance. Just kind of blindsided by an offer more like a half remembered dream, and not an actual, tangible thing that was ever meant for him to touch or keep. No options here. Just a whole lot of no one getting to be happy because apparently that’s where they were going to end up anyways and why not just cut out the middle man?

“Has he always been like this?” Which sounded like such a simple question, except what Sam was really asking was, is there any chance he’s going to change?

“As long as I’ve known him he’s been a miserable, self sabotaging ass-butt who honestly seems terrified of anything that could possibly be mistaken for happiness-” Castiel caught himself and sounded almost guilty as he added on, “except for this past New Years through the end of February. Sam… let me call around for you. I will see if I can’t find where he’s gone.”

“Thanks, Cas.” And he meant it.

Coming here had been a weak plan to begin with. Finding the shop closed had sort of thwarted all his good intentions. It was almost comforting to know that he still had some backup out there. Moral support if nothing else.

With a sigh so deep that it hurt his chest, Sam let his feet carry him to the coffee shop. Maybe something to drink would help to ease those chocolate chip pancakes that suddenly weren’t setting so well with him.

He’d been in here a handful of times since November (though he hadn’t had a reason to come by for a few months now). It didn’t look any different than he remembered, except for the girl behind the counter. She was new, which was probably for the best because she couldn’t link Sam to the grumpy faced man who owned the place next door.

“What?”
She shrugged and got out a paper cup, filling it with hot water. “You just have that ‘woke up on the wrong side of… someone’s bed’ look to you.”

His smile felt a little tight. Normally baristas weren’t so… accusatory before they’d even said hello. And it’s not like he was offended, just a little disappointed that it was so noticeable to even a complete stranger. “That obvious?”

With another grin she tossed two tea bags into his cup and snapped a lid into place. “Must just have been a full moon or something last night. Everyone who’s come in this morning looks worse for the wear.” She nodded to the little patio that they had out through the side door, two little tables and a handful of mismatched chairs, and one lonely looking man. “One of our regulars. He came stumbling in an hour ago. Four coffees and I think half a pack of cigarettes so far. I don’t think he’s hung over, but he’s definitely in it in a bad way.” Little sympathetic sigh. “I don’t have the heart to tell him he can’t smoke out there, but once we get start getting the morning crowd in I’m going to have to tell him off.”

Remotely, Sam was aware of her words, but just kind of on the peripheral of things, because the man out there smoking was unmistakably Nick. The familiar slump of his shoulders and the way that his hair was a little extra messed up on one side, like he’d spent the night with his head on someone’s chest.

“Here you go…”

Sam blinked and looked back at the girl behind the counter who had probably been trying to hand him his tea for a little while now. “Thanks… uh, does he seem angry, or just upset?”

“Who?” She cocked her head, but then seemed to notice Sam’s gaze flicking back out through the windows. “Oh, don’t worry about him. He’s a lot nicer than he looks. Really sweet guy. He won’t give me any trouble.”

Which threw Sam off for a second, until he realized that she thought he meant that Nick might be difficult to kick out when other more civilized customers started showing up.

“I… I know. I’m actually a friend of his. Came out here to see him, but he wasn’t next door.”

Her thumbs hooked on the front of her apron as she considered Sam. “Maybe you can go try to cheer him up? I hate seeing him like this, but all I can really do is keep refilling his coffee.”

Sam tried not to laugh. He would have bet money on his currently inability to cheer Nick up, but telling this nice girl as much wasn’t going to help. “I’ll see what I can do?”

This offer pleased her and she grinned up at him once more. “Just a second. Here, take these.”

And two blueberry muffins went onto a plate that she passed over the counter to him. “On the house.”

And muffins seemed like fairly insubstantial armor to Sam, but it was still better than going out empty handed.

With grim determination, he nudged open the patio door and the lingering scent of coffee was replaced with the sharp, honey warm smell of clove cigarettes.

“I know, I know I’m a big dumb jerk.” Nick was telling his phone in a rather defeated kind of way. He was pitched forward, practically face down in his coffee, a thin trail of smoke curling from the corners of his mouth. “But I’m also your big brother, and you don’t get to tell me what I should and shouldn’t be doing, Cassy… No… no… look, you know that I love you, but kindly get
bent.” And he tossed the phone down onto the metal table top with jarring clatter.

“Maybe no one told you,” Sam started, hardly more than a whisper, and Nick’s head whipped up so fast he must have hurt something. “But California state laws actually prohibit smoking in and around all public buildings.”

Smoke trailed from Nick’s nose, and Sam couldn’t help himself from thinking that the man looked like a cartoon bull snorting steam. It was the only hint of any kind of emotion on the man’s face. So very blank otherwise.

“It’s considered a health hazard.” Sam added as he set the offering of muffins down beside Nick’s elbow. “Secondhand smoke and all.”

The man slowly raised the long black cigarette to his lips and took a drag. The fine tremor in his hand only gave him away a touch as he ran two fingers over his lower lip. Quiet nervous lines of his body that’d never been all that good at hiding.

“That’s my shirt.”

“They’re your pants too.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed and he took another drag, the cigarette pinched between his thumb and first finger. “Why?” The question crawled from his mouth like a living thing.

“Because my clothes are still sandy from the beach yesterday, and coming here naked seemed a little too forward.”

“That’s dirty pool,” Nick’s tongue flicked out for a second and a familiar heat crept into his lingering gaze, “so... you’re not planning on letting me get out of this with any kind of dignity intact, are you?”

Doing his best to ignore the way that his brain seemed so very focused on the way that they’d returned so easily to their same positions as the night before. Nick all guarded and sitting while Sam had the higher ground and not a damn idea of what to do with it. “Did you really think I was going to let you dump me via text message?”

The cigarette got put out into Nick’s mostly empty coffee cup with a sharp hiss. “Would you mind, I don’t know, maybe not standing over me so… mouth level? It’s really hard to pay attention to what you’re saying.”

Sam smiled, but it felt tight.

He pulled out a chair and set himself down, but it felt like a dare. “I don’t accept your break up.”

“First off, we broke up back at the end of February, you’re way past the time frame for an appeal. Second, it’s not a proposition. You don’t get to ‘yes’ or ‘no’ here, darlin’.”

“There was never anything official.” Sam argued, not entirely sure if they were at a point of negotiations or what was happening, but they were talking and it was better than not. But at the same time, he actually had no idea what to say now, so he picked up his tea and took a sip. “You weren’t at work.”

Nick was looking at Sam’s hands, curled around the cardboard cup, dwarfing it so easily. “I had planned to get some work done… but I was in such a hurry to leave this morning, I forgot my keys.”
There was a small effort, not to laugh, really, Sam did try. He just failed.

Then Nick reached out and touched his fingers so lightly to Sam’s and whatever laughter that had started coming from the younger man stumbled into a whimper and he hated himself for it.

“What the hell are you trying to do to me?” Nick didn’t sound all that much better, ragged kind of whisper as his thumb nail caught on the edge of the ring that Sam had stolen that morning.

“I thought it completed the outfit.” He squared his shoulders as best as he could because whatever higher ground that he’d come in here with had eroded quickly. “You don’t think so?”

“It’s not yours.”

Sam leaned in a little, as defiant as he could get without begging. “Anything I’m wearing that belongs to you, you’re welcome to take off me.”

In a seemingly unconscious gesture, Nick ran his thumb slowly along the edge of the thin, gold band. “I told you last night. We’re not doing that anymore.”

“Now my memory seems a bit foggy, but did you decide that before or after you pushed me down on your bed and kissed me on the mouth?”

Something almost like a smile passed over Nick’s face. “You’re not making this easy for me.”

“Good. I didn’t want to.”

Nick’s hand fell away and he leaned back in his chair, turning his face and chest to the sun, closing his eyes. “This wasn’t ever going to work. It wasn’t supposed to, Sam. We literally planned for it to fall apart from the first day we met. Why can’t you just let it go?”

“Because I love you.”

With a curl of his lip Nick grunted at Sam’s confession and seemed otherwise fairly unimpressed.

“Because you’re my friend and I’d miss your big dumb face.”

“Friend?” Nick’s teeth flashed for a second. “We’re practically strangers, darlin’.”

As much as it pained him, Sam really couldn’t argue, mainly because he knew that any objection he had would be shot down so easily because that’s simply the mood that Nick was in.

They had only started spending time together in the first place because they wanted to breakup and make their brother’s regret ever introducing them. It actually was a little hard to argue with when Sam thought about it that way.

“You know what?” If there was a worse reason to form a friendship with someone, he couldn’t think of it. “You’re right.”

Nick snorted out an almost laugh, but refused to open his eyes. Leaving himself spread out, open like an offering to the sky, like he hoped that the sun would just finish burning him up.

“We started this whole thing off on the wrong foot.” Sam stood and that got the other man’s attention, the line of his mouth going sour, but his head stayed half turned away.

“Hi.” Sam said in his most confident voice.

Another aborted laugh caught in Nick’s throat. “Hi.”
“My name’s Sam. Do you mind if I sit here?”

And that worked even better. Nick sat up and looked at Sam with a curious expression. “What are you doing?”

“Introducing myself. Obviously we did it wrong last time around. So, let’s try it again- Hi. I’m Sam.” He held a hand out expectantly.

Nick looked at him like he’d gone crazy, squinting with mistrust at the whole offer.

Sam just stood there, hand out, waiting, feeling his resolve weakening with each tightly strung second that passed- but then the other man’s hand slid into his, warm and solid.

“Nick Surley.” He may have held Sam’s hand a little longer than would have been considered socially acceptable for the little scene they were playing out- but there were no complaints forthcoming. He stole up the younger man’s tea, probably to give him something new and less awkward to hold onto, and then nodded to the chair that Sam had just left.

And so he sat back down for what felt like the first time- and without much protest, Sam watched the man drink about half his tea.

“So… you come here often?”

With a jerk of his shoulders, Nick suffered down a laugh. “Are you hitting on me, sir?”

“Maybe.” It was too hard to keep a straight face and Sam just let his smile grow.

“We just met.” Nick gave back the tea, his eyes bright even though he was rather stubbornly holding onto his glower.

“I move fast.”

“No you don’t.”

“You don’t know that.” Sam took a sip of his drink and tried to convince himself that it was mostly just his imagination that the edge of the cup tasted a little like ash.

“Sir, that is a ring on your finger and I’m not sure if I feel comfortable being on the receiving end of the advances of a married man.”

Nick was weaseling his way out even still and Sam was slightly impressed by the sheer stubbornness of this man.

“We’re separated.” He decided on an answer that was honest but still perpetuated this little game.

“That’s unfortunate.” Nick stole his cup again and sighed before taking another drink. “Other than little old ladies in England, who freaking drinks mint tea?”

“People who had too many chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast.”

“Oh.” He tried to sound casual, but the smile curving over his lips couldn’t quite be hidden all the way behind the edge of the cup.

“You know… I was standing in there for way too long, just looking at you out here all alone, trying to get up the courage to come out and talk to you.”
Nick pressed the edge of the cup to his mouth again, though he didn’t take a drink. Nervously playing with his lip and trying to hide it. “That’s… kind of sweet and creepy. Thank you.”

Sam ignored the accusation with a smile and an oddly grateful kind of feeling that he’d chosen to come in his sandals from the day before. He hooked his mostly bare foot around Nick’s ankle and gave the other man quite a start. And there was no way to make this offer without feeling every inch like a middle schooler, but Nick already knew that Sam tended to get a little lost midway through these half assed plans. “So, I was thinking, if you’re free, maybe you and I could…?”

Eyebrows raising just a hint, mouth still cradling the lip of the paper cup. “We could what?”

Muffled and uneasy, and Nick knew exactly what Sam was getting at, but still wanted to fight it every last step.

“We could… go out.”

“Go out?” Nick teased the word making it sound dirty, then he just shook his head, chuckling. “Sorry, but I’m busy tonight.”

As ‘NO’s went, it was considerably more gentle than the last one that he’d given Sam. But this wasn’t last night, and Sam wasn’t worried about making things worse, because they’d already said goodbye.

He kept pushing- saying the first words to hit his tongue. “I didn’t mean for tonight.”

“Busy tomorrow night too.”

“I mean for the next six years,”

Nick choked on his ill gotten tea.

It was immensely satisfying to watch.

Sam picked at one of the muffins, pulling out a blueberry and smiling as he watched his friend struggling to pull himself back together.

“Excuse me?”

“Six years- give or take a few weeks.”

Nick started laughing, but it sounded a bit high and panicked.

“No, see, I’ve got you all figured. If I try and tell you that the first time I saw you I thought ‘now here’s a guy who shouldn’t be alone’. That I’ve felt homesick since the day I met you. Or that even now I can’t stop looking at your mouth. And that there will always be a part of my brain that, when I’m with you, is completely devoted to assessing all nearby load bearing surfaces for the best one to push you up against and kiss you and… and just kiss you until you stop arguing with me.” Sam shook his head, clearing it of those distracting thoughts. “Anything I can think to tell you, I’ve already said to you- and you just get this look and tell me that I’ll get over it.”

Nick had that look right now. “It does sound like you’ve got it all worked out.”

“But if I tell you that I kind of liked having the company and that I looked forward to you distracting me from my school work- you can’t argue with that.”

“No…I can’t.” So uneasy. “But where the hell is this six years coming from?”
“I’ve got one more year until I graduate. Then two more years for my law degree. A year as an intern, and then I figure I’m going to be a nobody at some law firm for at least another couple years, and Nick— that’s a lot of stress. I’m going to be too busy with classes and cases to look for anyone else. And you can’t argue with that either.”

The struggle was rather visible on Nick’s face. Eyes dark and more than a little confused. The line of his mouth gone uncertain.

“You aren’t going to let yourself believe anything sentimental or passionate that I can tell you. So here’s the logical offer. I can promise you for the next six years I’m not going to have the time, energy, or desire to look for anyone else. For convenience sake, because you won’t let me have anything else, let me keep you for the next few years.”

The cup got set down which mean that Nick’s hands ended up in fists on the table top. He looked pretty much everywhere other than at Sam. It started with a sharp breath, a few half words that never really got started, then Nick ran his hands over his face and just kept them there for a few seconds too long. When he came up for air he seemed to have a better handle on himself.

“And what happens at the end of those six years?”

“Well, by my calculations, that will put your daughter at about sixteen- so you will probably be in need of a good defense lawyer when you get arrested for either the assault and or murder of whatever boy she brings home.”

The pained noise that caught in Nick’s throat like a death rattle could never be mistaken for a laugh- though the smile he wore sort of confused things.

“I figure when we get there I can either bail you out and provide proper defense in court- or if you manage to keep yourself out of prison, we can reassess our lives and I can make another completely stupid offer that you’ll ho and hum over before finally taking and we’ll agree to stay together until the next arbitrary mile marker and then we’ll do this again.”

“For how long?”

Sam surprised himself with a laugh. “Until you give up.”

Carefully, Nick repeated his words, though he didn’t give them much sound, just kind of mouthing them over again as he studied Sam’s face like he’d never seen it before.

“Until you take this ring off my finger, and then you ask me to take it back from you.”

The instant he said it, Sam realized that he’d probably overstepped himself. Shown a little too much teeth and Nick was liable to get defensive all over again. But the other man still had that stunned kind of look. Too lost to know what direction to run in this time.

Nothing to lose… right?

Sam held a hand out to Nick for the second time that morning. “Ok?”

The man looked at Sam’s hand like it might hurt him. “What kind of an offer is this?”

“One that I’m hoping is so flawed and badly thought out that you’ll just feel bad for me and stop saying no.”

“I… I’ve never really trusted tomorrow, and you’re asking me for two thousand of them.”
“Yes.” He kept his hand out in the space between them. “I am. I’m asking you to help me out for the next six years, because I know that if I say it any other way that your commitment issues are going to get in the way.”

“I don’t have commitment issues.”

Sam refused to smile. “Then what do you say? You free for the next few years?”

Nick didn’t take his hand.

Not like he was supposed.

You’re supposed shake on a deal.

But the man caught his hand like they were two kids about to run away together. Their fingers knotting and palms pressing together.

Nick got this soft, wiry kind of smile that went well with his laugh. “Ok.”

“Ok?”

“Ok.”

As promises and confessions of love went, it wasn’t exactly stirring or romantic.

It wasn’t perfect.

But it was... ok.

And seeing as neither of them were all that romantic, and neither had ever even once come close to perfect, it actually worked out rather well for them.

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