Any Little Heartbreak

by followthattardis

Summary

Dean Winchester knows everything there is to know about the human heart.

Well.

Anatomically speaking.

Notes

First of all, I can't believe I actually finished this. My first DCBB. Amazing.

Second of all, I need to thank two people: my lovely artist Jess and my beta/cheerleader/instigator Natalia. It's not an exaggeration to say this fic wouldn't exist without them.

Disclaimer: I do not have a medical or nursing degree, nor have I ever worked in a hospital. I tried to research everything to the best of my abilities, but there's only so much you can do with Google and your own curiosity. If there are any doctors or nurses reading this, please accept my sincerest apologies.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Move

Nurses are angels in comfortable shoes.

— Author unknown

There’s absolutely no way he’ll get through this without a beer.

Dean straightens his back, wincing when his spine gives an audible pop. He glances around his new apartment, the still curtainless windows, the bare floors and the boxes piled up on every available surface. The sight is very disheartening, and Dean really, really needs a break, so he goes straight for the fridge, where at his request his landlord – God bless his heart – left a six pack of Bud Light.

The cool glass of the bottle meeting Dean’s palm is a nice contrast to the sweat-soaked t-shirt clinging to his back. He takes a generous swig and leans against the kitchen counter, looking around the room in resignation. This must be how Attila the Hun felt before going into battle.

Since Dean would do pretty much anything to put off this ordeal for just a bit longer – and also because he’s an amazing big brother – he fishes his phone out of his jeans pocket and speed-dials Sam. It’s Sunday and barely past 8 am in California, so he should still be fast asleep, but Dean would bet any money the jumbo-sized weirdo is up and about already.

Sam proves him right when he answers after a single ring.

“Dean? How are you? Have you settled in already? How’s the Big Apple?”

“Big,” Dean replies, grinning into his phone. Sam’s enthusiasm manages to carry even over the three thousand miles that separate them.

“That’s groundbreaking news,” Sam snorts. “Come on, give me something. How is it?”

Dean props his elbow on the countertop and starts picking at the label on his beer bottle.

“It’s fine, Sammy. I dunno. Sort of overwhelming. I’m about to unpack, but there’s so much of this crap I don’t even know where to start.”

“Sorry I couldn’t come with you to help,” Sam says, and Dean can almost hear the frown in his voice.

“You better make it all nice and homey for when I come over to visit.”

The thought of Sam flying over from across the country is just the incentive Dean needs. He puts away the beer and turns to face his new living room, phone still pressed against his ear.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to prepare a nice guest bedroom for you. Paint it pink, put in a dressing table, maybe some Disney Princess posters on the walls?”

“Fuck off,” Sam says half-heartedly, and Dean laughs. He walks over to the closest box, aptly labeled ‘cooking stuff’, and attacks the adhesive tape that keeps the flaps together.

“And how’s the hospital?” Sam prods, undeterred.

“Don’t know yet. Tomorrow’s my first day.”
The tape stubbornly refuses to yield under Dean’s fingernails, and he grunts in frustration.

“What the hell are you doing over there?”

“Trying to open a goddamn box,” Dean grits out, jamming his nail into the crease between the flaps.

“Just use a knife,” Sam offers soberly.

“All my knives are inside the boxes, genius.”

“Then go borrow one from the people next door. That way you can meet your new neighbors.”

“Thanks for the advice, Aunt Samantha.”

Sam must be scowling hardcore right now, and Dean is greatly disappointed he can’t see it.

“Just let me know when you’ve settled in, okay?”

Dean pauses for a moment, letting go of the box and leaning back on his haunches.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll call you.”

“Good.”

There’s a brief silence between them, and Dean purses his lips. Maybe this was a horrible idea after all. Sure, being parted is nothing new, but they’ve never lived farther than a few hour drive away from each other. And now Dean shipped his ass across the entire continent for nothing more than a job, like some goddamn yuppie who only cares about his career. How much time will it take before him and Sam go from being thick as thieves to sending each other Christmas cards with courteous updates on their personal lives that no longer have anything in common?

“Or maybe you could Skype me?” Sam suggests. “So you don’t forget how I look.” His voice is teasing, but there are undertones there that Dean sees for exactly what they are – the reflection of his own fears.

“Sure. Yeah, I’ll Skype you.”

They both go quiet again, and it’s a perfect opener for mushy talk, the kind that Sam relishes and Dean despises. It’s just the right time for Sam to assure Dean that nothing’s going to change, that just because they’re on the opposite coasts doesn’t mean they can’t keep in touch, that technology blah blah telephones blah blah planes blah blah. Dean instinctively braces himself, but then Sam clicks his tongue and seamlessly turns back to his full-on annoying little brother mode, dropping the subject before they can really delve into it.

He’s indulging him. For the love of crap.

“You want me to email you instructions on how to set up Skype on your laptop?”

Dean rolls his eyes, but he can’t contain a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He abandons the box and walks back to the counter to grab his half-empty beer.

“Why not,” he replies in his best ‘whatever’ voice.

“But if I didn’t, you’d know how to do it by yourself, right?” Sam teases mercilessly.

“I’d figure it out, it’s not rocket science.”

“That’s coming from a guy who doesn’t know how to tag people in photos on Facebook.”

“Fuck you, I have a PhD.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re a grandpa.”

“And you’re a nerd.”

“Said a geek.”

“Hey, I wear that label as a badge of honor.”

“Don’t I know it. I’m like 80% sure the first thing you’re gonna do with your new room is hang up an Indiana Jones poster.”

“Try to join us here in the 21st century, Sammy.”

“But, Dean,” Sam says sweetly, “didn’t you once say that Harrison Ford from the Raiders era is
the main reason someone should invent time machines already?"

Dean almost drops his beer.

“She told you. I’ll kill her.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Sam says brightly.

“She got me kinda drunk, okay? And when I say ‘kinda drunk’, I mean ‘totally hammered’, and then I just, I don’t know, I think she may have coaxed it out of me with witchcraft?”

Sam starts laughing openly, which leaves Dean pretending he’s offended and doesn’t enjoy inadvertently making Sam crack up.

“You should call her some time, by the way,” Sam says once he’s recovered. “Tell her you’re fine.”

“I will, I just need to gather my strength for it. You know how Jo is. The first thing she’s gonna ask will be if the nurses are hot and if I have my eye on someone.”

“I think her involvement in you love life is sweet,” Sam announces.

“Of course you do,” Dean snorts. “Everything is sweet to you, you big baby.”

“Call her. And set up Skype.”

“Yeah, yeah, I said I would. Now go do something fun. It’s Sunday.”

What follows is their usual routine of Dean encouraging Sam to go “seize the day” and “squish the college experience like a lemon” while Sam huffs indignantly and argues that he “came here to study, not to become a frat boy” and “getting shit-faced is not on my list of ultimate college experiences, Dean.”

When they finally hang up and Dean slides the phone back into his pocket, he realizes two things.

One: even though the boxes strewn across his floor haven’t shrunk in numbers, he feels brave enough now to tackle the monumental task of unpacking them.

Two: New York might still be loud and intimidating outside his window, but knowing that his moral support is one phone call away – or Skype call, whatever, he’ll figure it out later – makes the prospect of facing it on his own significantly less overwhelming.

Dean’s optimism turns out to be short-lived when he wakes up on Monday, and realizes the reason his alarm didn’t go off yet is because he forgot to change his phone’s clock to the NYC time zone. Which means he has twenty minutes left before his first shift begins. Which, in turn, means that he’s uber screwed.

“Fuck, shit, fuck!” he swears uselessly, leaping out of bed and stumbling into the bathroom. The situation calls for desperate measures, so he resorts to something he’s rather lousy at – multitasking. He brushes his teeth with one hand while frantically raking the other through his hair in an attempt to lend it an air of no-I-did-not-just-wake-up. With no time to rummage through the boxes in search of fresh clothes, he shimmies into the pair of old jeans and the t-shirt he wore yesterday (he’s going to make a great first impression in those, for sure.) The clock is ticking, so he decides to forego breakfast and the coffee that usually keeps him awake during the first few hours at work. He rushes off in such a hurry that, of-bloody-course, he forgets his wallet and has to go back for it. By the time he finally makes it to the hospital, breathless and rumpled, it’s 9:08 am and he is officially the biggest failure in the history of failures.

The nurse in registration looks him up and down like she’s trying to decide if he needs to be rushed to the ER and given oxygen.

“How can I help you?”

Dean inhales deeply, willing his heart to stop racing, and offers the nurse his million-dollar smile.

“Yeah, I’m good, just… a little short of breath.”

“Areyou alright, sir?” she asks, drawing her painstakingly plucked eyebrows together.

“Are you alright, sir?” she asks, drawing her painstakingly plucked eyebrows together.

“How can I help you?”

Dean inhales deeply, willing his heart to stop racing, and offers the nurse his million-dollar smile.

After all, she’s his coworker now, isn’t she? Might as well start making friends right away.

“I would like to see Doctor Crowley, please. He’s expecting me.”
“Oh. Are you the new heart surgeon?”

“That’s right,” he nods, his smile widening. “Dean Winchester.”

“Doctor Crowley said you’d be coming. I’ll call him down.”

While the nurse – Elizabeth, as her name tag says – makes the phone call, Dean leans against the counter and tries to get himself under control. It’s only 9 am and he’s already a screw-up, but at least it can’t get much worse than this. From now on, he’s going to be calm and collected, and a 100% professional.

“Doctor Crowley is on his way,” Elizabeth informs him, putting the receiver down. “You can sit down and wait over there,” she adds, gesturing behind Dean to a small waiting area.

Dean flashes her a quick thank-you smile and plops down on the nearest chair, looking around himself with curiosity. He’s seen pictures of the hospital online (Sam researched it the second he found out Dean had been invited to apply for a position), but he never actually set foot here until today. Even his job interview was conducted on the phone – courtesy of Doctor Crowley himself, who showed unexpected understanding and wholeheartedly agreed that a trip from California to New York and back is not something one undertakes lightly, especially without the guarantee of actually getting the job first.

Come to think of it, Crowley has been very accommodating. Suspiciously so, considering the reputation of a hardass he’s gained for himself (Crowley’s reputation is also something Samuel Winchester took upon himself to google.) It’s almost like he’s too nice. Hospital administrators are not nice. Not in Dean’s experience.

Sam is certain that he’s being so cute and cuddly because he knows Dean is the best at what he does, and wants him on the team. Dean is less optimistic (and half-waiting for the other shoe to drop), but the fact remains that he’s got a contract signed with one of New York’s best hospitals, and however weird or shady the motives for Crowley’s kindness might be, it’s not the worst position to be in.

“Doctor Winchester,” a silky voice purrs from over Dean’s shoulder, making him snap out of his musings. He jumps up a bit in his seat and turns around to see Crowley, who looks even more suave in person than he did in the photos that Sam found online. He extends his hand for Dean to shake and as he does so, the corners of his lips drag upwards, but it’s more of a smirk than an actual smile. He’s wearing a bespoke, black suit that seems out of place among the sterile white of the hospital corridor.

“Pleasure to finally meet you in person. Welcome to St Hubert’s Medical Center. Would you please follow me.”

Dean doesn’t manage to get another word out before Crowley turns on his heel and glides down the hall, leaving him no choice but to follow.

Although he tries his best to memorize every turn and corridor they take, soon Dean has no idea where he is. He finds himself distracted by watching the people that pass them on all sides, doctors, nurses, and patients alike. Some of them slow down to give Crowley a polite nod or offer a greeting, but none acknowledge Dean’s presence – not that it’s surprising, really, but the farther into the bowels of the hospital they enter, the less confident Dean feels, and he wishes he knew someone friendly in here. If right this moment Crowley decided to leave his ass to fend for himself, he’d probably need a map to find the exit.

It’s not a comforting thought.

“Here we are,” Crowley announces once the elevator door opens on the third floor. “Let me introduce you to a few people. They’ll be your… hm. That’s interesting.”

Curiously, Dean follows Crowley’s line of sight and his eyes land on a nurses station, where a plump black woman in scrubs is currently whacking a scrawny-looking doctor upside the head with a pile of documents.

“I swear to God, Charles, one more time you disturb my girls with your nonsense and you’ll get smacked with something much heavier than this!”

“I was just—”

“I know exactly what you were ‘just’, and I don’t appreciate you coming onto my nurses. A well-respected neurosurgeon like yourself should find better things to do with his time than using Star Wars puns as a means of seduction, Charles. Now, I’m sure as entertaining as Pamela finds them, she needs to go back to work.”

“I was just making conversation,” the man called Charles mumbles, but he doesn’t argue further.
Instead, he heaves a long sigh and reluctantly dawdles away, much to the amusement of a black-haired nurse who Dean deduces must have found herself on the receiving end of Charles’s attentions.

“I’ll catch you later in the cafeteria, Chuck,” she offers with a twinkle in her eye. “So you can tell me all about the—”

“Rounds, Miss Barnes.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going. I’m gone.”

Pamela grabs her stethoscope and walks away as well, giving Dean a wink as she passes him. Without much thought, he responds with a smile that’s nothing short of seductive. Her hips sway a little as she moves, and Dean’s eyes inevitably trail after her until she disappears behind the corner.

“So, you’re a flirter.”

Dean’s head whips back to find Crowley staring at him with amusement. His eyes widen in horror as he belatedly realizes that he has just checked out his coworker’s ass with his boss watching the whole thing.

“Oh, I— no, that’s— I was just being friendly,” he blurts pathetically. Jesus Christ, when he thought he couldn’t fuck up more than by being late on his first day, did his brain take it as a challenge?

“We don’t formally forbid intimate relations between hospital staff, but we strongly discourage them,” says Crowley, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Especially if they are of a purely sexual nature. So unless you plan on marrying nurse Barnes in the near future, I suggest you slow down a little.”

The tips of Dean’s ears get redder and redder with every word. Luckily enough, Crowley’s rather playful tone indicates he’s not seriously displeased – or for some reason he doesn’t show it. Maybe it’s a test. Maybe in reality hooking up with a nurse means getting your ass fired effective immediately. Maybe—

“With that in mind, let me introduce you to our head nurse,” Crowley continues, evidently not interested in hearing Dean’s response. He leads the way to the nurses station, where the woman who put a damper on Charles’s flirtations bustles around giving orders and handling documents.

“How can I help you today?” she asks, not lifting her head from the paperwork she’s reading.

“By being a darling and showing Doctor Winchester around.”

She looks up at that and gives Dean a quick once-over before turning to Crowley.

“New heart surgeon?”

“Precisely. Doctor Winchester, meet Missouri Moseley.”

Dean smiles politely, at the same time wondering if the frown that has appeared on Missouri’s face is a bad sign. She nods back at him, but her lips thin in displeasure.

“Nice to meet you, dear. And what exactly do you expect me to do?”

It takes Dean a moment to realize the question part wasn’t in fact meant for him, but for Crowley, and he bites his tongue just in time.

“It would be fantastic if you could give him the grand tour of the hospital. Show him the ORs where he’ll be working, the treatment rooms, just the usual. As much as I’d love to do it myself, I have other matters to attend to.”

“I ain’t a goddamn tour guide,” she says, knitting her brows. “Got my hands full here anyway with those hopeless souls.”

“Hey!” a female voice protests from behind Missouri’s shoulder. Its owner turns out to be a dark-haired woman, perhaps in her thirties, wearing scrubs and holding a clipboard. “Who’s hopeless?”

“Every single one of you,” Missouri says firmly. “I’ve been afraid to take a day off ever since you lot almost set the cath lab on fire.”

“I need to hear about that,” Dean says, grinning at the younger nurse. She grins back and extends a hand for him to shake.

“I’m Tessa. I can show you around, if you want.”
“You got work to do, miss.”

“But—”

“Off you go,” Missouri insists. Although her tone isn’t harsh, it leaves no room for argument.

Tessa shrugs and smiles apologetically, mouthing ‘good luck’ at Dean and giving him a little wave as she disappears down the corridor.

“I’ll take my leave as well,” Crowley adds smoothly, putting a hand on Dean’s shoulder. Given the considerable height difference between them, it should be awkward as hell – and it sort of is, the angle all messed up – but Crowley has so much confidence coming off of him that it’s somehow still intimidating.

“I didn’t say I agree,” Missouri interrupts, putting her hands on her hips. “I ain’t got time for babysitting.”

“I’ll manage on my own,” Dean says quickly, determined to interject before the conversation ends in fisticuffs. He doesn’t know Missouri, but she doesn’t seem like the kind of person to back down first. “If you just show me into the OR, I’ll look around myself.”

Missouri gives him a stern look, but Crowley jumps on Dean’s suggestion like a hipster on an oversized sweater.

“Perfect,” he says, voice all velvety. “Of course, don’t hesitate to call me or come over if you have any questions,” he adds pleasantly. His expression clearly says that under no circumstances should Dean dare interrupt him during the meeting, unless he wants to get in the boss’s black books on his first day.

Once Crowley’s gone, Dean is left standing awkwardly under Missouri’s scrutinizing gaze. She’s looking at him as though she was trying to determine if he can be trusted to tie a shoelace, much less to be let loose in the operating block.

“There are no surgeries scheduled in OR number 2 until 1 pm,” she informs him eventually, which Dean takes to mean the evaluation was positive and he’ll be allowed to explore the operating rooms after all.

“She’s your access card,” she continues, taking it out from under the counter and thrusting it into Dean’s hands. “It opens all staff-only doors in the hospital except for Crowley’s office.”

“Obviously.”

“He’s a traditionalist,” she goes on, as if she didn’t hear him. “His office door is the only one in the hospital opened with a regular key. Now, here’s a map of the cardiology department.”

“Why do you even have that?” Dean asks, but quickly shuts up when Missouri narrows her eyes at him.

“Because, Doctor Winchester, I’m prepared for anything, as you’ll learn yourself soon enough.” She puts the map on the counter between them and taps on it.

“Now. The hospital cafeteria is on the ground floor, by the elevators. Open till 7 pm, so if you haven’t eaten till then, you ain’t eatin’ at all. The doctors lounge is here,” she points at the map, “the breakroom here, the ORs here, cath lab here, treatment rooms here and here. The loos are on all floors, just ask anybody from the staff. Every staff member has a pager, and here’s yours,” she says, handing it to Dean. “You be sure to keep that on you at all times, you hear me?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Dean says, and it comes out much less ironic than he expected.

“Good. I suppose Crowley will assign you new patients as soon as he’s done with that meeting of his, and until then you can get to know your way around the block. All clear?”

Dean’s not sure he remembered half of what’s just been said, but he nods nonetheless, smiling faintly.

“Crystal.”

“Don’t forget to scrub before you go in anywhere,” she adds sternly, raising a finger at him in a mock threat.

“I’m new, not an amateur,” Dean replies, a bit offended.

“Don’t you get cocky with me.”

“I’m just saying it’s not my first job. I wouldn’t make such a rookie mistake.”
Missouri watches him for a moment, arms crossed, but then something unexpected happens.

She smiles.

“Good to hear we have a professional joining us,” she says, much softer now. “Well, good luck then,” she adds, shooing him away. That new, good-natured smile is still on her face though, and Dean gratefully smiles back.

“Right. Thank you.”

He looks down at the map in his hand, then back up, but Missouri has already vanished somewhere, leaving him standing unsurely in front of the nurses station. He glances back down at the plan, which shows all four floors of the hospital with abbreviations like PACU, PAT or CTICU written across different rooms.

“Well, this’ll be painless,” he mutters under his breath. He allows himself one resigned sigh before rolling his shoulders and straightening his back.

Okay. CTOR sounds like a short for Cardiothoracic Operating Room, so it’s probably a good place to start. According to the map, it’s located on the fourth floor, so Dean makes a beeline back to the elevator and hits the button with number 4. As the door slides shut and the elevator climbs up to the next floor, he once again examines the map, nibbling absent-mindedly at his bottom lip.

Four floors, tons of doctors and nurses running in all directions, a maze of corridors, and a confusing network of rooms and offices. What could possibly go wrong?

When they meet for the first time, it’s in a flurry of sparks.

“Motherfucker!” Dean yells. His sleeve flies up to his face to protect it from the shards of glass raining down from a broken surgical lamp. He ducks his head and tries to back away, but he trips over the leg of the operating table and goes down like a fallen tree – except with much less dignity.

Shit. He hasn’t even started working yet, and he’s already managed to make a complete fool of himself and damage medical equipment possibly worth hundreds of dollars. This simply can’t get any better.

“Excuse me, are you allowed to be here?” a low voice asks from somewhere above. Dean screws his eyes shut, willing the voice to go away and let him contemplate his stupidity on his own. Apparently, it’s not his lucky day, because the owner of the voice doesn’t give up. He grabs Dean’s left arm and shakes it decidedly.

He’s got one hell of a firm hand.

“Are you hurt?”

Dean sighs and opens his eyes.

“No. Just mortified.”

The hand slides down to grip his entire shoulder and pulls him up to his feet with unexpected strength. Dean blinks a few times, and discovers that the hand is attached to a gravely-looking dude sporting blue scrubs and equally blue eyes.

“Um. Hi.”

Blue Scrubs glares at him with reproach.

“Did you break the lamp?” he asks, as if the glass lying everywhere and Dean being the only other person in the room wasn’t incriminating enough.

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry ‘bout that.”

Blue Scrubs gives him a look like Dean has just disappointed every single puppy within twenty mile radius.

“I’m afraid Doctor Crowley will not be happy about this,” he says evenly, turning away from Dean and inspecting the damage. The lamp shoots up a few final, miserable sparks before it goes dead and joins others in the Surgical Lamps Valhalla. Or wherever the hell it is that broken medical shit goes off to. Dean feels a bit guilty and sincerely hopes it’s somewhere nice.
While he’s busy contemplating the afterlife of the lamp that met its untimely death because of him, Blue Scrubs turns away from the mess and pins Dean down with a displeased stare that suddenly reminds Dean of his brother.

“What are you going to do about this?”

Dean considers the question for a moment.

“I would love to sneak out and pretend I was never here, but that wouldn’t be a nice thing to do, would it?”

He hopes to elicit at least a brief smile, but the Lamp Avenger is not amused.

“It definitely would not. You should report this to Crowley as soon as possible,” he advises. He pauses for a moment, then adds: “You’re the new cardiac surgeon, aren’t you?”

Dean nods his head with resignation. Great. Everybody in this hospital will know about the stunt he pulled by lunchtime. Or earlier, if Grumpy here likes to run his mouth. He doesn’t seem like a gossiping type, but who the hell knows.

“I must leave now. I assume I can trust you to inform the administration about the damage?”

“Yeah, of course. Scout’s honor,” Dean promises, his tone more serious now.

Blue Scrubs disappears behind the door, leaving Dean standing among the remnants of the lamp and his reputation as a medical practitioner.

He’s going to have to interrupt Crowley’s meeting.

He’s going to have to tell his employer of not even one whole day that he broke a vital part of his precious OR equipment.

How the hell is he supposed to do that?

With a long, heaving sigh, Dean maneuvers himself around the mess he’s made and directs his steps to the nearest elevator, which will (hopefully) take him to Crowley’s office.

He’s too preoccupied with trying to conceive a sensible speech to realize that he didn’t even catch Blue Scrubs’ name.

“I think I just met Dean Winchester,” Castiel says, putting a tray with empty pill vials on the table.

Meg perks up at his words, lowering the Cosmo she’s been browsing.

“You don’t say. Our new celebrity?”

Cas nods as he starts cleaning out the vials.

“Well? What’s he like?” Meg asks conversationally, nudging Cas’s leg with her toes. “Spill it, Novak.”

“He broke a lamp in the OR,” Cas admits with a pained expression.

Meg smirks, turning a page of her magazine.

“He’s stirring shit up already,” she remarks lazily, propping her foot on the edge of the desk and starting to sway her chair back and forth. “So, what’s your take on the guy?”

Cas gives a nearly imperceptible shrug.

“He seems…I don’t know. Young.”

“Young? That’s your professional opinion?”

“He is young for a heart surgeon,” Cas clarifies. “You hardly ever meet heart surgeons under forty. He must be really accomplished to have secured a job here. Crowley is usually extremely picky when it comes to medical staff.”

“Huh. Is he hot?”

Castiel knows Meg too well to be surprised by the question, so he doesn’t skip a beat as he answers:
“I believe most people would describe him as conventionally attractive, yes.”

Meg gives him a positively devilish grin.

“What single?”

“I wouldn’t know. We barely exchanged a few sentences. If you are interested in making advances, I suggest you ask him yourself.”

Meg pretends to consider this option for a moment before shaking her head.

“I think I’ll pass. Got a date tonight anyway.”

Cas looks up curiously from the now-empty tray.

“If I ask who it is, will you tell me?”

“I will,” Meg offers graciously. “Mostly because I want you to envy me. She’s super hot.”

“You know I don’t—”


Cas winces a bit at the nickname, but he doesn’t say anything. He’s long since given up trying to convince Meg to stop using it. It’s simply one of those things you need to let go in favor of coexisting in relative peace in a small nurses station.

“Her mother was admitted three days ago with severe pneumonia,” Meg continues, “and she came by yesterday afternoon to visit.”

Cas’s eyebrows knit together as he goes through his mental list of patients admitted in the last three days.

“You mean Mrs. Milton?”

“That’s the one. The mother’s a dull sack of potatoes, but the daughter…” Meg licks the tip of her finger obscenely before turning another page of her Cosmo. “So you can have Klutz M.D. all to yourself if you want.”

“Why thank you,” Cas huffs sarcastically, putting away the tray and slamming the drawer shut. “I wasn’t going to, what with it being against the hospital rules and all, but since you were so kind as to give me your permission, it would be a shame to waste it.”

“Careful, Cas. Boys don’t like it when you sass them.”

Castiel doesn’t bite; instead, he only shakes his head in resignation.

“I’m going downstairs to get some dinner. Would you like to come with me?”

Meg throws her Cosmo on the nearby countertop and stretches her arms above her head.

“Yeah, why not. You payin’?”

“No.”

“Worth a try.”

During lunch, they chat about the pain-in-the-ass patient from room 312, the new movie Cas must absolutely see because “seriously, Clarence, when was the last time you saw a movie made in this century?”, and the alleged aesthetic qualities of one Anna Milton.

Somehow, Dean Winchester’s name doesn’t come up even once.

“The mashed potatoes they’re serving today look more like puke than the actual puke I had to clean up this morning,” Meg announces gravely as she enters the breakroom, flinging herself onto the nearest chair. Charlie looks up from the mug of coffee she’s just brewed and gives her a crooked smile over the rim.

“You always complain about the food in our cafeteria and yet you always go back there. Bring your own stuff,” she advises, waving her hand around the little kitchenette shared by both doctors and nurses.
Meg shrugs noncommittally.

“I’m too lazy.”

Charlie snorts into her coffee.

“Fair enough.”

“Hey ladies, you on break too?”

Meg and Charlie turn to see Pamela, who marches into the room like she owns it and goes straight for the fridge. She rummages through it and emerges triumphant with a neatly packed chicken salad.

“Just finishing it,” answers Meg.

“Just starting,” answers Charlie.

“Shit, I thought you’d both keep me company,” Pam says ruefully, working the lid open and fishing out a plastic fork.

“You mean share hospital gossip,” Charlie amends with a smile.

“You got me,” Pamela agrees easily, slumping on the nearby couch and stuffing a forkful of salad into her mouth. “What have you got for me?”

“There were sightings of the new heart surgeon today,” Meg supplies. “You know, the wonderboy from California that Crowley hired.”

“Oh, so that’s who the playboy was,” Pam says with an impish smile.

“You saw him?” Charlie asks curiously, perching on the armrest by Pamela’s side. “When?”

“This morning. For a moment I thought Crowley hired himself a stripper.”

Charlie bursts out laughing, and Meg looks like she’d do the same if it didn’t interfere with her strict policy of showing no emotions other than cold disdain for the world.

“What?” Pamela asks defensively, but she’s laughing now, too. “I swear he looks like a stripper who has a doctor routine rather than an actual doctor. Have you seen his lips? Come on!”

“I have to meet this guy,” Charlie decides once she’s stopped laughing. “As the resident lesbian of this hospital I’ll objectively evaluate his looks and get back to you.”

“Hey, I’m objective,” Pamela protests around a mouthful of chicken.

“I won’t be,” Meg announces. “Clarence says he’s hot, so I already have my expectations.”

Charlie swings her legs over the back of the couch and snorts.

“Cas did not say that.”

“The gist was the same,” says Meg, shrugging. “Oh, and he broke a lamp in the OR. Cas caught him.”

“On his first day? That’s gotta be a new record.”

“Do you think Crowley’s gonna back out of hiring him?” Charlie asks, already feeling bad for the doctor she hasn’t even met yet. “That’d be a shame.”

“He won’t,” Pamela says confidently. “If Crowley offered him a position, he must really want him, and one minor fuck-up won’t change that.”

“So, prestige?” Charlie asks.

“Prestige. Haven’t you heard the name Winchester before?”

“Nope. I work in IT, remember? Not really in the loop with the celebrities of the doctor world.”

“You’re not missing much,” Meg smirks. “All you need to know is that he’s the shit among cardio surgeons right now.”

“So basically the Beyoncé of cardiology?”

“Equally attractive for sure,” Pamela says.
“That’s kinda blasphemous.”

“You haven’t seen him. I mean, he’s really, really fucking—”

“Apples and oranges, Pam.”

“Like hell!”

The banter runs wild for the next few minutes, but despite their best efforts Meg and Charlie don’t succeed in convincing Pamela that Beyoncé is a separate category of human and therefore unsuitable for any sort of comparisons.

“Don’t you need to go back to work, Meg?” Pamela interrupts at last, throwing her now-empty salad container over Charlie’s shoulder and into a trash can. “Your break already took at least half an hour.”

“Missouri will have your head if she finds out,” Charlie joins in.

“But she won’t, because you won’t tell her,” Meg cuts off, though she gets up and runs a hand over her scrubs to smooth out the creases. “Okay, okay, I’m off. Later, kittens.”

Once Charlie and Pamela are left alone (save for the ever-silent Doctor Creaser munching on his lunch in the other corner of the room), Pamela turns to Charlie and puts the spot next to her on the couch.

Charlie raises her eyebrows in silent question, but Pamela just shakes her head and scoots farther up to make more room. Intrigued, Charlie plops down on the couch and leans in.

“What is it, Pam?”

Pamela hooks one hand under Charlie’s arm in a conspiratorial gesture and uses the other to put a finger on her lips.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of Meg, but I got that feeling again.”

Charlie’s eyes widen.

“When you say ‘that feeling’, you mean…”

“I mean like when I knew about Tess’s husband before she did. Yeah, that feeling.”

“Crap,” Charlie mutters. She looks around them briefly, as if to make sure no one’s listening, and turns back to Pamela, whose forehead creases in thought.

“But do you know what…” Charlie hesitates, pausing to rephrase. “Is there anything specific about it? People maybe?”

“I only know two things,” Pamela says. There’s frustration seeping into her voice, but also an undercurrent of fear that unsettles Charlie. Pamela Barnes is not one to get scared easily. Whatever she’s seen or felt, it must have been serious.

“I know it’s going to involve that new doctor.”

When Charlie doesn’t comment and waits patiently for her to continue, Pamela sighs and places her head in her hands.

“Something awful’s going to happen, Charlie. I have no idea when or what or how, but it’s going to be bad, real bad.”

While Charlie processes the news, Pamela shakes her head almost angrily as if trying to shake away that disturbing feeling too.

“I’m sorry to burden you with this, kid, but these things tend to eat you alive if you don’t share them with someone,” she explains. Charlie responds by putting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing it gently.

“Don’t worry about it. Now that we both know, maybe we can keep an eye on him.”

Pamela gives a little nod, but Charlie knows she’s indulging them both. There’s nothing to be done about this, just like there was nothing to be done all the other times. It always happened the same way; Pamela would see something vague and horrible, and sooner or later it would come to pass.

Charlie didn’t believe her the first two times.

This is premonition number six.
Although the administration meeting has ended before Dean arrives at his boss’s office door, Crowley is not too happy about seeing him again so soon, and even less happy when he finds out the reason for it.

On the upside, he doesn’t throw a bitch fit (Dean once had the head of the hospital shut the door in his face and it wasn’t a pleasant experience), nor does he fire Dean on the spot. Truth is, he looks like he’s holding back a disbelieving laugh.

“I do hope testing the durability of our medical equipment won’t become a habit of yours, Doctor,” he quips drily.

“It was an accident and won’t happen again,” Dean vows, watching as Crowley taps away on his tablet. He was afraid of Crowley’s reaction, but now for some reason he feels pissed at his nonchalance.

“The lamp was insured, but I’ll still deduct a compensation from your salary,” Crowley says without looking up. Dean refrains from sighing and just nods his head. He expected that much.

“In the meantime, since you’re already here, I have a list of your new patients. Your first surgery is scheduled for Wednesday. I hope before then you will familiarize yourself with our hospital and staff without causing any more damage.”

Dean flushes furiously and nods his head again without uttering another word. If he tried speaking right now, he might snap and get sacked for real. Instead he shuts his mouth and takes a thick folder from Crowley’s desk, scanning the front page.

“You’re still here,” Crowley remarks, eyes glued to the device in his hand.

Dean grits his teeth and mutters a curt, passive-aggressive “thank you” before leaving the office. Once the door closes behind him, he releases a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

He’s not fired. He fucked up big time – on his very first day, when you’re supposed to be busy making good impressions – and he still has the job.

Sammy’s right. Crowley must really want him here.

Comfotered by that thought, Dean opens the folder in his hands and scans through the list of people he’ll be operating soon. On the top of the page, he finds the name of the cardiologist that referred the patients for surgery: Dr. Franklin Deveraux.

“Here’s hoping you’re a sensible guy,” he mutters. Then he slams the folder shut and directs his steps to where he hopes he’ll find the hospital cafeteria – after all, what better way to celebrate not getting fired on your first day than with a nice lunch?

The rest of Dean’s day passes by in an endless blur of new names, faces, and places. The more people he meets, the more they blend together, and the more he explores the hospital, the more confused he gets. On the bright side, there are no more catastrophes like the one in the OR, and Dean successfully manages to locate some more strategic locations, the most important of which is the doctors lounge.

It turns out to be a mid-sized, dimly lit room with a single couch and a small TV set tucked into one of the corners. It’s oddly quiet, much more so than the doctors lounge in Dean’s previous hospital. There’s no one inside, so Dean hovers awkwardly around for a few minutes, poking around, and walks right back out.

The mystery of why the room seems barely used is solved at his next stop, namely the breakroom on the second floor. The explanation comes in the form of a small doctor who almost bumps head with Dean on his way out of the room.

“Shit, sorry!”

“No worries.”

The doctor gives him an apologetic smile and it’s then that Dean recognizes him as the Star Wars loving neurosurgeon from before.
“You’re Charles, right?”

The doctor winces and shakes his head as if Dean should know better.

“Chuck.”

“Okay, Chuck it is. I’m Dean, the new heart surgeon.”

“Oh, right,” Chuck says distractedly. “Nice to meet you. Sorry, I gotta rush. My break’s over and I have a surgery in fifteen.”

Dean nods automatically and steps away a little to let Chuck through before his words fully register.

“Wait, you were having your break here? Why not upstairs?”

“What, in the doctors lounge?” His lips stretch into a good-natured smile, as if Dean was a lost duckling in need of adult supervision. “Nah, we barely use that. The social life is here. If you ask me, it’s because the kitchen is also here.”

“It was different in my old hospital,” Dean says grumpily.

“Hey, don’t sweat it. You’ll get used to it soon enough. “ Chuck pats him gently on the shoulder, then quickly removes his hand as if he changed his mind. “Uh, anyway, I gotta run. Good luck and all that.”

With that, he’s gone.

A few moments pass when Dean just stands there awkwardly, the door in front of him having swung closed before he could make a move to hold it. Eventually, he shakes himself and swipes his new access card to open it again, putting on his most charming smile as he enters the breakroom.

If this is where the social life is at, it’s time to win over the crowd.

It’s already well past 8 pm when Dean returns home, feeling tired down to his bones despite the fact that he didn’t perform a single surgery today. His apartment welcomes him with silence, a couple of boxes he’d left unpacked lying around the living room, and a strong smell of cleaning detergent that stubbornly clings to the floor and refuses to evaporate.

Dean’s first instinct is to go to sleep without even bothering with the boxes, food, or bath, but his immediate second instinct reminds him he was supposed to call Sam. That’s why instead of making a beeline for the bedroom, he sits himself down on the sofa with his laptop. Thanks to Sam’s instructions (which were overly simplistic, really, Dean’s not a fucking baby boomer, he can deal with technology), the process of setting up Skype is fast and painless. A few minutes later Sam’s shaggy head flashes across Dean’s screen, and he can’t help but smile all wide and gummy at the sight.

“Heya, Sammy. How’s life?”

“About the same as yesterday, and the day before that,” Sam replies, moving closer to his laptop so that his face fills the whole screen, giving Dean extra insight into his skin pores. “It’s your life I’m more interested in. Come on, tell me everything. How was it?”

Dean sighs all long and theatrical, leaning back to swing his arm over the back of the sofa.

“It was a clusterfuck. Honestly.”

Sam frowns, propping his chin on his hand in that schoolboy gesture Dean secretly finds endearing.

“What happened?”

“Well, let’s begin with the fact that I fucking overslept.”

Sam snorts before he can stop himself.

“On your first day?”

“I know.” Dean whines. “It’s because my stupid phone didn’t switch itself to the right time zone. But that’s only the first on the long list of today’s disasters.”
“It gets worse?” Sam asks incredulously.

“You bet it does. It turned out my boss didn’t have the time to show me around, so he tried to pass
that ungrateful job to the head nurse, who basically told him to go screw himself. So I ended up
showing myself around, going everywhere with a map in my hand like a freaking Japanese tourist,
and when I managed to finally find the OR something short-circuited or something, and I broke a
fucking lamp.”

Dean is infinitely grateful when his brother doesn’t burst out laughing and limits himself to a light
snicker instead.

“That’s a feat,” he remarks. He sounds as if he was genuinely impressed.

“Shut up. I’ve been here a day and I’ve already fucked up in all the ways that I possibly could.
This sucks.”

“Dean, but this means it can only get better now. It’s perfect.”

“Come again?”

“It’s perfect! Because you’ve already hit rock bottom, and now the only way is up.”

Dean groans.

“Wow, Sam. You do know how to make a guy feel better.”

There’s a sloshing sound on Sam’s end, and Dean notices a bottle of water Sam is twiddling with.

“I could use a drink,” he says wistfully, throwing a quick glance towards the kitchen. The fridge
that holds beer seems so very far away.

“Don’t change the subject,” Sam chastises. “Tell me about your coworkers. Are they nice?”

“Kindergarten teachers are nice, Sam. People working in a hospital are just trying to function.”

“Okay, okay, jeez. What did they do to you that made you so broody?”

They talk some more, but despite his best efforts, Sam doesn’t succeed in getting anything
substantial out of Dean apart from a desperate “I’ve got information overload, Sam! Ask me all
those questions again in a week.” After some not-so-gentle encouragement Sam ends up telling
Dean about his own day as well, about the paper he’s writing and the extra credit he’s going to
get, and another handful of more or less random news about his student life that have Dean
nodding and smiling with that particular glint of brotherly pride in his eyes. When they finally say
their goodbyes, the call time indicates 54:21 and Dean can barely keep his eyes open.

“Remember to set your clock right this time,” Sam teases.

“Remember to eat your Wheaties and blow your nose,” Dean shoots back.

“Jerk.”

Dean opens his mouth, a knee-jerk reaction he could hardly control even if he wanted to, but it’s
too late; Sam has already disconnected.

There’s no doubt the little shit did that on purpose, and Dean makes a mental note to start their
next conversation with an appropriately offended “Bitch!”.

The first person Dean runs into as soon as he steps into the hospital is, to his embarrassment, none
other than the man who caught him red-handed with the broken lamp the other day. He’s already
wearing scrubs, a stethoscope flung around his neck and a pile of documents in his hands.

“Doctor Winchester,” he nods and steers around Dean without stopping.

“Morning,” Dean responds too late to the air where Blue Scrubs was two seconds ago. He looks
after him, brow furrowed, and it hits him that while Blue Scrubs knows his name, Dean has no
idea who he’s dealing with. Dressed in those universal scrubs, the guy could be anyone – a
doctor, a surgeon, a nurse, a physical therapist…

Dean thinks back to the strong hand that pulled him up to his feet, and decides that physical
therapist is where he’d put his money. Then again, there’s no reason for a physical therapist to be
in an OR. A surgeon then? If so, they might end up operating together, and it’s going to be fifty shades of awkward when Dean won’t be able to call the guy by his name. Although, of course, somebody else in the block could—

“Doctor Winchester?”

Dean snaps back to reality and his eyes fall on a short, bespectacled redhead who’s smiling tentatively up at him.

“Yes, that’s me. I think.”

She stifles a laugh.

“I’m Charlie Bradbury from IT. Doctor Crowley said you have your first surgery tomorrow and asked me to show you how our OR software works.”

“Oh, right. I mean, yes! Yes, that’d be awesome.”

“Super. Let’s go.”

Charlie leads the way to the cardiology department and Dean takes full advantage of having her as a guide, trying to commit the route they’re taking to memory. It comes easier today, and he even thinks he recognizes some doors and corridors from his solitary exploration the day before.

“So, how are you settling in?” Charlie asks conversationally as the elevator doors shut behind them. “I bet it’s a lot to take in at once,” she adds with sympathy.


“Well, now you know me. That’s an awesome start.”

She smiles so wide Dean can’t help but return it, and funnily enough, it really does make him feel a bit better.

“How about we grab lunch together?” Charlie asks when the elevator stops on their floor. “Do you eat in the cafeteria?”

“Well, I didn’t have enough time to work out a routine yet,” Dean says, following her out. “But sure, why not. I hope it’s better than the shithole in my old hospital.”

“Can’t promise you that,” Charlie quips with a glint in her eye. “Where did you work before, anyway?”

Talking to Charlie is the easiest thing in the world, and encouraged by her genuine curiosity Dean soon finds himself telling her about his time in Sandover Memorial in much more detail than he normally would a stranger. By the time they reach the ORs and scrub before entering the sterile environment, Charlie knows not only Dean’s specialization and medical areas of interest, but also the members of his old team. It doesn’t escape her notice that Dean has something nice to say about everyone, even if he dresses it in jokes and hides it in-between silly one-liners. “Dumb teddy bear” Benny must be a damn fine anesthesiologist judging by Dean’s words; Ash, Charlie’s counterpart in Sandover Memorial, is a weirdo hippie who drives the hospital administrator insane by coming to work in baggy pants and worn-out T-shirts, but Dean’s description of him is in equal parts teasing and affectionate. The head nurse Jody sounds a lot like Missouri to Charlie’s ears, so much so that it makes her suppress a laugh at the thought of Dean moving from under one bossy lady’s thumb to another’s. Never mind that as a surgeon Dean doesn’t answer to the head nurse; one look at him and Charlie just knows that he’s a type that secretly loves being mom’d.

The conversation needs to be put on hold once they’re inside the OR, but Charlie is already looking forward to lunch and learning more about Dean Winchester. She starts up the equipment and begins explaining step by step how to manage video signals, all the while pointedly ignoring Pamela’s words that keep floating back to her with infuriating persistence.

*Something awful’s going to happen.*

Charlie does not like the idea of anything even remotely unpleasant happening to the first doctor in her career that didn’t react to her natural inquisitiveness with a condescending “It’s too complicated to explain to someone without a medical degree.” She already likes Dean. She likes how unaffected and down-to-earth he is, and how genuine interacting with him feels. She likes how the softness in his eyes betrays how much he cares about the people he tells her about, and how he looks at her attentively when she’s speaking.

She likes Dean, and so she makes every effort to forget Pamela’s words. Maybe this time she’s wrong.
As they sit down with their trays in a quiet corner of the cafeteria an hour and a half later, Dean thanks his lucky stars for sending Charlie Bradbury his way. He expected it might take him some time to adjust to the new workplace and make friends, but it’s only his second day and he’s already found an invaluable ally. The friendly beginning may have been attributed to nothing more than general politeness on Charlie’s part, but when at some point she unzipped her hoodie revealing a Batman tee and looked up to see Dean grinning as if Christmas came early, the deal was sealed.

The only bummer is that since Charlie is from the IT department, they won’t be working too closely after Dean’s express training is completed. The people he’ll soon be spending every waking hour with still remain strangers, their names and faces mixing up incessantly.

Dean thinks back to his awkward morning encounter with Blue Scrubs, and decides it’s as good a starting point as any to test the waters.

“There’s this guy I met yesterday,” he begins casually, sticking a fork into his lasagna. “He... well, he kinda walked in on me murdering a lamp.”

Charlie snorts and quickly covers her mouth with her hand.

“Colorful way to put it,” she says, clearing her throat. “But you’re not in trouble now, are you? Pam thought you wouldn’t be.”

“Who— wait, how do you even know about that?”

Before Charlie can answer, Dean does it for her.

“That guy told you, didn’t he. Shit, he didn’t look like a blabbermouth to me.”

“Cas isn’t a blabbermouth, and he didn’t tell me anything. He only told Meg, and she told us.”

“Cas?” Dean perks up. “That’s his name?”

“You met him and you don’t know?”

“He was too busy grilling me about the lamp to introduce himself,” Dean says, shrugging. “And when I ran into him this morning I had no idea how to call him.” He sighs, rubbing his temple. “What I’m trying to say is, I’m obviously the new kid in the playground. I still don’t know who’s who. So, help me out a bit?”

Charlie livens up at that and leans closer, forgetting about the fork hovering half way to her mouth.

“You want me to break it down for you like they do on TV?”

“Like… come again?”

In her excitement, Charlie bends over the table so far that her glasses slide down to the tip of her nose.

“You know, exposition. Like in pilot episodes, when you have a lot of new characters and you need to introduce them to your audience so that they don’t get confused? And often you have the main character arrive somewhere new and you get to know the rest of the characters through his or her eyes, like in, I don’t know, Brooklyn Nine Nine or Community or—”

“I saw Brooklyn Nine Nine,” Dean interrupts, grateful for having something familiar to latch onto in the midst of an unexpected lecture on screenwriting.

Charlie grins even wider and slaps him on the shoulder.

“I like you already, Doctor Winchester.”

“Please don’t call me that, I feel so old when people do it. Dean’s fine.”

“Okay, old man, I’ll remember. So you know how in the first episode the new captain arrives to the precinct and Terry tells him about all the detectives, and we get their names and short descriptions and even some flashbacks on them?”

“You wanna do the same for me?” Dean finally catches on, and it makes him laugh around his
mouthful of lasagna. “You wanna be the sergeant to my captain?”

“Hell yeah. You in?”

“Sure,” Dean agrees. “Hit me.”

Charlie pushes her glasses back up with a flourish and sets her elbows on the table. “Alright. You’re gonna have to refer to your imagination for the montage, so close your eyes. I’ll be your narrator.”

Dean shakes his head, laughing helplessly, but he obeys. The cafeteria disappears behind his eyelids, and as he loses all visual, he becomes hyperaware of all the sounds assaulting his ears: the clatter of trays, the scraping of cutlery against the plates, the chatter of people, the squeaking of shoes on the linoleum floor, the buzzing of fluorescent lights.

“You focusing yet?” Charlie asks.

“Yup.”

“Alright. Before we proceed any further, you have to promise not to use anything I tell you against me. All the things you’re about to hear are opinions and are not an objective or reliable source of information about our coworkers.”

Dean pops one eye open and frowns, but Charlie waves her hand dismissively.

“Just a disclaimer. Anyways, the opinions expressed by yours truly by no means represent the official position of the hospital’s administration, blah blah blah, etc. Now for the fun part.”

Charlie stops to take a breath, and when she speaks again, it’s in a much lower, theatrical voice.

“Let’s start at the top of the food chain, namely with Crowley. Of course you’ve met him already, but here’s a handful of selected fun facts about him: he’s a lover of antiquities, he wears only tailored suits, he hates his first name – seriously, never ever use it in his presence – and he doesn’t practice medicine anymore.

“Our head nurse is Missouri, and you might think she’s not your problem because you’re a doctor, but you’re wrong. You do not, I repeat, do not want to get on her bad side. Luckily, all you have to do is don’t be rude or condescending towards her. Just remember that and I’m sure she’ll like you, and once she does, you’ll be good here. Who else did you meet already?”

Dean shifts in his seat, eyes still tightly closed, and strains his memory for names.

“Tessa?” he says hesitantly.

“Tess, of course. She’s a widow, raising two kids on her own. Her husband died in Afghanistan two years ago and she’s been alone since, but she’s a very cheerful person when you get to know her. You can often catch her listening to music when she has a moment to herself. She says it helps her relax.”

“She’s raising two kids on her own and works as a nurse?” Dean cuts in, impressed.

“I know. She’s our very own superhero,” Charlie smiles softly, tapping her fork against her plate. “Who else?”

“There was this nurse with black hair I met yesterday. She had a really great, um…. Anyway, I think her name was Pamela.”

“Pam, yeah. The word you were looking for is ‘bum’, and she does have a great one,” Charlie agrees. “Okay, so Pam is a wonderful human being, and really good at her job, too, but watch out for her, cause sooner or later she’ll probably try to get in your pants.”

“Yeah, I got that impression,” Dean mumbles under his breath.

“And then of course you have Meg.”

“The one who blabbered about my screw-up to you guys?”

“Come on, Dean. You must know that trying to stop hospital gossip is like trying to catch water with a sieve. Moving on. Meg is 5’2 of concentrated sass and one-liners, and I hear she’s great company during night shifts. I don’t really know anything about her private life, though.”

Dean chooses this moment to give up and open his eyes, blinking rapidly against the sudden brightness.

“What about the montage?” Charlie sulks.
“My imagination’s not that vivid anyway. And I’m pretty sure people are beginning to stare at the idiot who eats lunch with his eyes closed.”

Charlie gives him a devious smile, like that was her plan all along.

“Fine. Anyway, if you wanna know more about Meg, you should ask Cas about it.”

“Huh. Are they…” Dean begins, then trails off. The obvious question hangs in the air between them as Charlie chews slowly on her food.

“They’re close,” she says at last, which doesn’t explain anything. “I never understood why, because they seem so different, but…” She shrugs noncommittally. “And Cas himself, he’s something else. I don’t know much about him privately either, just that he’s not from around here.”

“He seems uptight,” Dean remarks.

“I like Cas,” says Charlie, like it’s an accusation. “He just comes off that way, but he’s the sweetest guy in this hospital.”

Dean snorts, and quickly regrets it when Charlie glowers at him in response.

“Wait till you get to know him. You’ll see.”

“Alright, alright,” Dean allows, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I guess I will. But what exactly is his job?”

Charlie opens her mouth to answer, but before she can speak a word her pager begins beeping like crazy. She pulls it out of her pocket and frowns down at it like it has personally offended her.

“Let me guess, you’re needed?”

She sighs and pushes her plate away.

“It’s Doctor Walker. I hate that guy. He probably disconnected his monitor again.”

“I’m no good at all that technical stuff, but that sounds pretty basic,” Dean says, watching Charlie get up and put her tray away.

“That’s cause it is,” she groans. “And it’s like the third or fourth time it’s happened, you’d think he would have learned by now. Anyway, see you later?”

Dean nods, and watches with a small smile as she scurries between the tables and out of the cafeteria, leaving him in a much better mood than the one she found him in.

He spends the rest of the afternoon buried in the paperwork of the patient he’s going to operate the following day. The usual pre-surgery blood tests, x-rays and anesthesia evaluation were all done the week before, so all that’s left for him to do is study them till they’re etched permanently into his retinas.

The patient is a 46-year-old man in need of a mitral valve replacement. It’s a standard procedure – hardly revolutionary – but Dean prepares for it as if it were his very first time operating. The deeper he delves into the details of the surgery and the patient’s particular needs, the more it helps him calm down and control his nerves later on, when he needs to be at his sharpest. The sun moves slowly across the sky outside Dean’s window, descending all the way down and behind the horizon before he finally straightens his back and allows himself to call it a day.

The way home is quicker the second time around, with significantly less running around looking for the right exit in the subway. The untouched boxes still mock him from their spot on the living room floor as he enters the apartment, and Dean fights off his sleepiness to crouch down and unpack them already, jeez, okay, if they insist on sitting there and insulting him with their presence then fine.

The original plan is only to empty the boxes so that he can get rid of them and take care of arranging his stuff some other time, but somehow Dean ends up sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room and sorting through his medical books and musical records, putting them in alphabetical and chronological order respectively. He runs out of energy around half past ten, so he leaves the last box unpacked (what? it’s still progress) and heads to bed to get some proper rest before his first big performance tomorrow.

He’s already falling asleep when it occurs to him that Sam might be disappointed he didn’t show
He grabs his cell from the nightstand, types in a quick, “Too beat to Skype. Night, bro” and drifts right back to sleep.

“The surgery will take about four hours and it’ll be performed under general anesthesia. Would you like me to explain what we’re going to do?”

The man sitting on the bed looks at Dean sternly.

“I know what’s wrong with me,” he drawls, balling his hands into fists. “It’s all I’ve been hearing about for the past two months.”

Dean plasters a polite smile on his face and nods empathetically.

“I understand that, Mr. Henriksen. If you think what Doctor Deveraux told you is enough, that’s fine by me.”

A slight shadow of hesitation crosses Henriksen’s face, and Dean mentally congratulates himself on reading the guy right. He expected Dean to keep pushing and he would refuse any further explanations, but seeing Dean back away without insistence made him doubt his own decision.

“He explained the basics of mitral stenosis,” he admits, “but I read up a lot on it. The mechanics, the causes, the whole kit and caboodle. He kept yapping about how I should limit strenuous activities, like that’s even an option for a cop. I don’t like cardiologists. No offence.”

“Not a cardiologist, none taken,” Dean replies, tapping his pen against the clipboard he’s holding. “Yeah, if you’re a cop then keeping your heart rate in check is a shitty piece of advice. But I hope Doctor Deveraux told you you’ll need to take at least a month off from work?”


“Heart diseases are generally a pain in the ass, but once your new valve is in place you’ll feel a noticeable difference,” Dean promises.

“So, what exactly are you gonna do when you’re up to your elbows in my guts?” Henriksen asks grumpily.

A triumphant smile spreads across Dean’s face, and he quickly hides it behind the clipboard. He’s totally won the guy over.

“We’re going to replace your leaking valve with a brand new, mechanical one. There are different types of valves, but the mechanical ones don’t wear off as easily as, say, tissue valves, so with a bit of luck it will serve you well for the rest of your life.”

“Let’s hope so,” Henriksen groused.

“There’s no reason to be pessimistic.”

“I take your word for it.”

“Good.”

Henriksen seems stunned for a moment, but then shrugs as if accepting Dean’s response.

“What happens next?” he asks.

“Doctor Visyak, your anesthesiologist, will come in a bit to prepare you for anesthesia. I’ll be off now, but I’ll see you soon in the OR.”

Dean lowers the clipboard to his side and gives Henriksen his best reassuring smile before taking his leave to go prepare for the surgery. As he walks down the corridor, he can feel his blood start to buzz with anticipation, that unique combination of nervousness and thrill that always overtakes him right before walking into the OR. The adrenaline will soon begin pumping through his veins, but his hands won’t shake and his mind will be the clearest it ever is, laser-focused on the task at hand. All the other thoughts, the worries and fears of a newcomer will wash away for those few hours of complete concentration.

He cannot wait.
“The patient’s out already,” Eleanor announces.

Dean looks up and nods.

“Great.”

“Also, your assisting nurse is here.”

She smiles and points behind Dean, so he turns around on his heel, ready to charm the (undoubtedly lovely) nurse who’ll assist him on this and many more surgeries to come. What he sees makes the smile freeze on his lips.

Blue Scrubs squints at him as if he couldn’t believe this shit either.

“Are you my assisting nurse?” Dean asks uselessly.

“Yes.” Cas (because it’s high time to start calling him by his name now – besides, everybody here is wearing blue scrubs including Dean himself, what even—) extends his hand for Dean to shake.

“Castiel Novak. We’ve met before.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Dean says weakly, taking the proffered hand and squeezing it gently. He immediately regrets it when the grip he gets in return almost crushes his fingers.

“I did tell Crowley about the lamp,” he says stupidly.

“I figured you did. I saw it had been replaced,” Blue Scr- Castiel says. Really, though? That’s what Cas is short for? If Dean’s being honest, it’s just as weird a name as Blue Scrubs, but whatever. The guy didn’t pick it for himself.

Before Dean has a chance to say something smarter, or anything at all, Castiel strolls out of the scrubbing area and into the OR.

If what they say about the third time being the charm is true, then Dean’s chance to make a good impression is irrevocably gone. Looks like this cooperation is going to be painful.

Dean inhales deeply through his nose and releases a long, steady breath.

Calm and collected.

Prioritize.

Alright. Blue Scrubs turned out to be a surgical nurse – his surgical nurse – but Dean has no time now to ponder on how he feels about that. It will have to wait until after the surgery.

He rolls his shoulders as if trying to shake any lingering, distracting thoughts, finishes off the scrubbing and walks into the OR.

Into battle.
The surgery went well – excellent, in fact – but Dean is so exhausted by the mental and physical effort combined with the stress of performing in front of his new team for the first time that he can barely stand upright. He moves on autopilot as he strips off his scrubs, throws away the disposable gloves and washes his hands. He tries to nod and smile at everyone as they pass him on their way out of the operating block, but he doesn’t really register their faces, too preoccupied with keeping himself from falling asleep where he stands.

By the time he’s made it to the subway station he can barely keep his eyes open and seriously considers going back to the hospital and crashing in the doctors lounge. Eventually reason wins, and Dean limits himself to taking a short nap in his seat, which predictably ends in him missing his stop. He wakes up two stations later, angry as all hell, and gets on the train going in the opposite direction, careful not to drift off this time. When he finally arrives at his apartment door it’s well past 1 am. He doesn’t bother turning on the lights and stumbles in the dark, undressing on his way to the bedroom. Tomorrow morning he’s going to grumble at himself, carefully collect all the clothes, throw them into the hamper, make himself a coffee and, well, that’ll probably be all he’ll have time for before going to work again.

He collapses on the bed in nothing but boxers and falls asleep before his head even hits the pillow.

Victor Henriksen’s post-operative recovery is quick and smooth, a fact that doesn’t escape the notice of all those curious about the veracity of Dean’s stellar reputation. Two surgeries performed almost back-to-back the following day only serve to confirm his good opinion, and as is always the case in hospitals, the news spreads like wildfire throughout St Hubert’s Medical Center.

Chuck approaches Dean during lunch, smiling rather awkwardly and mumbling his congratulations on Dean’s first successful surgeries with his new team. Tessa stops him as they pass each other in the hallway on Thursday, and reminds him that her offer still stands if he needs any help in figuring out the inner workings of the hospital. Pamela is less subtle and, as per Charlie’s predictions, accosts him one morning in the elevator, which ends in shameless flirting that carries onto the corridor and all the way to the nurses station, where she leaves him with a dopey smile on his face.

All in all, Dean slowly but surely wiggles his way into the hospital hierarchy, carving out a place for himself among the other employees. Everyone falls for his charm sooner or later – after all, Dean Winchester is nothing if not a freaking delight to work with, and his new coworkers have come to see that already.

Well, not all of them.

There’s still that Novak guy.

No matter how hard he tries, Dean can’t seem to find a way to win him over. It’s not that Castiel is rude or hostile towards him – on the contrary, he’s always perfectly polite. Their working relationship is civil and efficient, yet on the social level Dean feels like he’s being held at arm’s length. The warm welcome he received from all the other members of his team only serves to emphasize the glaring difference.

Doctor Eleanor Visyak – Ellie, as she insisted Dean called her – not only proved to be just as skilled an anesthesiologist as Benny, but also a kind soul and a comforting presence by his side during the surgery. The surgical tech Andy gave him a goofy smile and started cracking jokes right away, not stopping even when the procedure began. The circulating nurse Gwen opened with teasing remarks about Dean’s “delicate features” (how original), but quickly turned out to be a true professional and a solid part of the team. Castiel, though?

Most of the time, he just stares.

It shouldn’t be as disconcerting as it is, since it’s actually his job to assist Dean and anticipate his needs during surgery, but the way Castiel’s gaze is constantly fixed on Dean is more distracting than helpful.

It doesn’t help that the guy is drop-dead gorgeous, either. Even though he wears the usual, unappealing OR ensemble that covers him from head to toe, somehow a mere glimpse of sharp cheekbones or blue eyes is enough for Dean to get sidetracked. Castiel’s hands might be hidden in ugly, disposable gloves, but that doesn’t stop Dean from noticing how long and skilled his fingers are. His mouth might be obscured by a surgical mask, but his deep voice still sends a shiver down
Dean’s spine every time it catches him off guard.

In the end, Dean is torn between feeling offended by the guy’s attitude and sexually frustrated by his looks, so true to his habit, he elects to ignore both. How difficult could it be to tune out the presence of somebody who’s constantly by your side?

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The last surgery on Friday is the most complicated one Dean has had to perform so far, and it ends much later than originally planned. After it’s done, he stumbles out of the OR half-alive and drags his legs to the doctors lounge, where he all but throws himself onto the couch. The room is empty, all the other doctors having gone home already to their wives and girlfriends and children.

Lucky fuckers. Dean has a silent apartment waiting for him, and even the warmth of his own bed isn’t enough of an incentive to make him move a single limb.

Just when he nestles his head on his elbow, about two seconds away from falling into a slumber so deep only cannons could wake him from it, he hears a rough voice coming from the doorway.

“This is not a motel. You should go home.”

“Is that any way to talk to a guy who saved a life today?” Dean says, his words slurring slightly as he rubs his eyes. Reluctantly, he pulls himself up and slings his shoulder over the back of the couch to look at the bastard who insists on interrupting his well-deserved rest.

“Cas?”

“Nurse Novak, actually,” Castiel says as he steps into the room. He hesitates a moment, then closes the door behind him.

“Were you really planning on sleeping here tonight?” he asks.

Dean shrugs dismissively.

“Yeah. It’s not like anybody’s waiting for me at home, and I have to come back here in the morning, which is in…”

He looks at the wall clock above Castiel’s head.

“… less than 6 hours.”

“If all of us followed that logic, the entire hospital staff would end up living here,” Castiel says, shaking his head.

Dean sighs and rests his forehead against the back of the couch. That’s just his luck; instead of catching some sleep, he’s in for a pointless argument with Florence Nightingale.

“Aren’t you tired too? Haven’t you ever crashed in here after a surgery?” he mumbles.

The question is met with silence, but after a moment the other end of the couch dips. Dean lifts his head to see Castiel nestled comfortably next to him (though with considerable room left between them), a remote in his hand.

“I am and I have,” he answers calmly, “but that doesn’t mean sleeping here is reasonable.”

He turns the little TV set on and begins changing channels as if it was the most natural thing to do at 2:15 in the morning. Dean watches the stream of images with bleary eyes until he recognizes a familiar doctor fussing around on screen.

“Hey, leave that on.”

Castiel turns to look at him with disbelief.

“Really? Dr. Sexy M.D?”

Dean tries to appear nonchalant, but he can feel the telltale blush creeping up his neck.

“It’s a guilty pleasure,” he mutters. He waits for a condescending comment, but it never comes. Instead, Castiel skips back to the right channel and increases the volume.

Dean quickly (much quicker than he’d ever be willing to admit) recognizes the episode as one of the older ones, where Doctor Sexy and Doctor Piccolo were still dancing around each other like a pair of teenagers trying to ask each other out for prom.
“She’s a heart surgeon like you, isn’t she?” Castiel asks after a while.

“Yeah, why?”

“Then she should know you can’t wear any jewelry inside the operating room,” Cas says, pointing his head at the screen where Doctor Piccolo brandishes a scalpel, a bracelet swirling around her wrist.

“They’re not big on the details,” Dean admits.

A few scenes later Doctor Sexy pulls down his mask mid-surgery, which earns him an indignant scoff from Cas.

“That’s Operating Room 101. He just contaminated himself.”

“But you can see his face, and that’s what everybody’s watching for,” Dean explains, huffing out a laugh.

“Oh, I see.”

Something in Castiel’s tone makes Dean look his way, and he discovers a pair of curious eyes boring into him.

“I understand how that could be a reason for overlooking the medical inaccuracies,” Castiel says slowly, as if expecting Dean to protest.

Several seconds pass before Dean catches on to how Castiel must have interpreted his words, and the realization makes him flush even deeper.

Oh sweet Jesus. Did he just accidentally come out?

Cas squints at him, paying no mind to the TV anymore.

“However, I can’t commend you for your taste, Doctor,” he says, pulling a serious face. “I recognize the appeal, but…” He scrunches up his nose in disapproval.

“But what?”

“Not my type,” Castiel finishes, turning back to the TV and gluing his eyes to the screen as if nothing happened. Dean on the other hand stares at him for much longer than socially acceptable, trying to process the news.

Holy shit. Holy shit. Not only does the hot nurse seem totally unfazed by Dean’s unintentional coming out, but he’s into dudes as well. Dean has never been able to tell these things – a fact that made him lose at least four different bets in the course of his college years – but he still feels stupid for not even having any suspicions.

“Are you alright? You seem troubled.”

“Huh?”

Dean looks up to see Castiel watching him again, expression a little softer this time.

“You didn’t mean to do that, did you?”

“Admit I’m crushing on a fictional doctor who can’t even behave in the OR properly? No, not really.”

Castiel smiles, and it alters him almost beyond recognition. The serious lines of his mouth curve upward, and little crow’s feet appear in the corners of his eyes.

It’s the first time Dean has ever seen him smile like that.

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to,” he promises. Dean’s not sure whether they’re talking about him liking Doctor Sexy or men in general, but whichever it is, he won’t have Castiel thinking he’s ashamed of it.

“No, no, that’s not—I mean, I don’t care who knows.”

“Oh kay.”

They watch the rest of the episode in silence that’s not really companionable, but not uncomfortable either. When the next episode begins (it must be one of those back-to-back reruns), Castiel doesn’t react, so neither does Dean. They sit through two more before Dean’s exhaustion finally overpowers the adrenaline high, and he conks out.
He wakes up alone a few hours later, curled into a pretzel with a blanket of unknown origin wrapped loosely around his shoulders. Castiel is gone, and only the squashed cushions on the other side of the couch serve as evidence that he was there at all.

“You’re shitting me.”

“I wouldn’t dare, Pam.”

“You want me to believe that somebody locked you and your anesthesiologist buddy in the OR for the entire night and no one noticed until the next day?”

“That sounds like a setup for a bad horror movie,” Charlie chimes in, scooping a spoonful of yoghurt. “Is your buddy Boris Karloff?”

Pamela crosses her arms over her chest and gives Dean a determined look.

“I don’t believe your hospital was that much of a disaster. Somebody would notice.”

Dean rolls his eyes.

“No, they wouldn’t, because Benny and I sneakedit in there after the surgery was over and everyone was gone.”

“Why would you even do that?”

“We had liquor,” Dean admits, eliciting a giggle from Charlie and a grin from Pamela.

“Irresponsible,” Tessa tuts from her spot by the door.

“I know, but the surgery took almost 11 hours. We had to blow off some steam.”

“What kind of surgery?” Charlie asks, sliding closer to Dean and looking up at him expectantly. Ever since she realized he wouldn’t blow off her medical questions like everybody else did, she started taking advantage of it as often as she could – and Dean never failed her.

“Cardiomyoplasty. It’s an experimental procedure, and a real bitch to perform. Basically, we take skeletal muscles from the patient’s back or abdomen and we wrap them around the heart. Then we stimulate that added muscle with a device that’s a bit like a pacemaker – you know? – and it’s supposed to augment myocardial contraction. The heart’s pumping motion, that is.”

“So… you take a muscle from my back, put it around my heart, and put some volts through it?”

“In short, yeah,” Dean agrees, smiling at the sight of fascination on Charlie’s face. “Have you ever thought about studying medicine?”

Charlie shakes her head.

“I don’t have the stomach for that. But I like listening.”

“So what about that night in the OR?” Pamela cuts in. “My break ends in five, so you better hurry that story, Winchester.”

Dean obliges with gusto and relates his and Benny’s adventures like he did many times before. He never tires of it, because the tale is truly hilarious. The liquor wasn’t just the reason they got locked in the OR in the first place, but also the reason they got tipsy and started winding each other up until they managed to persuade each other they’re in a room full of monsters that crave the flesh of people with medical diplomas.

“We weren’t even that drunk, technically speaking… I think it was the exhaustion,” he explains while Pamela and Charlie roll around on the couch, laughing their asses off. “The nurse that found us the next morning almost jumped out of her skin. We must have made a real spectacle.”

“How are you still a renowned surgeon after shit like this?”

“I’m just that good.”

“Bull. My guess is that you have good friends who covered that up for you.”

Dean is silent for a moment, but then he nods, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“You’re right, Pam. I do plenty of stupid shit, but I’ve always had a lot of luck with people.”
He doesn’t say it out loud, but he thinks his good fortune didn’t leave him when he moved to New York. Although it didn’t look promising at first, one week into the new job and he’s been embraced better than he could have hoped for. Everybody warned him that a hospital in New York would be a beehive full of tired, testy people, but it’s not what Dean sees around him.

He sees Charlie clapping him on the shoulder on her way out of the breakroom; he sees Pamela giving him a wink that no matter how you look at it can’t be interpreted as innocent; he sees Tessa saying goodbye a while later with a gentle smile before she goes back to her duties.

And most importantly, he sees a place for himself, too.

It takes one week and three days for Dean to admit to himself that he may have a bit of a problem, and that this problem may happen to have post-electrocution hair and unfairly sharp cheekbones.

Following their weird late night marathon on Friday, Castiel has taken to joining Dean in the doctors lounge after their surgeries. At first, they don’t speak much – whether due to exhaustion or lack of will, it’s not entirely clear. Dean always comes first and takes the right side of the couch. Castiel appears not long after and moves to the left side, always with a remote in hand. He hops from channel to channel until he finds something interesting or Dean stops him, and they watch in silence, blinking tiredly against the bright light of the tiny screen.

After a while, they begin to talk. It starts with one of them commenting on whatever is happening on screen, and half of the time they end up arguing about it. They can’t seem to agree on anything, whether it’s a cooking show, a talk show, a documentary or even a stupid game show.
“It’s not how you make guacamole!” Castiel bristles when they watch Food Network.

“Calm down, Gordon Ramsay, she’s doing fine,” Dean says. It might not be how you prepare guacamole, but the contestant is doing her best.

“It’s fascinating how elephants can smell water from up to 3 miles away,” Castiel marvels when they happen upon a documentary on Animal Planet.

“I’m about to stab myself in the eyeball from boredom,” Dean announces.

The worst comes when they watch Jeopardy!, though.

“You cannot seriously be rooting for that dickbag, Novak.”

“He’s the best educated of them all by far.”

“He didn’t answer the question about Bon Jovi! Does he live under a rock or something?”

“Not all of us are as invested in old school pop-rock as you are, Winchester.”

“It’s not pop-rock!”

“My brother listened to this band, it’s the very definition of pop-rock.”

“I don’t listen to pop-rock—”

The more heated the argument becomes and the longer it continues, the more difficult it is for Dean to refrain from kissing that irritating expression right off Castiel’s face. The bastard just sits there, driving Dean insane with his calm and his ridiculous opinions, but most of all with those
hands (no longer in disposable gloves), that jaw (no longer hidden behind the mask), that hair (thoroughly disheveled by the surgical cap) and the eyes that don’t seem to stop following Dean even outside the OR.

So Dean grits his teeth and squabbles with Castiel until he’s out of breath, pointedly ignoring his treacherous instincts. When he feels like reaching out and running a hand through the mess of Castiel’s hair, he clenches his fists in his lap. When he catches himself staring at Castiel’s lips too openly, he gets up to get them a pack of chocolate raisins from the vending machine. He finds a million little ways to avoid facing the truth until he can’t anymore, because one week and three days after their first meeting he wakes up from a very vivid dream, hard like a rock and blushing at the filthiness of his own subconscious.

He tries to battle through it, but the fight is short and doomed to fail from the beginning. Defeated, he shuffles into the shower and takes care of himself with long, furious strokes, leaning his forehead against the shower wall and replaying the dream of blue eyes and pink lips before it can slip from his memory.

“Winchester! I’m gonna kill you!”

“Remotely?”

“If I have to. Why didn’t you call me sooner, you jerk? You promised you would.”

“I had a lot on my plate, Jo.”

“Careful or I might actually believe you,” Jo scoffs.

“I moved to the other side of the country,” Dean explains patiently, plonking himself down on the sofa and placing the laptop on the coffee table. “And started a new job. Cut me some slack.”

“Mom told me to yell at you on her behalf.”

“Christ. Jo, save me.”

“I will cover for you if you promise to update me regularly,” Jo offers, tilting her screen so that Dean gets an eyeful of the window behind her. The sun still hasn’t set in California.

“What do you want to know? It’s all boring,” Dean warns, but he already knows Jo won’t hear any of it.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Let’s start with the apartment.”

“Well, it’s sorta medium-sized, and—”

“No, you idiot, show me.”

After some predictably ineffective protests, Dean is forced to carry his laptop around the apartment, showing Jo every room and the view from the windows. It’s already dark out, but it doesn’t seem to bother her.

“Looks like a cozy little neighborhood,” she remarks.

“I haven’t done much exploring yet, but it’s nice. It’s called Fort Greene.”

“You’re turning into a middle-aged gentleman, Winchester. Do you take your morning newspaper to read in Central Park on Sundays, too?”

“Shut up, Jo. I’m still hip.”

“More like hip replacement.”

“You’re lucky you’re on the other coast, you little monster.”

Jo flips him off and rolls over onto her stomach, pushing her laptop closer on the bed.

“Tell me about the hospital. Any hot males or females?”

Dean sighs, briefly entertaining the idea of shutting the laptop right here and now. Ultimately he decides against it – it wouldn’t be worth the hell Jo would give him once she got a hold of him again.
“You cut right to the chase, don’t you?”

“You know me.”

He could lie to her. He could tell her there’s no one that caught his eye, or exaggerate the significance of his half-serious flirting with Pamela just to get Jo off his back, but what comes out instead is:

“How do you deal with people who are super attractive but just as obnoxious?”

Jo lets out a laugh and raises her eyes to the ceiling.

“Oh, these are the best ones.”

“If by ‘the best’ you mean ‘the most annoying’, then yeah.”

“Who is it?” Jo prods.

“My surgical nurse.”

“Your surgical nurse?”

“You know what I mean!” Dean says exasperatedly. “The one I work with. He’s infuriating.”

“Oh, so he’s a ‘he’. And what did he ever do to you to get your panties in a twist?”

Dean opens his mouth, then closes it. He doesn’t want to sound like a whiny kid, and suddenly he can’t think of a way to phrase why the mere sight of Castiel Novak makes him fume like a Republican during pride season.

“He’s… he’s just so serious, Jo. It’s like he’s honor-bound to never relax.”

Jo raises her eyebrows.

“And that’s reason enough to get all worked up about him?”

“I just want a friendly atmosphere at work, is that too much to ask?” Dean says defensively. “He doesn’t do small talk, doesn’t come to the breakroom to socialize – hell, he doesn’t even smile! I can count the number of times I saw him do that on one hand.”

“Oh dear. Is the brooding nurse immune to your charm?”

“I already regret telling you anything,” Dean says, lips curving into a pout.

“Sorry, sorry,” Jo laughs. She plasters a more serious expression on her face and sighs when she sees Dean slouch despondently against the sofa. “Sorry,” she repeats. “Is it hard to work with him? Maybe you could request a different nurse?”

“No, no. I mean, maybe I could, but I don’t wanna.”

In theory, Jo’s idea could work, but Dean knows right away that it’s out of the question. He doesn’t want to stop working with Castiel. Even though they’ve barely spent two weeks together, Dean can already affirm without a doubt that Cas is the best, most professional surgical nurse he’s ever collaborated with. It’s not his work ethic Dean is unhappy about; it’s the fact that Castiel is an insufferable walking distraction and there’s nothing to be done about that.

Unless.

“Oh my God,” Dean whispers. “Jo, I love you.”

“Huh?”

“I know what I have to do.”

Jo’s confusion is evident on her face, but Dean is too excited about his sudden burst of genius to notice.

“What’s that?”

“I need to bang him,” Dean announces with feeling. “Get it out of both our systems.”

“Dude, you are gross,” Jo winces. “You think having meaningless sex will improve whatever weird working relationship you got going on?”

“It can’t make it any worse,” Dean argues.

“It’s a terrible idea, Dean. You have just started working there. Don’t burn any bridges.”
“If I don’t do something, he’ll drive me insane,” Dean protests, but he’s losing his enthusiasm under Jo’s disappointed gaze.

“Is it really just about him being obnoxious? Because I think you can’t stand the fact that he simply doesn’t like you.”

Dean duly expresses how offended he is at the suggestion, but deep down he starts to wonder if Jo might be right. He’s used to being liked, and getting the cold shoulder from the one person in the hospital he’s supposed to be working with the closest maybe stings him more than he realizes.

“Look, Dean, you’re a grown-up and I can’t stop you from doing what you want, but promise me you’ll think it through, okay? Don’t go sticking your private parts into people and thinking it’s a universal problem-solver.”

“Wow, Jo. Who’s gross now?”

Jo only shakes her head and gives him a hard look.

“Okay?”

He nods automatically and makes sure to change the subject as fast as he can. While Jo grills him about his commute and his terrible eating habits, his mind wanders back to Castiel. Would dragging him into some supply closet to suck him off really change anything? Would it make him easier to coexist with, or less quarrelsome during their post-surgery marathons?

Would Cas even let him?

The conversation with Jo has the exact opposite effect than the one Dean intended. Talking to someone was supposed to help him get a sober perspective and deal with the situation better. Meanwhile, he winds up in a living nightmare even worse than before.

He can’t stop thinking about it. He catches himself staring at Castiel more and more often, and gets increasingly flustered each time he’s noticed. His concentration in the OR goes to hell when all Cas has to do is brush his fingers while handing him a pair of forceps or make their hips touch when he moves around the operating table. Their late night TV watching becomes a battlefield, because it’s so much easier to argue with Castiel than to admit having wild hots for him. Of course, admitting how much Dean wants him to drop the frigid attitude and warm up to him is out of the question from the get-go. He has his pride, after all. If Castiel chooses to act all detached and sour then fine, Dean won’t go tripping over his own feet to make him change his mind.

Unfortunately, some things are easier said than done, and soon enough Dean’s internal battle between his common sense and his libido comes to a head. Quite literally, too.

It’s 2 am and they’re resting in the doctors lounge after an exhausting double bypass surgery. Dr. Sexy MD is on again, so they don’t bother searching for anything else. The blue glow coming from the TV screen illuminates Castiel’s profile, highlighting his features in a way that’s five kinds of unfair.

Dean sneaks a surreptitious glance at him, idly wondering how that permanent stubble would feel beneath his fingers, when Castiel scrunches up his nose in distaste and shakes his head as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“This is so unrealistic.”

In a flash, Dean’s eyes snap back to the screen. He got so distracted he has no idea what’s going on in the scene.

“What?”

“Nobody slaps people as often as Doctor Piccolo and gets away with it.”

Dean can’t contain an inelegant snort that escapes him. He scoops a chocolate raisin out of the bag that sits between them and throws it at Castiel’s head.

“It’s medical drama, dude. It’s meant to be exaggerated.”

“This is not what the term ‘drama’ refers to,” Castiel points out and immediately ducks to avoid another speeding raisin.

“Are you familiar with the concept of making jokes, Novak?”
“Was that a joke?” Cas frowns, feigning confusion. “I was under the impression those are supposed to make you laugh.”

Dean flings yet another raisin at him, which makes Castiel scoff in annoyance.

“Would you stop that?”

It’s a reasonable request, but Dean discovers that launching a raisin attack on the object of his frustrations has great therapeutic value. That’s why he proceeds with his kindergarten-style assault, cackling like a maniac and too dog-tired to reflect on how childish he’s being.

“I understand that you’re fatigued,” Castiel begins, ignoring the raisin that hits him square in the chest, “but this is juvenile even for you.”

“I’ll keeping throwing these at you until you smile,” Dean informes him in between huffs of laughter.

“What are you, twelve?”

“Yeah, on a scale from one to ten,” Dean grins, tossing two more raisins that land in Cas’s lap.

“Dean, stop it,” Castiel says, his voice gaining a sharper edge.

“Oh, so it’s Dean now?”

“What has gotten into you today?”

Dean rolls his eyes and sinks his hand deeper into the bag, ready to fish out another fistful of ammo.

“Nothing has gotten into me. I just want you to smile already.”

“You give me no reason to,” Castiel replies coldly.

“You’re such a pain in the ass, you know that?”

Castiel stills, but Dean doesn’t stop to think about whether it’s a good idea for him to keep talking. He abandons the raisin bag and sidles up closer to Cas, his left knee knocking against Castiel’s hip.

“Can’t you just fucking relax? God, we’ve been doing this for three weeks and all you do is argue with me about the dumbest things.”

“It takes two people to argue,” Castiel says, his voice as icy as his eyes now.

“There it fucking is again,” Dean barks. “You can’t bear to agree with me on anything.”

“I’m not in the habit of adjusting my opinions to anyone’s likes or dislikes, Winchester.”

“Admirable,” Dean sneers. “Congrats on the integrity, I hope it keeps you warm at night.”

Something flashes behind Castiel’s eyes, but it’s gone just as quickly as it appeared, and Dean’s not sure if it was hurt or annoyance or something else altogether. All he knows is that it was the wrong thing to say.

Castiel leans forward, bringing their faces mere inches apart, and pins him with the most terrifying stare Dean’s ever been given.

“Fuck you,” he says. They’re so close now that the words send a small puff of air directly into Dean’s half-open mouth.

It’s very intimidating, but also stupidly hot. Dean licks his lips before he can stop himself, and that’s when he notices it. Castiel’s eyes track the movement; his pupils dilate; his own lips part ever-so-slightly. It might be subtle – definitely more so than Dean’s ogling – but it’s there alright.

Dean is not alone in his plight.

“Yeah, fuck you too,” he says.

It’s unclear who makes the first move; all Dean knows is that one moment they’re staring at each other with eyes that spell out bloody murder, and the next they slam into each other in a painful crash of lips and teeth. It’s uncoordinated and heated, laced not only with annoyance, but also with an alarming dose of lust. Castiel doesn’t even pretend to play nice, biting Dean’s bottom lip and digging his fingers into his sides. Dean’s blood pounds in his ears as he tries to take in every little sensation at once, the strong hands gripping him tight by the waist, the stubble grazing hard against his skin and the tongue licking its way into his mouth. Once his brain catches up, he
against his skin and the tongue licking its way into his mouth. Once his brain catches up, he responds in kind, sinking his fingers into Castiel’s hair and tugging at it until Cas moans low into his mouth and yanks him flush against his hips.

As soon as their bodies meet, Dean feels the hard line of Cas’s erection straining against his thigh, and dimly realizes he inadvertently put his plan into motion.

There’s no way they won’t get each other off right here and now.

Both of them are still wearing scrubs, so it’s no effort at all to pull the loose material aside and take each other in hand. Dean’s eyes roll back in his skull when those freakishly long, skillful fingers he’s watched for hours in the OR wrap around him and begin to work him over at a maddening pace. He returns the favor with frantic movements, crowding against Cas in the little space they share on the couch. The angle is odd and uncomfortable, but Dean can’t be damned to let go of Castiel’s lips for long enough to adjust it. He’s already so close to shooting his load it’s embarrassing.

“Shit,” he gasps when Castiel squeezes him particularly hard. “Cas, shit.”

“Oh, so it’s Cas now?”

“Do you— ah— do you have to argue with me even while we’re jacking each other off?”

“Should I stop so that we can argue without distraction?”

“Don’t you dare, you bastard, don’t—”

Cas gives him a rough pull and Dean groans, any protests dying in his throat. A few strokes later he spills all over Cas’s hand, pressing his face into the crook of his neck. His heart beats a fast tattoo against his ribcage, and it takes several moments before he sobers up enough to realize that his own hand has stopped moving a while ago and remains dry, which means Castiel didn’t get off.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he whispers hoarsely. He always prides himself on never leaving his partner hanging, but it seems that Castiel continues to tear through his patterns like it’s nothing. “I’m gonna— just— lie back, Cas.”

Dean is fairly surprised when Castiel obliges without a word of protest, slumping backwards on the couch and letting Dean crawl on top of him. As they shift around, a rustle of plastic comes from somewhere underneath them.

“What…?”

Cas reaches a hand behind his back and fishes out the forgotten bag of chocolate raisins. They both stare at it for a few long seconds.

“We better put that away before the chocolate gets squashed into the upholstery,” Cas says with a thoughtful look on his face.

“You have my hand down your pants and you worry about décor?”

“This couch is common property and we shouldn’t vandalize it, even if it’s in the heat of the moment.”

“Is this your idea of dirty talk?”

“Can you only speak in questions?”

“Is this a challenge?”

“And you dare accuse me of being contentious? You—hmfdpf!”

The bag slips from Cas’s hold as Dean seizes their lips and grinds their hips together. The raisins go rolling in all directions across the floor.

“Damn it,” Castiel mutters, straining to see past Dean to inspect the mess they’ve made.

“Just leave it, Jesus.”

“I only wanted—”

“For the love of!” Dean spits out. “I will make you shut up, Novak, if it’s the last thing I do.”

In one determined move, he dives in and swallows Cas down before the irritating bastard can think of anything more to say. The effect is most satisfying, since Castiel promptly forgets all about the raisins, gripping Dean’s hair and arching his back with a choked-off cry.
Dean makes every effort to keep Cas’s mind far away from the snacks scattered on the floor. He’s having much more fun taking him apart than he anticipated, delighting in the gasps and curses that spill from Castiel’s mouth instead of his usual infuriating remarks. It doesn’t take long before the hand buried in his hair tightens in warning and pulls him away, which causes an obscenely wet popping sound.

Dean watches as Cas comes in hot spurts all over his scrubs, and feels an unexpected rush of affection towards him. It’s the weirdest time to get all gooey – not five seconds after having the guy’s junk in his mouth – but Dean finds himself leaning over and smiling down at Cas. With how angry and desperate this whole thing between them was, he would never have expected Castiel to show such consideration. On the contrary, he wouldn’t be surprised in the least if things got rough and he ended up with a mouthful of spunk.

“Congratulations.”

Dean blinks down at Cas.

“On what?”

“On making me shut up. It worked.”

Dean smiles sheepishly and clambers off of Cas, moving back to his side of the couch. He doesn’t look over to see what Castiel is doing, but judging by the sounds, he’s cleaning himself up. Once the rustle of fabric dies down, Dean knows it’s time to say something. Anything.

He clears his throat and risks a glance to his left.

Castiel stares at him.

“That was…” Dean begins, then cuts himself off. That was what? Awesome? Problematic? Awkwardness-inducing, apparently?

“Do you regret it?” Castiel asks, his voice as calm and collected as if they were talking over a game of chess.

“No. You?”

“Me neither.”

Silence.

“Do you want to… you know. Repeat it some time?”

It may only be Dean’s imagination, but Cas looks almost astonished, like he didn’t even entertain that possibility. He purses his lips in thought.

“It’s a good alternative to watching TV all night,” he says. “And I much prefer that than arguing with you.”

“Likewise.”

Castiel keeps watching him with those wide, searching eyes, and Dean finds he can’t look away.

“So… was that a yes?”

“I think so. No strings attached?”

“No strings attached.”

“Okay.”

Dean can feel his skin prickling under Cas’s gaze and decides it’s high time to evacuate before he does something stupid, like jump him again.

“I, uh… I think I’m gonna head home and catch at least a few hours of sleep.”

“Alright.”

“I— I’ll see you later, Cas.”

“Goodnight, Dean.”

As soon as the door closes behind him, Dean thumps his head against the nearest wall.

*We discourage intimate relations between staff*, said Crowley.

*Cas is really sweet. Just wait and see*, said Charlie.
Don’t burn any bridges, said Jo.

No strings attached, said Cas.

Wow, he’s hot, said Dean’s downstairs brain.

What the fuck did he get himself into.
When his first fall in New York comes around, painting the trees bright red and yellow, Dean barely notices. He’s worked in St. Hubert’s Medical Center for almost two months, taking on more and more new patients until Tessa comes over to him one day, places her hand on his shoulder and gently asks him to stop.

“You’ll run yourself down, Dean. Everybody here already knows you’re amazing at what you do. It’s time to take care of yourself.”

Dean smiles and thanks her for the advice, but does nothing to follow it. He doesn’t want to change anything, because everything is perfect. He has a well-paid job he excels at; he likes his coworkers and is respected and liked in return; he helps people on a day-to-day basis; he’s even grown quite fond of New York. He neither wants nor needs to slow down – he’s in his element. Even the last piece of the puzzle, the pain-in-the-ass Castiel Novak, RN, has finally fallen into place.

If Dean was afraid their working relationship would suffer as a result of that fateful night in the doctors lounge, Castiel dissipated his worries in no time at all. He remains professional both in the OR and outside of it, acting as if nothing ever happened. Dean has more trouble keeping himself in check, but he does his best to conceal any signs of overt familiarity between them. Very soon they both become experts at hiding and sneaking around, finding empty treatment rooms and supply closets to make out in. They’re so good at it that nobody has a clue what’s going on, and they take the precaution of not telling anything even to their friends. Cas promises not to breathe a word to Meg, whereas Dean answers Charlie’s curious questions with a doctor’s most believable excuse – “I have no time to have a love life.”

Even though they have to hide, it’s clear that the arrangement they cooked up is working, and working well. The long hours they spend in the hospital prevent them from going out and meeting other people, be it for random hook-ups or something serious. They both need stress relief and physical closeness, they find each other desirable, and they’re both there. It’s perfect.

Until, of course, it isn’t.

“Just do it.”

“I’m trying.”

“You need to flick your wrist.”

“I am flicking it!”

“No, you’re not. You’re flailing it. Look.”

Castiel picks up a handful of chocolate raisins and one by one sends them into a mug sitting at the foot of the TV. They all land safely inside, unlike the ones Dean has scattered all over the place – except where they were supposed to go.

“I hate you.”

“You simply need more practice, Dean.”

Cas gets up from the couch and goes to collect the raisins for another round. It’s 2 am again and instead of watching TV, they’re throwing snacks into a mug. They’re grown-ups after all.

“I don’t want any more practice,” Dean says sullenly when Cas comes back and settles next to him. “I think I’m gonna call it a day.”

“Dean Winchester,” says Castiel, eyes twinkling with amusement, “you’re a sore loser.”

“I’m not, I’m just tired. In case you forgot, I performed three different surgeries today.”

“So did I, and my aim is not affected.”

“Shut up, Novak.”

They end up falling off the couch and making out on the floor until Cas grabs Dean’s face in his hands and forcibly pulls it away so that he can look him in the eye.
“Dean, this is insane. We stopped watching television together because it only took a few minutes for one of us to tackle the other, and now what, we don’t even need to turn on the TV for that to happen?”

“Apparently,” Dean shrugs, struggling against Cas’s grip and trying to seal their lips back together.

Castiel sighs and lets him.

“I thought you were tired,” he mutters when Dean moves on to nibble at his neck.

“I’m on my last legs, man. That’s why we’re horizontal.”

Cas laughs at that – a full-on laugh that punches all air out of Dean in one swift motion. It’s sonorous and unrestrained and genuine and – well, kind of beautiful. Dean pulls away, scrambling to prop himself on his elbows, and glances down at Castiel.

“Can’t you do that more often?”

“Do what?”

“Laugh.”

He would be so much more bearable if he laughed like that on a regular basis.

Castiel doesn’t answer right away, looking up at Dean with an inscrutable look on his face. The faint light coming from the corner lamp casts a shadow on one side of his face, and Dean mindlessly traces the edge of it with his thumb. The prolonged silence is just about to become uncomfortable when Cas finally lifts his hand and puts it around Dean’s neck.

“I might if you give me reasons,” he says sincerely, his voice tinged with sadness Dean doesn’t like one bit. “Winchester,” he adds after a beat.

It’s a transparent attempt to preserve the light-hearted atmosphere, but Dean lets it slide without a comment. Instead, he allows Cas to pull him down and bring their lips together, all the heat from before gone in favor of what is probably the softest kiss they’ve shared so far.

Dean deepens it and tangles his fingers in Cas’s hair, silently deciding that if secretive make-out sessions afterhours are what it takes to make Cas laugh, then he’s totally on board with that.

He still doesn’t see he’s in trouble.

One day, Dean ventures into the pediatric ward.

Normally, he would have no reason to be there, but he needs to talk to Doctor Deveraux ASAP and one of the nurses informed him that he was asked for a cardiological consultation of a young patient. It’s therefore nothing but a series of minor incidents that leads Dean to the part of the hospital he’s never wandered into before (nor does he want to – pediatric wards are by far the most depressing departments in any hospital), and it’s by pure accident that he happens to catch a glimpse of a familiar dark head in a playroom he passes on his way.

He stops abruptly and almost does a double-take. What would Cas be doing here? Didn’t he say he was going on a lunch break?

He tiptoes closer, feeling like an idiot for sneaking around but not wanting to make an even bigger fool of himself in case the guy is not really Cas. The door to the playroom stands ajar, and Dean peers inside, putting his hand on the doorjamb.

The sight that greets him makes his jaw drop.

Castiel sits in a yellow beanbag in the center of the room, surrounded by about a dozen kids in ages from 4 to 12. They all stare at him as if he just brought the Word of God down from the mountain, hanging on every intake of breath and every syllable. Castiel himself doesn’t look at any of the kids, only at the book he’s holding in his hands. It has a red hardback cover embossed with golden letters, and Castiel’s eyes move across the page as he reads aloud, his voice even deeper than usual, pronouncing each word with feeling and intensity that quickly make Dean understand why the kids sit stock-still like they’re under a spell. The throaty rumble of Cas’s baritone carries through the room, unfolding a story of a princess who had everything and a poor peasant boy who made her realize it wasn’t worth much if she had no one with whom to share it.

Dean leans his arm against the doorframe and stands there for a good ten minutes, careful not to
alert anyone to his presence. The cadence of Castiel’s voice is mesmerizing, so much so that Dean
doesn’t even register the words, only the rising and falling sounds, both calming and spellbinding
in their rhythm. When the story inevitably draws to an end and Cas attempts to close the book,
disappointed cries erupt across the room until he raises his hands in surrender, smiling gently as he
turns the page to begin another story. Dean doesn’t stay to hear that one, and instead retreats to the
hall without being seen.

Forgetting all about Doctor Deveraux and the matter he wanted to discuss with him, Dean pads
back to the cardiology department. He’s so deep in thought that he doesn’t notice Charlie running
forward after him, and only lifts his head when she pries the door open at the last moment.

“Very gentlemanlike, Winchester,” she pants, gripping her side as she leans against the elevator
wall.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there. Going up?”

“Yeah.”

Dean hits the button, still preoccupied with processing what he’s seen.

“You alright?” Charlie asks when she gets her breath back. “You look... hm. Pensive.”

“Just wondering about something.”

“Okay.”

Dean manages to contain himself for a whole of ten seconds.

“Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever seen Cas having lunch in the breakroom?”

Charlie gives him a surprised look that quickly morphs into suspicion.

“No, now that I think about it I guess I haven’t. Why?”

“Me neither,” Dean says thoughtfully. “The guy has gotta rest and eat sometime, right?”

“What are you getting at, Dean?”

“Nothing,” he backpedals. Thankfully, the elevator door opens and all Charlie can do is bore a
hole into his back as Dean walks away. He’s so distracted that he passes by Tessa and Chuck
without saying hi, and doesn’t notice when they look at each other with surprise. He wanders into
the doctors lounge on autopilot and slides onto the couch.

He’s at a loss.

He thought he knew Cas pretty well – they work together, they watch TV together, they banter
together, they organize raisin-throwing Olympics together, and they jerk each other off on a
regular basis. It’s all very easy to categorize. As a surgical nurse, Cas is professional, skilled, and
efficient. As company for TV-watching, he’s irritating and peevish. As a raisin-thrower, he’s
unbeatable. Straightforward labels, predictable behaviors, everything perfectly constant. But this?
This doesn’t fit into Dean’s view of Castiel. He has no trouble admitting Cas is good at his job and
annoying as all shit, but... kind? How is he supposed to reconcile the obnoxious jerk who drips
sex with a guy who willingly deprives himself of his lunch breaks to read fairytales to sick kids
like he’s some fucking saint?

It bothers Dean so much that come evening and their usual post-surgery get-together in the doctors
lounge, he can’t stop himself from spilling the beans.

To his astonishment, Cas looks away and bites his lip.

“Cas?”

“What would you like to watch tonight?”

Dean is so thrown off by Castiel’s poorly concealed embarrassment he almost misses another
anomaly: instead of snatchiing the remote and choosing the channel himself, Cas offered him a
choice. That never happens.

“Why are you ashamed of this?”

“I’m not,” Cas says sternly. “Let’s change the subject.”
“What the hell, Cas? You’re doing something awesome, why wouldn’t you—”

In a split second, Dean has Cas’s tongue down his throat and his body submits to it happily. They kiss and kiss until Dean remembers that wait, no, as unusual as it is, he’d rather listen to Cas than make out with him. Just this once, of course.

“Hey, hey, um— Cas, timeout— hey!”

They separate, lips swollen and glistening, and Dean has to focus very hard to remember what he wants to achieve here.

“I stood there long enough to see that these kids adore you. Do you go there often?”

Cas sighs and lets go of Dean’s collar, smoothing it down with the pads of his fingers. He seems to realize he can’t wiggle his way out of this that easily.

“As often as I can. It depends on how much work I have, but usually three or four times a week.”

“And what about your lunch breaks?”

“What about them?”

Dean scowls and grabs Cas’s wrist.

“You do know you have to eat, right? Rest? Pee? How do you even function?”

“You’re a doctor, figure it out.”

Dean makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat and tightens his grip on Cas’s hand.

“I’m serious, Cas.”

“So am I. If you were there, then you saw how happy those kids are when somebody takes the time to read them something other than their test results.”

“I get that, but—”

“No buts.” Cas says it with a note of finality in his voice, turning to grab the remote and turn on the TV – a clear sign that the conversation is over. Dean narrows his eyes, but he decides to let it go this time. Besides, there’s no defying Castiel when he’s like this.

Ten minutes pass and then they’re making out again, clinging to each other’s scrubs and letting their hands wander underneath. Dean presses his lips against the taut skin of Castiel’s neck and drags them across the light stubble there.

“Talk,” he murmurs, nosing at the underside of Cas’s jaw.

“What?”

“Just say something. Anything. The bones of the hand for all I care.”

Castiel huffs an amused sound, but surprisingly enough, he complies without question. Dean is infinitely grateful for that, because he has no idea how he could explain his newfound affinity for Castiel’s voice without sounding downright idiotic.

There’s a short beat, a gentle intake of breath, and Castiel begins to recite the names of bones as if straight from a medical textbook.

“Scaphoid, lunate, triquetral…”

Dean leans closer and seals his lips over Cas’s throat, placing his palm over the area his mouth can’t cover.

“…pisiform, trapezium, trapezoid, capitate…”

Despite having been taught about the human vocal apparatus and how it produces sound, Dean still isn’t prepared for the way the syllables reverberate through him, pulsing under his touch like a living thing. Entranced, he kisses a trail down the path of Castiel’s words, reveling in every little vibration.

“…hamate, metacarpals, proximal phalanx…”

Castiel is almost purring the names now, head tipped back and eyes closed.

“…middle phalanx, distal phalanx…. Dean…”
Dean shifts in Cas’s lap and smiles against his skin.

“The human body has 206 bones, Cas,” he whispers. “And we have plenty of time.”

While it’s true that the human body doesn’t lack bones that can be enumerated during sex if one is so inclined, Dean and Castiel run out of them indecently fast. Every single name has been whispered, gasped, sighed or groaned for the other’s listening pleasure, yet they both find themselves reluctant to give up the game. And so they get creative, soon devising a number of new ways to smuggle the Latin into their bedroom – or rather, into the doctors lounge after dark.

At first it’s just a matter of pride to recite the names the other requested without making a mistake or missing a beat, but like everything they do, it quickly becomes a competition. They go out of their way to make the other lose it, to torture them so thoroughly they’ll crack and slip up.

They both fail.

However hard they try, neither of them caves in. Castiel reels off the names of all the muscles of the tongue while having Dean’s drag its way up and down his shaft. Dean manages to remember the names of each back muscle despite having Cas draped over his own, thrusting into him from behind and leaning in closely to listen to Dean’s stuttered words to make sure they are correct.

After a while, it gets to the point when hearing a medical name in Latin, even in entirely innocent circumstances, brings out a Pavlovian response and makes their pants just a little too tight for comfort.

It’s insane, perhaps a little weird, and it’s the best sex Dean has ever had. It’s also a perfect outlet for their banter, and a painless way of satisfying their incessant need to tease each other. Dean can’t get enough of it, of the race and the thrill, of the touches and the teasing, of playing this whole game – of Cas.

If somebody asked him about it, he would have to say aloud that his arrangement with Cas is only physical and entirely platonic. If somebody asked him, he’d have to hear himself say it, and he’d inevitably realize it has ceased to be true.

But since nobody knows what they are to each other, nobody asks.

Dean’s happy obliviousness dies in agonizing pain two weeks after his discovery of Castiel’s extracurricular activities in the pediatric ward.

It’s his day off from work, a warm, sunny Sunday in the middle of October. Although the summer weather still clings to the city, the trees have already lit up with radiant hues of red, orange, and yellow. Dean would never admit that he notices this kind of things, but he secretly enjoys watching how New York changes with the seasons. It seems to go undetected by most people, always rushing between their homes and shops and subway stations. Of course, Dean is one of them; he sleeps 5 to 6 hours a day and by all standards he qualifies as a workaholic, but he takes care to find little moments when he can actually see the city around him.

Perhaps it’s because he’s a newcomer and doesn’t know it yet, or maybe it’s his soft side trying to claw to the surface. Either way, that Sunday morning Dean finds himself gravitating towards his kitchen window. He stands there in nothing but his pajama pants, holding a mug of coffee and looking down the street with mild interest. A couple of kids drive past his building on bikes, screaming something at each other. On the opposite side of the street, a middle-aged woman waddles towards the stairs to her apartment, both hands loaded with grocery bags.

Dean chugs down the last of his coffee and decides it’s time to wander around the neighborhood.

He tucks his laptop into a bag and throws a light jacket on his shoulders, leaving the apartment with his keys jingling on his finger. There are still two hours left to his meet-up with Sam on Skype, so Dean lets his legs carry him wherever they want. It’s only a matter of time before he ends up in a local 99 Cent discount store, elbows deep in a bin full of tacky shit he doesn’t need. Since Halloween is fast approaching, half of the stock seems to consist of skeleton costumes and horrible wigs.

Dean can’t resist buying a Batman mask. Maybe he’ll give it to Charlie later.
He sorts through the candy next, picking out his favorite brands of mints, bubblegum, and chocolate bars to compose his very own diabetes cocktail. When his eyes fall upon a shelf full of Raisinets, he feels a smile creep onto his face. He grabs a few bags. They’re much cheaper here than in the vending machine in the hospital, and contrary to what he said out loud, he does need more practice if he wants to beat Cas next time.

“Big party?”

Dean jumps up like he’s been electrocuted and drops everything to the floor. He swivels around, looking as guilty as if somebody caught him stealing.

The man who stands behind him smiles apologetically and raises his hands in an appeasing gesture.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

He stoops down to pick up the candy and it’s then that Dean notices the guy is wearing a store uniform and a nametag.

He’s also kind of cute.

“No, it’s my fault,” he says, crouching down to help. “I overreacted.”

“Yeah, a little.” The guy smiles and hands Dean his candy. “I just wanted to know if you need some assistance. Well, to be honest, my manager has been eyeing you for the last 5 minutes and told me to go check if you’re not having an insulin shock or something.”

Dean feels his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

“No, I—I’m not diabetic.”

“A party then?”

“No, I… look, the candy’s for me, okay?”

The guy looks like he’s fighting a smile, but it’s not the mean kind.

“I respect that, man. I have a sweet tooth too.”

They both stand up, and Dean looks down at the pile of candy in his arms.

“I may have gone a little over the top,” he admits.

“No such thing when it comes to candy.”

“As a doctor I can tell you that’s definitely not true.”

The guy’s lips part a little, and Dean recognizes the familiar, impressed look he gets every time he tells someone his profession.

“A doctor with a taste for candy. Where have you been all my life?”

Dean almost splutters at that. Is this guy flirting with him?

He gapes for a little too long, because upon seeing his bewildered expression the guy stops smiling and rubs his neck nervously.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. That was… I don’t usually hit on customers. Please don’t tell my manager.”

“I won’t,” Dean promises, relaxing a bit now that he sees the guy is just as flustered as he is. “Actually, if you’re asking me out, I’d like to take you up on that.”

“Oh.” The guy blinks, and then breaks into a huge grin. “In that case, I am asking you out. I’m Aaron.”

“Dean.”

“So, uh… are you free this evening?” Aaron asks. His gaze drifts down to the candy in Dean’s hands and his mouth quirks up. “Since there’s no party.”

Dean blushes – dammit, he really has no game – and nods.

“Sure, I’m free.”

They exchange phone numbers and arrange to meet at the Brooklyn Public House later this evening. Aaron gives him instructions on how to get there (it’s “super easy to find”, apparently) while he personally rings up Dean’s purchases and puts them in a bag. They say their goodbyes
and Dean leaves the store with a dopey smile on his face, absent-mindedly patting the pocket where his phone sits.

A quick look at his wristwatch tells him there’s still half an hour left before he has to log on Skype, so he heads towards Fort Greene Park and finds an empty bench to flop onto. Setting his bags next to him, he pulls out his laptop (oh the joys of having Internet through a wireless USB modem) and a random candy to munch on while he waits for Sam. His hand dives into the bag and when it comes out again, he’s holding a packet of Raisinets.

He stares at it, unblinking, and something clicks.

Cas. He has just agreed to go out on a date with somebody who isn’t Cas.

It’s then, in the exact moment when the thought enters his mind, that Dean finally realizes he’s in deep trouble. He has never had any qualms about having prolific sex life, and his arrangement with Cas couldn’t be any clearer. No strings attached means no strings attached, and if Dean wanted to go out on a date with a girl or a guy (hell, a girl and a guy), then it was none of Cas’s business, and there was no reason for Dean to feel guilty about it.

Except he does feel guilty, and it scares him more than he can express.

When Sam turns up on Skype, he takes a good, long look at Dean and immediately knows something’s off.

“I got a date,” Dean admits after some grilling. “Tonight.”

“Congratulations,” Sam says. “Something serious?”

“I don’t know yet,” Dean mumbles.

“Would you like it to be?”

“I don’t know!” Dean repeats, getting frustrated now. Sam raises his eyebrows.

“You don’t sound all that excited about it.”

“It’s complicated, Sammy.”

“If it’s the first date then what complications could there possibly be?”

Dean decides it’ll be easier to change the subject than to tiptoe around the fact that he has a fuck buddy he may or may not have started developing feelings for.

“How about we talk about your love life instead, huh?”

To his surprise, Sam drops his gaze to his hands and clears his throat a little too loud.

“Wait, there actually is someone? Sammy, you sly dog. Who is she?”

Sam cards his fingers through his hair and smiles his absolute goofiest smile.

“I’d like to introduce you to her. She lives down the hall, so… if you’d wait, I can bring her here.”

A five minute conversation with Sarah (or rather five minutes of watching Sarah talk animatedly and laugh while Sam keeps staring at her like she’s the sun and stars) is all Dean needs to get the whole picture. His little brother is head over heels, and the object of his affection is more than good enough for him, even by Dean The-Overly-Protective-Older-Sibling Winchester’s standards.

“Sam told me he’s planning to visit you in New York over Christmas,” Sarah says. “He keeps hedging my questions, so can I ask you – do you have any family there?”

“Nope.”

Sam sends him a spectacular bitchface over Sarah’s shoulder, but Dean just shrugs in response. It’s true, they don’t have anyone here. It would be much easier for him if they did, but life’s not all sunshine and rose petals.

“So it’ll be just the two of you?”
“Yup.”

“On Christmas?”

“Yup.”

“I see.”

Sarah falls silent for a brief moment, picking at a loose strand on her T-shirt. She glances at Sam, then at Dean.

“Would it be okay if I came too?”

“What?” says Sam.

“Sure!” says Dean.

“Wait, wait. Don’t you want to spend Christmas with your family?” Sam demands, putting his hand on Sarah’s waist and gently turning her around so that he can catch her eye. She doesn’t look apologetic.

“Answer the question, Sam.”

Sam sneaks a peek at Dean, eyes wide and searching for help. Dean winks at him.

“New York is a big place, and spending Christmas there with only one person as company will be depressing as hell. Trust me.”

“You should totally come,” Dean says before Sam can interject. “I’ll borrow a mattress and we’ll make Sam sleep on the floor so that you can have the sofa bed.”

“Dean, will you give us a second?” Sam says in his most business-like tone. “We’ll be right back.” The laptop shuts and Dean sighs, rolling his eyes.

While he waits for Sam to call him again, it hits him that Sarah broached a subject he hasn’t even considered until now. If Sam comes to New York without his girlfriend, then it will be the first Christmas they spend alone since that time they were kids and Dad got so drunk he got lost on his way home from a bar. Of course, he made it back eventually, but Christmas day was almost over by then.

Dean hopes Sarah will manage to persuade his brother. He really doesn’t need a reminder of that Christmas.

He starts getting impatient, glancing at his watch in growing annoyance, but then the computer screen flashes with Sam’s caller ID.

“What’s the verdict, kids? Do you—”

Dean cuts himself off at the sight of Sarah’s reddened lips and Sam’s hardcore disheveled hair, and stifles a laugh.

“I take it you’re coming, Sarah Blake.”

Although Dean toys with the idea of calling Aaron and cancelling their date, in the end he doesn’t go through with it. At 7 pm he turns up at the Brooklyn Public House and walks inside to see Aaron already seated behind the bar. They smile at each other, and the knot in Dean’s stomach loosens a little. He doesn’t owe Cas anything. He’s an adult and he has a date with a guy he likes. It’s cool. Totally cool.

The evening progresses well, riddled with your run-of-the-mill date topics such as work, favorite music and movies. When Aaron finds out Dean doesn’t really know New York, he launches into a ten minute lecture about the best places to eat in Brooklyn, and then an even longer rant about where Dean should never ever venture if he wants to live.

It’s all going swimmingly until Aaron gets tipsy on his third beer and leans closer on his stool, sidling up to Dean and eyeing his lips in a way that certainly won’t win him any subtlety awards.

“You wanna come to my place?”

Dean does. He wants nothing more than to make out, get laid (in an actual bed for once), and wake up tomorrow with somebody by his side. He puts away his beer and moves towards Aaron,
determined to just go through with it, because dammit, Aaron is cute and funny and normally
Dean would be all over him.

As he hovers closer, Aaron’s eyes slide shut in anticipation and his hand fists into the front of
Dean’s shirt. For some reason Dean stares at that hand, small and rather unremarkable – like most
hands are – and all he can think about are long, tan fingers moving across his face, gripping his
hips, gliding over his back—

“Fuck.”

Aaron pops his eyes open and blinks up at him in confusion.

“What?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Dean pulls away and looks down at his own hands, as if it was their fault.

“It wouldn’t be fair. I’m sorry.”

“Fair to whom?”

Mad at himself and the world in general, Dean snags his beer and finishes it in one swig. He’s a
fucking child.

“I have some, uh, unresolved issues with someone. I… shit, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t leading you on,
man, I—”

Dean chances a glance at Aaron expecting to find him disappointed or angry, so the resigned and
slightly amused expression he sees takes him by surprise.

“You’re not upset,” he realizes. “Why aren’t you upset?”

Aaron laughs helplessly, and it makes even less sense.

“I can’t effing believe this. And I thought *my* motivations were morally dubious.”

“What?”

“Try to be inconspicuous and look at the big guy sitting on your left, at the table by the window.”

“What are you—”

“Just do it. But don’t let him see you’re looking.”

Dean throws a quick peek over his shoulder and sure enough, there’s a huge dude in a white t-
shirt sitting alone in the corner of the pub.

“You saw him?”

“Yeah, but I don’t get— wait, didn’t I see him before in the store?”

“He’s my manager.”

“Aaron, what the fuck.”

“He bet me 20 bucks I would never score a date with you, and another 50 that I wouldn’t get as
far as a kiss.”

Dean gawks at him, too stunned to decide if he should be angry or flattered.

“You asked me out on a dare? Seriously?”

“In case you didn’t notice, you’re hot.” Aaron shrugs, but he looks contrite. “He was being a dick
and saying I could never get with a guy like you.”

“Thanks, I guess?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I really like you. This wasn’t… I wasn’t faking anything. It was a win-win
situation.”

“Good for you,” Dean snorts. There’s no actual hurt behind his words, though. Truth be told, he’s
immensely relieved it’s not only his fault this didn’t work out.

“I’m really sorry, man,” Aaron says sincerely.
“Looks like we both are.”

They fall into a brief silence, punctuated only by the sound of Dean’s knuckles tapping distractedly on the bar.

“You know,” Aaron begins, and waits until Dean lifts his eyes. “This may have been a train wreck from start to finish, but I still had fun tonight.”

Part of Dean wants to pout and let Aaron feel just how much he hurt his pride, but he can’t deny he did enjoy himself, too. Besides, his conscience isn’t entirely clear either.

He offers Aaron a tentative smile.

“Me too. God, we both screwed up big time, didn’t we.”

“Yeah. I can’t decide which is worse – the ‘asked-you-out-as-part-of-a-bet’ or the ‘has-old-relationship-baggage’. Clichés galore.”

“It’s not even a relationship,” Dean protests.

“It’s something. Otherwise you wouldn’t be able to resist those kissable lips.” Aaron makes a show of flicking his tongue across his lips in a slow, exaggerated movement that has Dean laughing out loud.

“You’re right. Normally I would have jumped you ten minutes into the date.”

“Damn it! I always have the worst timing.”

As Aaron shakes his head and takes another sip of his beer, Dean realizes that he’s right. Had they met pre-Cas, this could have been something. Despite its spectacularly bad outcome, it was one of the best dates Dean has ever been on, and he knows without a doubt he would have gone home with Aaron, he would have enjoyed it, and there’s a big chance he would have even wanted to repeat it. It might have even developed – horror of horrors! – into something serious.

Perhaps in some other universe they did better.

“Hey,” Dean says, putting his hand on Aaron’s elbow. “I know it didn’t work out, but if I kiss you right now in front of that guy over there, he’ll still give you fifty bucks, yeah?”

Aaron’s eyebrows draw together in confusion, but he nods.

“I guess.”

“How about we split it?”

They’re still laughing like children when Dean leans in and plants a big, chaste kiss squarely on Aaron’s lips.

A minute later the guy in the white t-shirt shuffles over to them and grudgingly hands Aaron a crumpled 50-dollar bill, mumbling something that sounds suspiciously like “fluke” before walking away. Aaron puts the money in his wallet and fishes out 25 dollars, pushing them across the table to Dean, who grins and stows them away in his pocket.

They finish up, pay for their drinks, and leave the bar together in companionable silence. Once they’re standing outside, Aaron draws up the collar of his jacket and smiles at Dean.

“If things don’t work out with that other guy, you have my number.”

Dean smiles back, but he doesn’t say anything. He watches Aaron walk away down the street, waiting until he disappears behind the corner. It’s only then that the smile fades from his lips, and his shoulders hunch despondently. With every second that passes Dean realizes more and more clearly what has actually transpired tonight. He had a date with somebody he liked, but he couldn’t even get as far as the first base because he felt obligated to a person who owes him absolutely nothing and, in all likelihood, couldn’t even stand to be his friend, much less something more.

He is royally fucked.
The Plan

The reasonable thing to do after having reality crash into you with all of its brutal force would be to address the issue right away, before the situation gets any more complicated. Dean has never been good at doing the reasonable thing, but he has always tried to do the right one. That’s why he spends his lunch break with a notepad and a pen in hand, trying to come up with a list of possible solutions. So far, it presents itself as follows:

1. **End the arrangement.** Cons: Cas takes offence. Asks why. Also: no more sex (!!!)
2. **Call Aaron, go out on another date, have sex.** Cons: shitty to Aaron, might not work
3. **Bone a stranger.** Cons: 99% chance it won’t work and will make me feel like shit
4. **AskJo for advice** no way in hell
5. **Ask Charlie for advice** we agreed not to tell any coworkers
6. **Ask Sammy for advice** TMI
7. **Ask him see if I can get him to like me as a friend**
8. **Ask him out ???????

Dean sighs with frustration and tears the page away, sticking it into his coat pocket. None of this is helpful, and mulling over it only made his stomach twist into a knot.

As he gets up and prepares to leave, the door to the breakroom opens and none other than Castiel steps inside. He’s holding a plastic bag with what looks like a salad container. When he spots Dean, he nods at him and strolls over to his table.

“Can I sit here?”

Dean sits back down and moves his hand in a vague “go ahead” gesture. Cas takes the opposite chair and unpacks his bag, setting his food on the table.

“Hey, Cas?”

“Yes?”

“You never come here.”

“Evidently I do,” Castiel answers calmly, grabbing a set of plastic cutlery.

“No, I mean – I’ve never seen you here. Like, not once.”

Cas begins to eat, chewing agonizingly slow as if to spite Dean. They wait each other out until Cas swallows his food down and gives up.

“You were right the other day. I should take better care of myself if I want to take care of others.”

Dean’s elbow almost slides off the table in shock. Did Castiel just admit Dean was right about something?

“When am I ever—”

“When are you not wrong? Your opinions on pop culture are the most atrocious—”

Before Cas’s salad container is empty, they somehow manage to get into an argument about Indiana Jones (“I don’t care what they say, The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is not part of the saga!” – “You cannot selectively decide what does or doesn’t belong to the franchise, Winchester. You can dislike it, but you can’t disown it.” – “Watch me.”) and the benefits of eating vegetables (“Health is more important than the comfort of your taste buds.” – “Please don’t tell me you’re into this ‘stay healthy, eat grass’ bullshit, Novak.” – “The only thing I’m ‘into’ is my own well-being. How can you practice medicine and disagree that health has priority over guilty foods?” – “I think it’s better to live shorter eating whatever the hell you want than to live for a hundred years like a freaking rabbit.” – “Unbelievable. Which nutrition professor at Stanford hurt you?”).

It’s at this point that Dean’s mind comes to a screeching halt. He gapes at Cas, forgetting all about their argument and a witty retort he’s supposed to come up with.
“How did you know I went to Stanford? I never told you that.”

Cas blinks.

“I am familiar with your medical career.” He speaks slowly, as if he was choosing the words very carefully. “Not all of it, but I do know the highlights. You graduated from Stanford specializing in cardiothoracic surgery, and then did a PhD at the University of California.”

Dean tries very hard not to jump into any conclusions, but honestly – what other conclusion could be drawn from this other than *holy shit Cas must have looked me up.

“That’s right,” he says blankly. He has no idea what to make of it.

“I was curious who I was going to work with,” Cas explains, unbidden. “You have a very good reputation.”

That would be a great time to wink and say something cocky, but all Dean can manage is a murmured “thanks”.

“Did you enjoy your time there?” Cas prods, as if this wasn’t the most awkward conversation they’ve ever had.

“I… yeah, I did. The classes were hard, but that’s a given in med school. But, uh, yeah. I made friends, founded a band, the whole college experience package.”

“You had a band?”

There is genuine interest in Castiel’s voice as he leans over the table and looks up at Dean. He does that curious head tilt thing of his, as if stories about Dean’s college shenanigans were the most fascinating topic of conversation since the Kardashian wedding.

Dean has no idea why Cas would care, but he finds it oddly sweet.

“My friend Benny and I, we were both fans of classic rock, and in college that’s enough reason to start a band. The Vampirates, we called it. We never had time to write anything original, so mostly we just played covers of old classics. You know, Zeps, Stones, that kinda thing.”

Cas gives him an amused look.

“The Vampirates,” he repeats.

“Like vampires and pirates, you know?” Dean can’t help but grin, old memories pouring back to him. Like that time they got permission to play a concert on the quad but their bass player got drunk off his ass before it even started. Or Benny and him being each other’s wingmen and going to bars on campus to pick up girls with the whole rock star spiel. Or their “rehearsals” in the dorms, which consisted of 90% doing stupid shit and 10% music (and ended in 100% hangover the morning after). How did he even manage to graduate from that university, he’ll never know.

“It’s a very pleasantly-sounding portmanteau,” Cas compliments, bringing Dean back from his brief trip down the memory lane.

“I don’t know what the hell we were thinking when we chose it,” Dean confesses with a smile. “And we were kinda terrible, to tell you the truth.”

“What instrument did you play?” Cas asks. He seems to be genuinely interested – *still* – and it makes Dean more and more flustered.

“Guitar. Like I said, I wasn’t too good at it—”

“I refuse to believe that. As a surgeon, you’re very skilled manually. Yours are good hands to play the guitar.”

The comment, offered so sincerely and innocently, renders Dean speechless.

“I also noticed you have an ear for music. You hum to yourself to concentrate before surgery, and you’re never off-key. It seems to me like you’re really musical.”

“Um… thanks?” Dean flounders, feeling his face flush under the compliments he’s not sure Cas is even aware he’s giving. This is beginning to be too much. Castiel watched his hands? Castiel listened to his horrible singing and liked it? Castiel typed his name into the freaking Google search bar and read about him?

What the fuck.

“Do you play any instruments?” Dean asks, suddenly desperate to turn Cas’s attention away from himself. It’s flattering, but it also makes Dean nervous in a way he can’t explain.
“I used to take piano lessons, but I stopped before I could get any good at it.”

“Not your thing?”

“Oh no, I loved it.” There’s a sad, wistful note in Castiel’s voice as he looks down at his hands, absent-mindedly toying with the empty plastic bag. “I gave it up for personal reasons. I regret it sometimes.”

Dean’s curiosity is piqued, but he knows better than to ask. He’s not even sure he’s allowed to – this whole conversation has them venturing into a very personal territory, one they’ve never explored before. Dean might not be an expert, but he’s fairly certain heart-to-hearts like this are not usually part of fuck buddy deals. Something is shifting here, and Dean wishes he knew what to make of it. As it is, he goes for an answer that seems the safest.

“You could always take it up again,” he says, offering a smile. Cas doesn’t return it and shakes his head gently.

“I don’t think so,” he says quietly. He folds the bag and stands up. The legs of his chair scrape painfully across the floor, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “Thank you for keeping me company, Dean. And for caring enough to point out that I should eat more regularly.”

“At your service,” Dean winks, the last, pathetic attempt at light-heartedness. His eyes follow Castiel as he leaves the room, and he’s almost disappointed when Cas doesn’t look back. Once he’s gone, Dean takes out his crumpled list, grabs a pen, and draws a thick circle around solution number 7.

“You need a what?”

“A local community center address. Or any address of a place where I can find volunteers for some charitable work. As close to the hospital as possible.”

Charlie narrows her eyes.

“Why?”

“I have my reasons. Come on, Charlie, help a brother out. Use your magic skills.”

Dean gives her his most charming smile and taps on the top of her monitor.

“Pretty please?”

Charlie keeps eyeing him with suspicion, but her fingers begin to tap away on the keyboard with incredible speed.

“What the hell are you up to, Winchester?”

“You’ll see.”

“If you’re making me an unwitting accomplice to something shifty, I will never forgive you.”

Dean laughs and moves to stand behind Charlie’s chair, looking over her shoulder at the screen.

“Hey! Don’t distract a genius at work. I’ll send you what I find by email. Now shoo, before I change my mind.”

Dean drops a quick kiss to Charlie’s forehead and walks out to the hall. Since he’s already in the right part of the hospital, he heads to Crowley’s office to discuss his idea with him. If there was ever a time to take advantage of Crowley’s evident soft spot for him, it’s now.

“Excuse me, who are you?”

The girl lifts her eyes and gives him the most radiant smile Castiel has ever seen.

“Oh, hi! I’m Kristen, and this is my girlfriend Siobhan. We’re volunteers from the Brooklyn
Castiel frowns and looks around, as if he expected to find the answers to his questions hidden somewhere in the room. The only thing he sees are the little patients huddled on chairs, sofas and on the floor, seated in a semi-circle around the girl who must be Siobhan. In her lap lies a huge, colorful book Castiel doesn’t recognize as one of those he brought himself.

“What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?” Siobhan asks, rolling her eyes.

“Your hospital administration reached out to us and asked if we wanted to start a cooperation,” Kristen explains enthusiastically, clasping her hands together. “Someone from our community center will come over every second or third day to play with these kids. You’re Mr. Novak, aren’t you? They told us it was your idea to organize something for the little ones. That’s so great.”

She smiles up at him, expression so open and friendly Castiel regrets having to burst her bubble.

“I had nothing to do with bringing you here. I read – I used to read to the kids, but I never attempted to engage anyone else in it.”

“Looks like somebody thought you needed a respite,” Kristen remarks softly. “You can stay and read something too, if you have the time.”

“I… don’t, actually. I apologize, I need to go.”

“Sure.” Kristen nods at him and turns back to the kids and to Siobhan, who shakes her head feigning exasperation. “Chatterbox,” she mouths. Kristen beams at her and jumps over a few pairs of tiny legs sprawled across the floor to take a seat next to Siobhan.

Castiel has never made it from the pediatric ward to the cardiology department in such record time.

“Doctor Winchester.”

Dean stops mid-conversation with Chuck and turns around to see Castiel, standing in the middle of the corridor with his chest heaving slightly. He looks shaken to his very core, and Dean takes a few steps towards him.

“Is everything alright?”

“I need to talk to you. In private.” A beat of silence. “About a patient.”

The last three words are clearly added for Chuck’s benefit, though even if he realizes this, he doesn’t let it show.

“Well, that’s my cue,” is all he says, clapping Dean on the shoulder. “I’ll just— I’ll let you guys talk.” He looks intrigued, but he leaves without another word. As soon as he’s out of ear shot, Dean takes a few more steps towards Castiel.

“It’s not really about a patient, is it?” His eyes linger as he takes in Castiel’s tense expression, hands hanging stiffly by his sides and mouth pressed into a taut line. There’s something in his features that unsettles Dean.

“In private,” Cas repeats.

“Doctors lounge?”

“Yes.”

They make it only halfway there before Castiel’s patience wears off. He throws a quick glance up and down the corridor, and once he’s sure they don’t have any company he grabs Dean by the coat and drags him into a supply closet between rooms 306 and 308. They stumble inside and as soon as the door slams shut, Cas presses him against the shelves that line one of the walls, his hands fisting tight into the material of Dean’s coat.

“Cas, what the hell—”

“It was your doing, wasn’t it? You went to Crowley and asked him to let volunteers into the pediatric ward.”

“I did, but—”
“It was your idea. Your initiative, Crowley wouldn’t come up with something like that by himself.”

The shelves dig painfully into Dean’s back, but he’s helpless to do anything about it. He instinctively grabs the wrists clutching at the collar of his coat and tries to pry them away, but to no avail.

“Cas, please, wait. I only wanted—”

“Yes, okay? Yes. I thought you needed help, so I asked Charlie to find me some—”

The pressure of the metal shelves against Dean’s shoulder blades eases suddenly, and next thing he knows he’s being lifted in the air.

“Cas!”

“Be quiet, Dean, or someone will find us.”

Dean is still uncertain if he should expect a quickie or a good whupping, but he wraps his legs around Castiel’s waist nonetheless. Cas walks them a few steps towards a broken washing machine (God only knows what it’s even doing there) and sits Dean on top of it, situating himself between his legs.

“What are you doing, Dean?” he asks. His hands move to rest on Dean’s hips, the grip just a little too tight, but when Dean reacts by pushing up into the touch, Castiel withdraws and purses his lips.

“What are you doing?” he repeats.

Dean licks his lips nervously, his mind speeding at a hundred miles per minute. He has no idea what’s going on, but he does have a distinct feeling that he somehow managed to screw something up.

“What do you mean?”

“You must have gone into a lot of trouble to find a reliable charity and secure Crowley’s permission. I want to know why. Why now, after I told you I’m taking care of this.”

Dean’s mouth goes dry and his heart begins fluttering madly in his chest. This wasn’t supposed to go like this. Cas wasn’t supposed to interpret it this way. No wonder he looks so pissed if he thinks Dean just sabotaged his visits in the pediatric ward by engaging strangers.

Cas still watches him intently, so Dean opens his mouth to offer an explanation, to say that all he wanted to do was to unburden Cas and give him back his lunch breaks.

He inhales, blinks, and realizes that he can’t do it. It’s on the tip of his tongue, but he can’t force it out. He can’t say it now, not when Cas is all pissy and wrathful and hovering above him like a human version of a storm cloud. Fuck, how would that even sound? I did it because I wanted to have you all to myself during lunchtime. Because I wanted to see you smile. Because I’m worried that you’re wearing yourself down. Because I might be harboring a pathetic crush on you and I don’t know how else to show it. Yeah, that won’t fly.

Dean looks away and goes for what he does best – deflect.

“I have to go,” he says, nudging his knee against Castiel’s thigh. “We can talk about this later. I, uh, I have a pre-operative appointment with a patient.”

“No, you don’t.” Castiel doesn’t move, keeping Dean trapped on top of the washing machine. To be honest, it’s a little humiliating.

“Oh, so you know my schedule better than I do? Let me up.”

“Dean, just answer me. Why did you do it? I didn’t ask you for help. I didn’t want help.”

Dean’s eyes dart around the room, flitting from the shelves on his left to the bare wall on his right – anywhere but Castiel’s face. What’s funny is that he actually wants to come clean, to stop wondering if he has a chance with Cas and simply find out. Even if it makes him sound like a teenager fumbling through a homecoming dance proposal.

“Dean,” Castiel urges. His right hand squeezes Dean’s upper thigh, close enough to his crotch that Dean’s dick takes interest.

And well, isn’t it just goddamn fantastic. With all his blood suddenly rushing south, Dean can’t
trust himself to say anything smart. If he tries to admit anything now, he’s gonna blow it, and not in a sexy way.

“I did it cause I thought it would benefit everyone,” he blurts. “Seeing you there gave me the idea, and I just went through with it, is all. Will you let me go now or do I need a freaking permission slip?”

Castiel contemplates him for a moment, an unexpected shadow of disappointment crossing his face, like it wasn’t the answer he’d been hoping for. The air between them is so charged it feels like it’ll start crackling, and Dean is sweating buckets. He silently begs all the gods he doesn’t believe in to make Cas accept his answer and drop the subject, and surprisingly enough, somebody listens. The death grip on his thigh loosens, the body blocking his way moving to the side as Cas lets him pass without another word. The moment is over, and the tension escapes like air from a pierced balloon.

Dean fumbles to wrap his lab coat around him to conceal the bulge in his pants (seriously, what is wrong with him) and practically bolts to the door.

“Dean?”

Hand already on the doorknob, he forces himself to turn around and look at Cas.

“Yeah?”

The wild glimmer is gone from Castiel’s eyes, leaving them calm and soft again.

“You were just being kind, weren’t you?”

Dean stares.

For the first time, Castiel drops his gaze.

“I didn’t mean to appear ungrateful. I just thought— never mind. Regardless of your reasons, thank you.”

Dean wants to scream why the fuck do you think I did it if not for you, you fucking moron, didn’t I promise I would make you smile more often, Jesus tap-dancing Christ just take the hint already, but his mouth twitches only slightly when he smiles and says: “You’re welcome.”

Since the relief team from the Brooklyn Community Art and Charity Center started showing up in the pediatric ward, Castiel has taken to visiting the breakroom more regularly. He still pops in to check on the little patients every once in a while, but now he has the luxury of knowing he doesn’t have to if he has too much work. Dean still likes to tease him about it sometimes, calling him Brangelina or Mother Teresa, though he only does this when they’re alone and he can immediately counterbalance his words with kisses laid in the hollow of Castiel’s throat.

Satisfied with the outcome of his little project, Dean expands his efforts. He drags Cas to the cafeteria to make sure he eats a proper meal from time to time, he indulges him when Cas wants to watch 2-hour long documentaries that bore Dean out of his mind, and he takes every opportunity he can to touch Cas in public when he’s sure their colleagues won’t notice, even if it’s just the lightest brush of skin on skin.

It works like a charm.

Cas laughs much more frequently now. It’s still not nearly as often as Dean would like, but it’s definitely an improvement.

He laughs when Dean comes over to the pediatric ward with him on one particularly slow day, and does an elaborate (and unbelievably goofy) pantomime in front of the awestruck kids.

He laughs when they sit in the hospital cafeteria and Dean accidentally spills spaghetti sauce all over his snow-white, perfectly ironed lab coat.

He laughs when Dean drags him into the janitor’s closet on the second floor, runs his fingertips over his wrist (which to Dean’s delight turns out to be surprisingly ticklish) and drops small kisses to his neck.

They’re still too rare, those laughs of Castiel, as if he was only now learning how to push them past his lips. At the same time they’re heady and intoxicating, and Dean collects them like seashells, picking them up one by one and stowing them away in a safe corner of his memory.
Things are going so well Dean is slowly warming up to the idea of taking a risk and finally, *finally* asking Cas out.

Before he can muster up enough courage to go through with it, a case they’re working on drives a wedge between them, shattering the fragile structure Dean has been so carefully building.

The patient’s name is Bobby Singer.

It’s a foggy morning in the beginning of November, the sky over New York draped with thick, dark clouds. Despite the early hour, all the lights in the breakroom are switched on to dissipate the grey reigning outside. A small group of doctors stands around the kitchenette, making small talk before the time comes for them to go back to their duties.

“My brother-in-law is such a fucking idiot,” Gordon grumbles, stirring a spoon in his coffee mug. “Natural selection should have taken care of bastards like him ages ago.”

Dean does his best to stifle a yawn, but really, it’s not his fault that Gordon’s complaints about his extended family are duller than Castiel’s favorite documentaries. He sneaks a peek at Chuck, who looks equally unimpressed, and Frank, who appears to be asleep with his eyes open.

“He might as well go around with a piece of paper that says “USE ME!” stapled to his forehead. How he managed to survive in New York his entire life is fucking beyond me.”

Dean nods automatically, all the while thinking of a way to politely excuse himself and sneak off to see if Cas is free for a quickie.

As if on cue, the door opens and Castiel walks into the room. He scans it quickly and marches right up to Dean and his fellow doctors.

“Good morning,” he says, nodding at each of them with a solemnity that would seem weird coming from anyone else. “Doctor Winchester, did you have the time to read Robert Singer’s file?”

“No, I was actually about to do that. Why, are there contraindications for surgery?”

Castiel says “yes” at the same time that Frank says “no”.

“Yes,” Castiel repeats, undeterred by the hostile glare that Frank gives him. “Mr. Singer has a history of carotid artery stenosis, which is a serious risk factor for post-operative stroke. I believe we should do a carotid duplex ultrasound scanning to assess the risk.”

“It’s just a routine CABG surgery, Castiel,” Frank begins. “The risk of stroke is so minimal that it doesn’t call for—”

“I don’t think Doctor Deveraux needs to explain himself to you,” Gordon cuts in, squaring his shoulders. “And the decision is for Doctor Winchester to make.”

“Yes, but it’s my job to advise him and make that decision easier for him,” Cas replies coldly, holding Gordon’s gaze. “Besides, I don’t think this case concerns you.”

Gordon bares his teeth in a smile that’s nothing short of terrifying.

“Oh, so you think a nursing degree is worth as much as a medical degree.”

“Now wait a second,” Dean begins, but he’s not fast enough.

“You think any doctor in their right mind would choose a nurse’s advice over their own common sense? Grow the fuck up, Novak.”

“I think a good doctor takes advice offered in good faith and at least considers it.”

“That’s fucking hilarious coming from a guy who puts Band-Aids on scraped knees and does tetanus shots.”

“I’m a registered surgical nurse.”

“And you want a medal for that?”

“Gordon, please,” Dean says, holding his hands out in front of him like a living statue of Christ the Redeemer. “There’s no need for insults.”
“Nursing is a future-oriented, increasingly well-paid, demanding, and rewarding job,” Castiel declares calmly, unruffled by Gordon’s aggression and heedless of Dean’s attempts at mediating. “It is of equal importance to the work you do as a doctor, but I fully recognize your right to uphold the stiff hospital hierarchy that benefits you, so I will leave you to misconstrue the point of my profession and underestimate its significance in peace.”

Gordon stares at Castiel as if he wanted nothing more than to test his new set of surgical cutters on him, but before he can think of a comeback, Cas marches out of the room, leaving the doctors in a stunned silence.

Finally, Frank says out loud what they’re all thinking.

“Damn. You just got owned, son.”

“Fucking pain in the ass,” Gordon snarls. He shoots angry glances around the room, as if to challenge others to disagree with him. “Doesn’t know his place. Crowley should’ve fired him ages ago. Loudmouthed dick.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Dean says sharply.

“Yeah, let’s keep it professional, buddy,” Chuck chimes in, clasping a hand on Gordon’s shoulder.

Since Castiel has left, the conflict sizzles out, but Dean and Gordon keep glowering at each other in silent challenge. Dean knew from the moment he met Gordon that the guy was a self-important ass, but not in his wildest dreams did he imagine he would ever witness an argument like this.

He stays in the breakroom just long enough to let Gordon know he’s not fleeing, and once an appropriate amount of time passes, he leaves to find Cas.

“I’m busy, Dean,” is all Castiel says when he sees him approach.

“Cas, I just need a moment to talk to you.”

“I don’t have a moment. We can talk later.”

Being given the cold shoulder is hurtful, but above all surprising. Dean is not the one who started spewing slurs. Did Cas expect him to jump into the discussion and pick sides? That’s ridiculous.

What’s even more ridiculous is that Dean wanted to do just that; he wanted to punch Gordon’s smug, irritating face for insulting Castiel, and he wanted to let everybody in the room know that they shouldn’t fuck with Cas unless they want a very angry heart surgeon on their ass. It doesn’t matter that Castiel defended himself just fine without any help (let’s be honest, that was a third degree burn right there.) Dean’s skin was itching with the desire to show Cas that had he needed backup, he would have had it.

For the rest of the day, Dean does a rather lousy job of focusing on his duties. His mind keeps wandering back to the exchange in the breakroom, and the ways his behavior could have been interpreted as siding with the doctors against Cas. He comes up with nothing.

The situation complicates even more when Dean finally opens Bobby Singer’s file and reads through his medical history and Frank’s notes. He can see where Castiel’s concern is coming from, but he disagrees.

He disagrees with his medical assessment and he’s going to have to tell him that.

When Dean manages to accost Castiel to talk to him about the surgery, it goes about as well as the morning conversation in the breakroom.

“I’m sorry, Cas, but Frank is right. There’s no point in doing a carotid ultrasound. It’s expensive and useless.”

“Mr. Singer had a severe case of carotid stenosis, and you know full well it’s safer to check the state of arteries before any major cardiac surgery. Even if it’s ‘just’ CABG,” Castiel says, his tone ice-cold.

“Yeah, ‘had’ being the operative word here. If you read the file, then you know he underwent carotid endarterectomy earlier this year and the proper blood flow was restored. He had a check-up not so long ago, and everything looked fine.”

“These things change—”
“But not so fast!” Dean says, irritation seeping into his voice. “Besides, Frank prescribed him Coumadin.”

“But his cholesterol is still too high.”

“It’s within norm.”

“Only barely. Are you really so stubborn that you refuse to do one simple, non-invasive test to make sure the patient won’t suffer a stroke? Or do you just want to demonstrate how little my nursing degree is worth?”

Dean’s hands clench into fists and he takes a step forward. Castiel doesn’t step back.

“That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You think I agree with that jerk?”

“I think you’re not as arrogant and elitist an ass as he is, but you still refuse to take advice, even if it’s in the best interest of the patient.”

Dean’s knuckles go white as his fingernails dig deep into his skin. How dare Castiel insinuate he would endanger the health of his patients on account of his own pride.

“I wonder what gave you the idea,” he spits through gritted teeth, “that I would make medical decisions based on what you think, and not what I deem best for my patients.”

“And here I was, thinking we were a team,” Castiel says bitterly. “We are a team— fuck, you’re impossible. Why are you making it personal when it’s not? I performed a shitload of surgeries like this, I’m not wrong. I don’t do wrong, Novak.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he wants to take them back. They might use each other’s last names when they banter, but it’s always imbued with fondness – never with genuine anger or even worse, malice.

Castiel’s whole body stiffens, and Dean immediately wants to reach out to soothe him and apologize for going too far. He doesn’t, and Castiel’s next words become a point of no return.

“That’s interesting. I didn’t pin you down as somebody prone to God Complex, Winchester.”

Dean’s jaw goes taut and he straightens his back, as if to accentuate the marginal height difference between them.

“I didn’t pin you down as somebody who takes any criticism as a personal attack.”

“Your decision to forego that ultrasound is irrational, and I won’t apologize for having a different opinion. You’re the head of our surgical team and you’ll do as you choose, but you’re making a mistake and being a stubborn idiot.”

“You know what? Blow me, Cas.”

“No,” says Castiel. He stares Dean down as if he was something disgusting stuck to his shoe.

“No more. We’re done. If you need a new fuck buddy, I suggest Doctor Walker.”

Dean is so furious he feels like he might pop a vein any second. Blood pounds in his ears as he steps closer, trying to crowd Castiel against the wall. He contemplates whether to finish the argument with a punch to Cas’s jaw or with his tongue down Cas’s throat, but before he can come to a decision, Castiel pushes him away and repeats:

“I mean it, Dean. We’re done. Find somebody else who’s willing to put up with you.”

The words sting more than Dean expected them to, especially in the light of all he has done in the past few weeks. He did his damn best to find his way to Castiel, through all their opposing views and differences of character, and he fell more and more in love with what he discovered.

Apparently, Castiel did not.

This evening, they don’t meet in the doctors lounge after the surgery for the first time in over two months.

The wind rattles the shoddy window frame, first real cold of the year slipping in through the cracks and making Castiel shudder as he steps out of the shower and onto the bare bathroom floor.
He doesn’t bother drying off and simply wraps a towel around his waist, watching as stray droplets run down his body and form a growing puddle of water on the unevenly-laid tiles.

He should buy a bathmat. He should have bought a bathmat years ago, but he never really cared enough to spare the time for shopping. The few people who stayed at his place overnight in the past didn’t care either. At least not enough to point it out.

Dean probably would, though. He can be downright mysophobic sometimes, Castiel has noticed. He always takes the longest time to scrub out of the whole team, and always frowns when he spots lint or even the smallest specks of dirt on Cas’s clothes. His fingers immediately reach out to brush them away, a knee-jerk reaction that feels so domestic Castiel has to remind Dean not to do it in public.

Now it won’t be an issue anymore, just like the mat won’t, but if ever— if they had ever made it far enough, Dean would have done something about this. Most likely, he would have told Castiel off, and then dragged him to the nearest Bed Bath & Beyond to buy a proper mat. Probably a non-slip one. Or maybe a fuzzy one. Something soft and nice to step onto, needlessly luxurious.

Yes, definitely a fuzzy one.

Castiel takes a single step in his pocket-sized bathroom and finds himself in front of the mirror. His reflection is a pitiful sight, wet hair clinging to his forehead and skin glowing yellow under the sickly artificial light cast by a naked bulb hanging under the ceiling. He looks ill, which, incidentally, corresponds to his emotional state pretty well.

The baby from the apartment next door starts crying, the sound carrying all too well through the thin walls. Castiel grips his toothbrush and squeezes a little too much toothpaste on it, concentrating on the regular tap tap tap of the water dripping from the showerhead.

The child keeps crying, and Castiel tries very hard to forget the look of hurt on Dean’s face, and the way he practically flinched when Castiel delivered the final blow. Find somebody else who’s willing to put up with you.

It was harsh, harsher than was needed and much harsher than Castiel intended it to be. But he was right to defend himself. To defend his opinion. He’s always had to fight for himself, hold his head high and make clear that the RN standing after his name instead of MD doesn’t mean he doesn’t get a say. He’s not about to go back on that just because it’s Dean and not some other douchebag surgeon who’s in love with himself. Dean has already gotten much too deep under his skin. No more allowances.

He spits out the toothpaste and rinses his mouth thoroughly.

He’s halfway through shaving the right side of his face when his cell goes off in the other room. The phone rings and rings, and Castiel waits with his razor frozen midair until it stops. A few seconds pass, and there’s a ding of a new text message.

Carefully, Castiel sets the razor on the edge of the sink and goes to retrieve his cell. He brings it back to the bathroom, toys with it for a while before finally opening the message.

06:44 11/06/2015
From: Dean Winchester
To: Castiel Novak
Singer’s surgery today at 16:20 as planned.

Cas picks the razor back up and resumes shaving.

It’s no surprise that Dean decided not to order the carotid ultrasound and perform the surgery as scheduled.

It still feels like a slap to the face, though.

The sudden prick of the blade against his skin makes Castiel hiss in pain and drop the razor to the sink as if it burned him. He leans closer to the mirror, inspecting the fresh cut on his left cheek like he’s not used to seeing gallons of blood on a regular basis. A couple drops drip down to the sink, and he flushes them under cold tap water, a red streak flowing downwards and into the drain. The tap doesn’t turn off all the way, and Castiel lets the water escape drop by drop.

Drip.

We are a team.
Drip.

You’re impossible.

Drip.

I don’t do wrong, Novak.

Drip.

Blow me, Cas.

Drip.

I overreacted, didn’t I.

Drip.

Didn’t I?

Drip, drip, drip.

At 9:27, they pass each other in the hospital hallway. Castiel gives a curt nod. Dean looks away.

At 12:42, Dean enters the breakroom only to find Cas already seated at the table, eating lunch. He walks right back out and goes to the cafeteria instead.

At 16:09, they scrub away arm in arm, silent.

At 16:20 on the dot, they begin the surgery.

Throughout the entire procedure Dean holds minimal eye contact with Castiel, fixing his gaze on nothing but the operating table before him. He can still feel those eyes boring into him, but not once does he give Castiel the satisfaction of looking up, unless it’s strictly related to the surgery.

Neither of them try to hide their animosities, and soon the whole team realizes there is bad blood between them. Gwen limits herself to curious glances, while Ellie limits herself to worried ones.

Unfortunately, Andy takes it upon himself to lighten the mood, and the result is about as fruitful as could be expected in the circumstances. If the atmosphere in the OR was tense at the beginning, halfway through it becomes downright morose.

The only good thing that comes out of it is that both Dean and Castiel seem to act alike in one respect: when they’re mad, they work with scary efficiency, their focus laser-sharp, movements sure and purposeful. No one can accuse them of being distracted when Bobby Singer goes into cardiac arrest as a result of myocardial infarction. No one can accuse them of failing to notice when oxygen saturation starts to drop, and no one can accuse them of not doing everything in their power to restore normal heart function.

No one can blame them when the patient dies at 19:10.

All the lights in the doctors lounge are switched off save for the dim glow coming from the TV screen. At first Castiel thinks the room is empty, and somebody simply forgot to turn the TV off. It’s only when he comes in that he notices Dean’s hunched form, sitting motionless in his usual spot.

Cas closes the door behind him and walks up to the couch.

Dean doesn’t make any move to acknowledge his presence.

“Dean?”

Nothing.

“Can I join you?”

Dean doesn’t say yes, but he doesn’t protest either, so Castiel sits himself down at a safe distance. He folds his hands in his lap and tries to compose himself, searching for the right words, an
He folds his hands in his lap and tries to compose himself, searching for the right words, an opener, something.

“I know we both said some harsh words this week,” he begins cautiously. “But in view of what transpired today, I think we should put our disagreement on the back burner, because…”

He pauses, biting his lip before he can finish the thought. Because it’s ridiculous for us to grieve separately when we can do it together.

Take two.

“I’m still angry, Dean. I’m sure you are too. Even so, we can be adults about this and admit that the current situation puts that in perspective.”

There’s still no move or sound coming from Dean, nothing to confirm that he’s aware of Castiel’s presence at all. His gaze remains plastered to the screen, hands resting unnaturally by his sides, and it’s starting to look like he might be genuinely oblivious to his surroundings.

Except Castiel doesn’t buy that even for a second.

He takes a steadying breath and slowly reaches out to put a hand on Dean’s elbow. He has no idea what kind of reaction to expect, so he braces himself for anything. He prepares to have his hand shaken off, to be yelled at, pushed away, punched, but all Dean does is jerk slightly under his touch and then, finally, turn to look at him.

There are bags under his eyes and a dead look on his face that Castiel never wants to see there again.

“I’m a fucking lousy surgeon, Cas.”

The sound of his name in its shortened form, the one that always rolls so nicely off of Dean’s tongue, makes Castiel hopeful. It’s good. It’s a start.

“That’s not true,” he protests quietly.

Dean makes a sound like he wanted to snort, but decided halfway that he doesn’t have enough energy to do so.

“I perform open heart surgeries, for fuck’s sake. It’s not like this hasn’t happened before, or won’t happen again. It shouldn’t get to me anymore.”

Castiel holds Dean’s gaze and closes the gap between them, their knees bumping lightly. He’s still wary though, like he might spook Dean if he moves too abruptly.

“Dean, you can’t just tell yourself you’ll be indifferent and make it so. When something like this happens—”

“I talked to his wife.”

Castiel’s heart clenches, a dull ache spreading through his chest. Losing a patient this way is horrible enough without having to deal with the family’s sorrow and possible grievances. Especially with a case like this, he expects the patient’s wife might have accused Dean of neglect and incompetence, even though Castiel knows very well neither is true. Dean really did the best he could. They all did.

“Do you want to tell me what she said?” he offers, reaching out for the remote control and turning off the TV. As soon as the sound cuts off, the room fills with tomb-like silence. Dean lifts his eyes and blinks away the dampness gathered in the corners.

“She thanked me, Cas,” he says. Although his voice is barely above a whisper, it sounds deafening to Castiel’s ears. Dean runs a hand over his face and takes a short, painful breath as if he was struggling for air. “Her husband died on my table, and she thanked me.”

“And rightly so,” Cas says sharply. Dean blinks in surprise and opens his mouth, ready to disagree, but Cas doesn’t let him. Something has clicked into place, and Castiel is no longer hesitant, awkward and uncertain of what to say. And, he realizes with relief, no longer afraid to offer physical comfort like his job has taught him to. He can do this. This is familiar territory.

His fingers snake around Dean’s wrists and hold them steadily in the space between them.

“She had every reason to thank you, because you did everything you could. Doctors can’t promise to save people. They promise to do the best they can. And you did.”

Dean looks anything but convinced, biting his lip so hard Cas wonders why there isn’t a trickle of blood running down his chin yet.

“Dean.” He wields the name like a weapon, like it could dispel the shadow of their argument and
magically make Dean believe him. “There’s nothing more you could have done. You did everything by the book. You did your best,” he repeats.

“So what,” Dean says despondently, looking away from Cas. “My best is obviously worth jack shit.”

Cas pulls at his wrists, forcing Dean’s gaze to turn back to him. When Dean’s eyes reluctantly meet his, they’re unfocused and watery. They’re almost glistening now, a telltale sign it won’t take much for the dam to break.

“You talk like you started working in healthcare yesterday, Dean. If you want predictable results and no risk of loss, go fix cars, not people. You’re an incredible surgeon. I’ve watched you. You have so much talent many accomplished doctors in this country would kill for it. Robert Singer died because he had a faulty heart, not because of anything you did or didn’t do. Mourn him like you would any other person you knew, but don’t think for even one second that his passing is on you. It is not.”

Left hand still clasped around Dean’s wrist, Castiel moves his right to cup Dean’s face, watching him lean into the touch.

“You can’t save everyone, my friend,” he whispers, rubbing his thumb across Dean’s cheek. “Though you try.”

Dean’s eyes close, eyelids fluttering at the gentle sweep of Castiel’s knuckles against his skin. He swallows hard, mouth working around words that just won’t come out, and then, eventually, the dam bursts. He falls forward like there’s nothing else left for him to do, and Castiel’s arms open for him without hesitation, welcoming as ever. With a sound that’s halfway between a sob and a whimper, Dean presses his face into Castiel’s neck and lets himself be held.

For a whole of four seconds.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” he stutters out, voice even scratchier than usual. “I’m sorry, I don’t— I know you’re still mad, I—”

He scrambles to sit back up and put some distance between them, cheeks burning as if he was ashamed of this brief moment of weakness. Castiel can already see the walls coming up, defenses slotting back into place, an insane need to pretend like everything is alright and they didn’t have a man die in front of them mere hours ago.

Dean’s hands push at Castiel’s chest, but they meet resistance. When he looks up, eyes red-rimmed and wide, Cas shakes his head, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he brings his arms around Dean and pulls him close, heedless of his half-hearted efforts to stop him. His grip gentle but firm, Castiel shifts their position so that Dean can rest his head on Cas’s torso.

In the silence that follows, Dean buries his face in Cas’s scrubs while careful fingers begin to card through his hair. It’s soft and tender, unlike most of their physical contact, and Dean melts into it, any attempts at feigning discomfort forgotten.

Upon seeing that his touches appear to have a positive effect, Castiel gets bolder and inclines his head to press a chaste, tentative kiss to Dean’s temple.

“You’re not a machine,” he says. He doesn’t know where the words are coming from, only that Dean needs to hear them. “It’s healthy to mourn, but not to blame yourself.”

He repeats the kiss, with more confidence this time, letting his lips linger on Dean’s heated forehead a little longer. Dean starts to shake, then, aborted, desperate kind of shivers that happen when you try to suppress your anguish and keep it in at all costs.

The dam may have burst already, but the flood keeps on coming.

“It’s alright,” Castiel whispers roughly, holding Dean a little tighter. “It’s not on you. It’s not. I promise.” He murmurs it all into Dean’s hair, affirmations Dean doesn’t believe and needs so desperately.

“I could’ve done the ultrasound,” Dean slurs, clutching at Castiel’s scrubs. “I should’ve fucking listened to you. Maybe—”

“Don’t. It wasn’t a stroke, Dean. You were right, the carotid arteries were clear. We couldn’t have prevented this.”

“But—”

“Dean,” Castiel repeats, cringing at how helpless he sounds. He can’t watch Dean punish himself over and over again, and he’s running out of things to say. He kisses Dean’s forehead again, then his brows and nose, and when Dean lifts his head to let him kiss his damp cheeks as well, Castiel
does it thoroughly, praying that somehow it’ll be enough.

Dean’s first thought when he wakes up is that he doesn’t remember how he got home and into his bed.

His second thought is that New York has finally lived up to its reputation, because there are sounds coming from the kitchen and in all likelihood it’s a burglar who’s going to murder Dean with his own bread knife the second he steps out of the bedroom.

He rubs his eyes and throws away the covers, discovering that he’s dressed in his pajama pants and an old T-shirt. He glances around the room in search of something that would help him fight off his first official New York Criminal™, but he stops when he catches not only the sounds, but also the smell wafting in under his door.

Bacon.

He sits up on the bed, blinking rapidly to chase away the last dregs of sleep, and then the memories from the previous evening all come back to him at once. He remembers losing Bobby Singer, and the silence that fell in the OR when his team realized there was nothing more to be done. He remembers Castiel’s voice, resigned and hollow, when he announced the time of death. He remembers talking to Karen Singer, and his own voice catching in his throat as he explained to her what happened. He remembers the tears glistening in her eyes and rolling down her cheeks when she clutched his hands in hers and thanked him for his efforts.

Dean shoots up from the bed and makes it to the bathroom just in time, knees buckling in front of the toilet bowl as he throws up the contents of his stomach. He grips the toilet seat and tries to wait it out, but it seems like once he started, he can’t stop. He doesn’t hear the footsteps approaching until there’s a gentle hand on his shoulder, and somebody slides down to sit next to him on the cold tiles.

“It’s best to let it out,” Castiel says, rubbing the tense muscles of Dean’s back.

Dean opens his mouth to tell him he has no fucking control over any of this, but then he’s puking again and Castiel holds both of his arms to support him. A steady stream of whispered nothings pours into Dean’s ear, the it’s okay’s and I’m here’s that Dean barely registers but that still manage to somewhat calm him down. Once he has nothing left to upchuck, he dry heaves a few times and leans back to sit on his haunches.

Cas flushes the toilet and hands him a glass of tap water that Dean chugs down in one go.

“Better?”

Dean nods slowly and hands the glass back, closing his eyes. Now that his stomach has stopped throwing a bitch fit, the embarrassment catches up with him. Castiel must think him a total wuss. A weakling. It’s pathetic, is what it is.

“It doesn’t normally happen,” he mutters, looking down at the floor. He pushes himself up using the sink as leverage and stands on shaky legs, fighting against the instinct to immediately sit back down. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Castiel’s arms shoot forward to support him in case he stumbles, and he grits his teeth.

“I’m fine,” he says with much more conviction than he feels.

“After my first patient died, I was sick for three days. I even got a fever,” Castiel says conversationally, grabbing Dean’s shoulder and walking him back to the bedroom. “Sit,” he adds, and Dean doesn’t even think to argue. He falls back onto the bed and lets out a long breath.

“It wasn’t my first patient.”

“I know.”

“And she shouldn’t have thanked me.”

“It made it worse, didn’t it?” Castiel asks softly, sitting next to him.

Dean nods, and neither of them says anything for a while. Although they’re not touching anymore, Castiel’s mere presence soothes him, warm and solid and alive.

After a few minutes, Dean shifts and sniffs in the air.
“Cas?”

“Mhm?”

“Weren’t you frying bacon?”

Castiel’s eyes go wide and he leaps from the bed like somebody pinched him.

“Shit!”

The bacon is not salvageable, so Dean offers to fry pancakes instead.

“I wanted to make breakfast so you wouldn’t have to,” Castiel grumbles, throwing the miserable remains of their meal into the trash can. “You distracted me.”

“Jeez, sorry if me dialing the porcelain phone interrupted your round of Chopped,” Dean snorts, diving his head into the fridge to find eggs. “Stop grousing and go wash up the frying pan.”

Dean starts to prepare batter while Cas grabs a nylon scrubber and attacks the bits of burned bacon that still cling to the surface of the pan. They fall into an easy, comfortable silence, their movements synchronized and in tune with each other as if they were back in the OR. There’s not much room in the kitchen and they should be bumping into each other all the time, but thanks to almost three months of practice they can anticipate the other’s motions without even thinking about it. After a while Dean starts to hum a tune under his breath, a habit Sam sometimes likes to tease him about. It’s only after a minute or two that he realizes Cas is humming with him.

He lifts his head and catches Castiel’s eye.

“Deep Purple fan?”

Cas shrugs and flips a pancake with a spatula.

“My brother is.”

“I didn’t know you have a brother.”

The unspoken invitation to speak hangs in the air, but Castiel doesn’t take it. Instead, he slides the first pancake onto a plate (at some point he overtook Dean’s position at the stove, not that Dean minds) and turns to look at him, expression almost grave.

“Dean, I know that due to current circumstances we silently decided to put our disagreement on hold, and I understand if you don’t feel well enough to reopen it, but I believe we should talk about it sooner or later.”

Cold dread travels up Dean’s spine and wraps itself around his chest. He doesn’t want to argue now, or revisit their resentments from the past week. He doesn’t want Cas to leave, even if it’s bound to happen eventually.

Not yet.

“I wanted to apologize,” Castiel says, which completely throws Dean off. He motions for Dean to sit at the table and puts the plate in front of him. Then he walks back to the stove and continues speaking as he attends to the next pancake.

“I have given a lot of thought to our recent altercation, and it’s possible that my reaction was... excessive, so to speak. The things that Walker said riled me up, and you took the brunt of it, for which I am sorry. I still believe doing the ultrasound would have been wise, but I should have respected your decision.”

Cas turns to Dean and frowns seeing him frozen in his spot.

“Eat your pancake while it’s warm, Dean.”

Dean ignores him, as well as the pancake.

“I never said what you do isn’t important, and I never thought that,” he says, an alarming edge of desperation creeping into his voice. “I mean, come on, Cas. You didn’t honestly believe that I... you know. That I think less of what you do.” Did you?

Castiel looks at him with a calm of a thousand-year-old tree, his spatula hovering a few inches above the surface of the pan. The pancake sizzles, and it sounds like a peal of thunder.

“No,” he says softly. “I didn’t.”

He takes the pancake off of the pan and moves to sit across from Dean. They eat their breakfast in silence, knives and forks clanking against their plates, until Dean wipes his mouth and musters up
the courage to say what he needs to say.

“I don’t want to stop.”

Cas looks up at him questioningly.

“Stop what?”

“You know what. We’ve always had our differences – let’s be real, we argue all the time about everything. It’s no reason to… you know, give up on our…”

“Arrangement?”

“Yeah. I mean, if you really don’t want to keep it going, I get it.”

Castiel takes his time answering, chewing slowly on his pancake, and Dean deflates. The longer he waits, the more certain he is that Cas is looking for a way to let him down easy. He braces himself for rejection and taps his fork against his plate to get Castiel’s attention. Whatever the verdict is, he can’t wait any longer or his ticker will give out. And wouldn’t that be ironic.

“I don’t want to stop either.”

Dean has to check himself not to fist pump in the air.

“I hate to admit it, but it seems a bit petty now,” Cas continues. “I was just so angry, at you and in general, and the angrier I got, the more I wanted to….” He stops, eyes flicking down to Dean’s mouth. “Kiss you senseless, I believe would be the most accurate term here. So I pushed you away to prevent it. I’m not proud of it.”

“You wanted to do what?” Dean asks, leaning closer and cupping his hand around his ear. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“Ass,” Cas says, but he smiles, and Dean can at last breathe freely. He grins back like a lunatic, all the nervousness from before leaving him in a rush.

“So we’re good?”

“We’re good. And you’re doing the washing up, because I need to go,” Cas adds, standing up.

“Go where?”

“Work, Dean. Some of us actually care about showing up for their shifts on time.”

Dean opens his mouth to offer a witty comeback (surely something will come to him any second now), but then he rethinks it, instead getting up and crossing the kitchen to plant a big one on Castiel’s lips. It elicits a startled, choked off sound which quickly turns into a content sigh.

“What was that for?” Cas asks once he manages to extricate himself from Dean’s hold.

Dean shrugs, doing his best to act casual.

“An apology. I never said it out loud.”

“All I’m saying is that you can kiss me and offer a verbal apology. They’re not mutually exclusive, so—”

Since he’s once again allowed to, Dean grabs Cas by his shirt and shuts him up with another thorough kiss. Unlike most times, they don’t go any further – it seems disrespectful somehow in the wake of yesterday’s loss, and neither of them feels like curing grief with sex is a particularly stellar idea. All they do is kiss avidly against the kitchen table, sloppy and frantic as if they had one year of abstinence behind them instead of one week.

A small forever later they part and Castiel props his left hand on the table, his right still wound tightly around Dean’s neck.

“I’m going to be late for my shift because of you.”

Dean doesn’t even try to look apologetic.

“I bet it’ll be the first time ever.”

“Don’t look so smug. I really need to go.”
“Okay.”

Cas reluctantly releases his grip on the short hair at the back of Dean’s head and lets his hand slide down Dean’s torso. He pushes at it lightly, though without much conviction.

“You know,” Dean offers innocently, “I haven’t thanked you properly for making us breakfast.”

“It would be remiss of you not to.”

Another (slightly longer) forever later Castiel rushes off down Dean’s street, more late than he’s ever been, followed by a pair of green eyes watching him fondly from the window.

Once he disappears from view, Dean leans his forehead against the cool glass and heaves a long sigh, though whether it’s one of contentment or sadness, he couldn’t say. Their argument was resolved, that’s definitely a plus, yet he’s still in square one. The square marked ‘colleagues with benefits.’

When he finally turns away from the window, his eyes fall on the two dirty plates sitting on the table. The sight gives him pause; he hasn’t seen it in a very long while. Most days he doesn’t have the time to eat breakfast at all, and when he does, it’s always by himself.

As Dean does the washing up, his hands moving automatically to scrub and rinse the plates clean, he realizes that he wouldn’t mind if Castiel became a permanent fixture in his kitchen. A constant presence, morning after morning, burning bacon and frying pancakes and letting himself be kissed against the table.

He wouldn’t mind that at all.

“You’re getting sloppy,” Meg says casually. She punches the elevator button and turns to look at Castiel, arms crossed over her chest with barely concealed amusement.

“What do you mean?” he asks tiredly. Having just finished a 10-hour shift, he doesn’t have any energy left to spare for the mental effort of playing games with Meg.

“I mean that you should be more careful, or Crowley will eventually sniff out your little love affair with Green Eyes MD.”

Castiel freezes, his mind going into panic mode for just a fraction of a second before he can compose himself.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says with forced calm.

“Please,” she scoffs. “You were fifteen minutes late today, wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Your hair looked like a bird just made a nest in it, and you couldn’t wipe that beatific half-smile off of your face the entire day. Everything about you screams ‘got laid!’, and I know from Gwen that you had a failed surgery yesterday and stayed in the hospital late, so you didn’t go out. Unless you’re boning Andy – and God only knows I raised you better than that, he’s much too lanky and much too hetero – that leaves only one person.”

For a moment Castiel entertains the possibility of playing dumb and denying everything. Then again, he really was especially careless today, and he doesn’t want to insult Meg’s intelligence. Besides, he kept his word to Dean – he didn’t tell her anything. She figured it out all on her own.

“How long have you known?”

“Finally some honesty,” she says coldly. “I suspected for a long while, but I knew for certain when I heard you banging in the supply closet on the second floor a few weeks back.”

“Oh my God,” Castiel groans. “Meg, you can’t tell anyone.”

“Cool your jets, Doctor Piccolo, my lips are sealed. I’m only offended you didn’t trust me enough to let me in on the secret.”

“It’s not personal, Meg. The fewer people know, the better.”

“How charming. I feel better already.”

The elevator stops on the ground floor and they cross the main hall in silence. Once they’re standing on the sidewalk in front of the hospital, Meg turns to Cas and stuffs her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket.
“I’m taking you for a drink, and you’re going to tell me everything.”

As always with Meg, it’s a statement rather than a request, and Castiel doesn’t bother arguing that he’s tired. It’s his day off tomorrow, and the truth is he could actually use a drink or two.

They walk the short distance to the nearest bar and Castiel tells Meg the whole story over a pint of beer. She listens with unusual patience and curiosity, interrupting only a couple of times to throw in a jibe or two, as per habit.

“You’re a goner, Clarence,” she announces when Castiel falls silent. “The hot surgeon batted his eyelashes, you let him get in your pants, and now I’ll be the one who’s gonna have to slash his tires when he turns out to be a jackass like the lot of them and throws you away like a pair of soiled scrubs.”

“You’re wrong,” Castiel says, putting his beer back on the bar. “Dean and I have a mutually beneficial agreement that’s purely physical and doesn’t affect our working relationship. And although he doesn’t have a car, I wouldn’t want you to vandalize it even if he did.”

“Are you hearing yourself? You practically escorted him home yesterday and didn’t even try to score, sleeping on the couch like Little Miss Decency. Purely physical my ass, Novak. End it before I have to pick up the pieces.”

“I’m not delusional, Meg. I’m controlling this.”

“Like shit you are. We’ve been through this before with Balthazar, Cas. How well did that end for you, huh? Oh yeah, he told you to go fuck yourself the second he had to choose between you and his precious medical career. I’m not letting you walk into another mess like this.”

Castiel’s expression grows hard, and he pushes himself off of his stool.

“There’s no point in comparing these two cases. Dean and Balthazar are nothing alike, and this time I know it won’t last forever. It’s impossible to be let down when you have no expectations.”

Meg shakes her head and stands up too, throwing a wad of bills on the bar.

“You keep telling yourself that. Or better yet, fucking listen to me for once and pull the plug on this while it’s still your decision.”

“Exactly, Meg. My decision.”

Meg doesn’t reply, but she keeps glancing at him with reproach as they make their way to the subway station.

“Think about it,” she says pointedly when her train rolls into the station. Cas sighs and nods, watching her get into the subway car. Once he’s left alone on the empty platform, he rubs his temples and sits on the nearest bench. Though Meg’s words may have been harsh, they weren’t that far off the mark. Cas wants to believe he has the situation under control, but what he said about having no expectations was an outright lie. He does have expectations; he expects everything he’s learned about Dean in the past few months to not be a mere exterior. He expects Dean’s two-penny humor, his affinity for bad television, his kindness, his thoughtfulness, his taste for chocolate raisins and his caring to be genuine.

He expects not to have been wrong in letting Dean Winchester wrap himself around his heart. Because quite frankly, Castiel likes him there.

Around the same time Castiel relays the story of their relationship to Meg, Dean decides to finally come clean to Jo. He has too much to process and he knows from experience that trying to handle it on his own is a poor idea.

“Don’t interrupt and don’t be a jerk,” he warns her, making himself comfortable on the couch. He ignores the pillow and the neatly folded blanket lying on his right, where Cas left them the night before.

Jo rolls her eyes, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them.

“I’m the embodiment of sensitivity. Hit me.”

Dean barely makes it to the end of the story before Jo explodes.

“Unbelievable! Un-fucking-believable! I give you friendly advice and what do you do? You go do the exact opposite!”
“Which part of ‘don’t be a jerk’ didn’t you understand?” Dean complains. “If I wanted somebody to yell at me on Skype, I’d call your mom. Yes, I know I’m screwed. Thanks for making that extra clear.”

“You’re not screwed unless you keep ignoring my advice. Listen.” Jo changes her position, sitting Indian-style on her bed and tilting back her laptop screen. “You’re into him, yes or no?”

“Yes,” Dean admits grumpily. “Do you have a point or do you just like to revel in the fact that I do, in fact, have feelings?”

“Shut up. If you’re into him, then he knows it.”

“What?” Dean splutters.

“I have news for you, Winchester. When you like somebody, you’re transparent like a ghost. Remember that summer in Pasadena?”

“Yeah,” Dean says warily.

“And that girl Cassie you were head over heels with?”

“How do you— I never told you that!”

“My point exactly,” Jo smiles triumphantly. “You thought you were being subtle, didn’t you. Meanwhile, everyone knew, and I mean everyone. Trust me, if this Castiel guy wanted nothing more to do with you than sex, he would have ended it already.”

Still shocked after discovering that his first summer love wasn’t as secret as he thought it was, Dean just stares at Jo with wide eyes, trying to gather his thoughts.

“I’m not that obvious,” he manages, but it’s feeble even to his own ears.

“Sure, whatever you say.”

“I mean— if he has any suspicions, then that would mean…”

“That would mean he wouldn’t be opposed to taking things one step further, or else he’d run away screaming like any dudebro afraid of commitment. Kudos, you got there almost on your own.”

“It’s just a speculation, Jo,” Dean mutters, refusing to believe it could be true. “You’ve never even met him, you can’t know what he thinks.”

“But I know you,” Jo shrugs. “You should have seen your face when you were telling me about this guy. I haven’t seen that dumb smile since that time you noticed Sam tear up like a nerd during your PhD graduation ceremony. If I can tell how far gone you are even when I’m on the other side of the country, then so can Castiel. Just be honest and ask him out.”

When Dean admits he was indeed planning on doing so, it proves to be too much for Jo, and she starts laughing.

“You hopeless bastard. Then what do you whine to me for? Go do it, and call me after the date. I’m warning you, I’ll want details.”

“It’s not just a matter of nutting up, Jo,” Dean argues. “If he shoots me down, it’s gonna make things awfully awkward at work. I don’t wanna ruin it.”

Jo sighs in exasperation, raising her eyes to the ceiling as if dealing with Dean’s shit required divine assistance. Perhaps it does.

“For somebody who mends hearts, you’re surprisingly bad at taking care of your own. Dean, from what you’ve told me you two are already well beyond friends-with-benefits territory. Don’t be an idiot. Just answer yourself, are you willing to pass up the opportunity to build something serious on an off chance that he doesn’t reciprocate?”

Dean worries his bottom lip between his teeth and slowly opens his mouth to say something, but Jo stops him.

“No, don’t answer me. Answer yourself. And now tell me when are you gonna finally come visit me and mom. She asked about you half a dozen times already.”

Dean rolls his eyes – he wouldn’t be himself if he didn’t – but he gratefully accepts the change of subject.

After they hang up, he spends a sleepless night tossing and turning in his bed, thinking up new
ways of asking Cas out and immediately shooting them all down as childish or pathetic. At 3 am he finally decides he’s gonna wing it, because what the hell. If Castiel likes him back, he’ll agree to a date regardless, and if he doesn’t, Dean will have no choice but to grow a beard and move to Tibet anyway. Whichever it is, the conversation with Jo – wonderful, irritating, smartass, helpful Jo – made him realize that being stuck in the state of suspension is a torture worse than anything that might result from coming clean. Dean never imagined he would be that guy – he spent his life thinking he’ll always be content with the “New Day, New Date” routine, but it’s not the case anymore. He’s in his thirties and he wants something real. He wants more of the domesticity he got to taste when he and Cas made pancakes and ate breakfast together the other day. He wants somebody to sit next to him on his bed and comfort him when he screws up. He wants soft smiles and soft touches that don’t always lead to sex. He wants to wake up next to the same person more than once, and he wants that person to be Castiel. He wants it so much he aches with it, and he’ll take any risk if it means he can have it.
December comes in a flurry of early snow, covering the streets of New York with a thin layer of white that thaws into slush almost immediately. The sight isn’t too appealing, but Dean doesn’t have a lot of time to contemplate it anyway. In fact, he’s much too busy convincing himself that the only reason he still hasn’t asked Cas out is because there was never a right time.

Jo would say it’s because he’s a stinking coward, so Dean resolutely avoids calling her.

Instead of making his move like he decided he would, Dean spends his time overanalyzing every interaction he has with Cas like a love-struck teenager. Every time they talk, touch or as much as make eye contact, he searches for confirmation that Jo is right, and for signs of affection that go beyond friendship or plain, Cas-like politeness.

After a week of playing this game, he’s even more uncertain and confused than before.

“Is something bugging you?” Charlie asks when they’re having lunch one early Wednesday afternoon. When Dean doesn’t answer right away, she snaps her fingers in front of his face. “Hey, you with me? What’s going on with you lately?”

“Nothing,” he says automatically. “I just drifted off for a second.”

“You seem to do that a lot these days,” Charlie remarks, frowning. “You sure you don’t wanna talk?”

Dean sighs, because boy, does he want to talk. He wants nothing more than to confide in Charlie and find out what she thinks about all this. But he promised.

“No, I’m good.” He offers her a smile and goes for a change of subject. “So, what were you and Dorothy up to recently?”

Charlie lights up like a Christmas tree at the mention of her girlfriend’s name, and goes on to tell Dean all about their weekend getaway to New Haven. As Dean listens to her happy chatter about their tour of the Yale campus, the charming lighthouse by the beach and the lovely little restaurant they found, he begins drifting off again, but this time for an entirely different reason.

This. This is exactly what he needs. Between surgeries and hiding away from their coworkers, how is he supposed to tell what spending quality time with Cas would actually be like? Perhaps a weekend in another state is a bit over the top, but an evening out – not a date, not just yet, merely a drink or two in a nice bar, somewhere far from the hospital so that there will be no risk of running into somebody who knows them. It’s not a perfect solution, but it’s definitely a good start.

“You’re not listening to me,” Charlie says, pursing her lips. “Am I boring you?”

“What? No!” Dean shakes himself off. “Sorry. I just—”

“Drifted off again. Yeah, I could tell. Try not to do that in the OR, though.”

Dean rolls his eyes and steals an olive from Charlie’s plate, earning himself a smack across the hand.

“You don’t even like olives.”

“Also don’t like when somebody doesn’t listen to me.”

Dean drops his hand, conceding defeat. He’s a shitty friend for tuning Charlie out, even if he was having an epiphany at the time. To make it up to her, he folds his arms on the tabletop and bombards her with more questions about her trip, this time giving her his undivided attention. After a while he gently steers the conversation in the general direction of places to go and attractions to see in and around New York, hoping for some inspiration as to where he could invite Cas. Charlie, ever helpful, gives him a couple interesting ideas he decides to explore later, but for now he puts the issue on the backburner and spends the rest of his lunch break laughing through a story about Charlie and Dorothy’s adventures in New Haven.

Castiel is walking down the corridor with an armful of documents and a glower that would put the fear of God in the most hardened of atheists. He storms past Dean and veers off to the nurses station, slamming the files on the desk so hard a few stray papers fly away and land on the floor.
Dean arches an eyebrow.

“Bad day?”

“We are both working for the devil himself,” Castiel proclaims heatedly, reaching to pick up the files from the ground. Dean beats him to it, and collects what turns out to be a bunch of hospital release forms.

“I thought you didn’t have a problem with Crowley,” he says, handing the forms back to Cas and propping his elbows on the counter. “I thought the two of you were kinda getting along, actually.”

Castiel looks righteously offended at the mere suggestion of associating with the likes of Crowley. He shakes his head and busies himself with opening several of the million and one binders stacked in the cabinet behind him.

“I only ever had a professional respect for him for the efficacious way he administers the hospital,” he clarifies, aggressively cramming a wad of papers into a plastic sleeve. “But I refuse to hold any esteem for a person who values bureaucracy more than the welfare of our patients.”

Dean is slowly beginning to understand where this is going, but he keeps his mouth shut and slides further onto the countertop, watching the hard line of Castiel’s mouth thin even more in anger.

“It’s unbelievable how the man who’s in charge of this entire hospital cares so little for the well-being of the people we set out to help.”

“Well, he’s not a practicing doctor, Cas. Not anymore, at least. He’s a businessman.”

“He’s a heartless bastard,” Castiel corrects, loudly slamming a binder shut and opening another one.

Dean has never seen Cas so mad before, and he’d be lying if he said it wasn’t perversely pleasurable to look at. The passion and rage that come off of him in waves make his usually calm eyes seem that much brighter and his cheekbones that much sharper.

It’s a very, very good look on him, Dean decides.

“What did he do to earn the ire of my favorite nurse?” he asks before he can bite his stupid tongue.

Cas pauses, looking up from the files as if to make sure the comment was directed at him. It might be a trick of the light or just Dean’s overactive imagination, but he could swear he sees a smile flick across Cas’s face before his features darken again.

“There’s a patient who’s been on the waiting list for a pacemaker implementation for a month now. She called today. Her health insurance is going to expire in a week, and she can’t afford to renew it. She needs that surgery to happen now—”

“—before she has to pay for it out of her own pocket with money she doesn’t have,” Dean finishes, sighing. He knows the drill all too well. “Let me guess – you asked Crowley to bump her up on the list and he said no.”

“He doesn’t gain anything by blocking that surgery. He’s putting her life in danger for no reason.”

“Other than the fact there are other people waiting for a pacemaker on that list,” Dean remarks gently. He’s not about to defend Crowley, but he sees how letting people bypass the rules would be frowned upon by the administration.

An angry glare he receives tells him that Castiel disagrees with that assessment.

“And why is the waiting period for the surgery so long?” he asks, his tone dripping with venom. “Is it perhaps because somebody grudges spending money on more beds and more staff, instead overworking the employees he has and using the funds to make a fucking winter garden?”

“You have a point,” Dean admits. “Though that garden is sort of awesome. I’m joking, I’m joking!” he adds, raising his hands up in surrender when Cas pins him with one of those ‘dishonor on your cow’ stares. “But you said yourself he’s a good administrator.”

“He is,” Cas agrees unhappily. “Even despite that garden. But his attitude to our work is unbearable.”

“Hey,” Dean says, coming around the counter to stand next to Cas. He can’t do much out here in the open, with nurses and patients crowding around, but he reaches out to briefly brush his fingers against Castiel’s wrist.

“I know it sucks. Trust me, I know. But don’t let it get to you like this. Don’t give him the
satisfaction.”

Cas stills under Dean’s touch and meets his eyes.

“We’re all part of a machine that hates us, Cas. We can’t win. But,” Dean smiles impishly as an idea pops into his head, “we can always have our own little acts of rebellion.”

“Such as?”

Dean grins, but before he can explain any further, a looming figure appears next to them.

“Don’t you boys have anything to do?” Missouri asks, staring them down disapprovingly.

“We’re discussing hospital matters,” Dean says. Which in a way, they are. Dean couldn’t lie to Missouri even if he wanted to; she has a unique way of stripping away all the layers of his bullshit in two seconds flat.

“Less discussing, more doing,” she says, waving them off to work. “Well, what are you waiting for, a written invitation?”

Dean rolls his eyes, which earns him a smack over the head.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me, young man.”

It’s a thing of wonder that Dean allows her to treat him like a wayward teenager. Professionally speaking, Missouri has no power over him – or any of the doctors, for that matter – but Dean can’t help but go into a little kid mode whenever she’s around.

“I’ll be in the cath lab,” he sighs. When Missouri turns around, he quickly leans in to Cas’s ear and whispers: “I’ll swing by later so we can pick up where we left off.”

Cas nods and finally gives a small smile.

As Dean walks away, there’s an extra spring in his step and a grin on his face that he couldn’t contain even if he tried.

“This is your ‘little act of rebellion’? Getting fired?”

“Quit being a buzz kill, nobody will catch us,” Dean mumbles under his breath as he jams the pin into the lock and twists it left and right.

“Dean, this is a terrible idea. If somebody were to walk in on us—”

“Like who? It’s past midnight. All the administration staff have long since left, and all the nurses and doctors on call are on the other floors. Relax, okay?”

Castiel just sighs, throwing a nervous glance up and down the corridor. It’s dark and empty, as expected, but that doesn’t seem to appease him.

“There can be janitors,” he offers.

“We’ll lock the door from the inside,” Dean says.

“You need to open it first,” Cas retorts.

“Don’t you worry about that. I’m an expert at picking locks.”

“So I want to know why?”

Dean smiles to himself as the mechanism finally yields and the door clicks open.

“You probably don’t.”

They slip into the room, Cas immediately closing and locking the door behind them. Dean’s first instinct is to reach for the light switch, but Cas grabs his hand mid-way and shakes his head.

“Somebody will see from the outside.”

Dean nods in agreement and looks around them, trying to remember the layout of the room from the last time he was here. Crowley’s office is one of the biggest in the entire building, furnished with stylish furniture and several truly ridiculous paintings – so ridiculous, in fact, that it couldn’t have been Crowley’s choice to put them there. Probably gifts from one of the hospital’s donors,
then. There’s also an impressive library running along the south wall, filled with tomes of medical encyclopedias, journals, compendia, text books, dictionaries, essays, and all kinds of other publications, some of them very old. Tessa claims Crowley must have friends in the smuggling business, because there’s no way he accumulated such a humongous collection legally.

Dean can only thank divine providence that instead of putting an alarm on the door like a normal person, Crowley had it installed only around a custom-made bookcase with shatterproof glass and stainless steel shelves.

“Is that where our funds are going?” Cas mutters, following Dean’s gaze.

“Nah, somebody would have had his balls by now if he put hospital money into this.”

“So he must have other sources of income. Probably illicit.”

“Probably,” Dean smirks. His eyes have grown accustomed to the dark by now, and he can clearly make out Crowley’s desk, two leather armchairs, a swivel chair and a sofa standing by the window.

“So,” he murmurs, grabbing Cas’s sleeve and pulling him closer, “shall we?”

Castiel’s head turns toward him, the movement causing the light from an outside streetlamp to hit his face and illuminate it in a way Dean would describe as breath-taking if he was a love-struck moron, which he most certainly is not. Cas looks down to where Dean’s hand is still holding onto his scrubs, then back up.

“You are serious about this,” he says, incredulous. “I didn’t think you’d actually… you’d really risk your employment to do this?”

“To make you feel better? Yeah.”

Castiel’s eyes widen at that, and Dean feels an unwelcome heat spreading across his cheeks. Good thing it’s not visible in the darkness that surrounds them. Even so, he clears his throat and quickly covers it up with something sufficiently cocky.

“Besides, a guy can’t just pass up the opportunity to spite his boss when it presents itself, right?”

He smiles crookedly and gives Cas his special wink, the one that usually gets him anywhere he wants with both men and women. That should cut the sappy shit right down to the root.

There’s a short beat when Castiel just watches him, tilting his head in that disconcerting, bird-like way he has. He looks about as thoughtful as it’s possible for someone who’s considering banging in their boss’s office.

“I see,” he says, enigmatic as ever, and then nods, much too solemn. Dean almost starts to laugh at him and at the overall ridiculousness of the situation. He opens his mouth again, teasing remark at the ready, but then Castiel is right there, and Dean’s mouth falls open even more when his bottom lip is suddenly being pulled at, then licked, then sucked at, and then—

“Shit, Cas! Your hand’s fucking cold!”

Castiel only smirks and sneaks his palm farther underneath Dean’s lab coat, sliding it down his spine to rest on the small of his back. He pulls Dean close and resumes abusing his lip in the filthiest way imaginable, at the same time rubbing his palm over the swell of Dean’s ass, just shy of slipping it below the waistband of his scrubs. The contrast between the icy skin of Castiel’s hand and the heat of his mouth is so stark, it has Dean losing his mind even before they manage to remove a single layer of clothing.

“Shit, so cold, shit,” he repeats nonsensically, torn between squirming away from the freezing touch and pushing back into it.

“Don’t worry,” Cas murmurs, “I’ll warm it up before fingering you open with it.”

The noise that wrenches itself out of Dean’s throat makes him sound like he’s dying – which he very well might, if they don’t get on with the program this fucking instant.

“Promise?”

“Have I ever disappointed?”

“Cas,” Dean growls. He reaches behind himself blindly to grab at Castiel’s wrist, and points his head towards the couch. “Come on.”

“No, not there. We’ve already broken so many rules, let’s at least make it worth our while.”

Dean’s confusion must show on his face, because Cas smiles and clarifies:
“I mean the desk. Let’s do it on Crowley’s desk.”

The imagery those words conjure effectively makes Dean’s mind go blank. The very idea of Cas bending him over Crowley’s desk is enough to make his already prominent hard-on painful, and he almost stops thinking clearly then. It’s so tempting to just pin Cas to the floor and hump him quick and dirty until they both come – God, is it tempting – but months of their sexual exploits have taught Dean a thing or two about the benefits of delayed gratification. That’s why instead of giving in to his instincts, he only mutters “kinky bastard” and nods his assent, letting Cas push him backwards until they stumble into the desk. Once there, Castiel hooks his thumbs under the waistband of Dean’s scrub pants and yanks them down, his own joining them shortly after.

“Crowley would murder us in cold blood for this,” he whispers against Dean’s neck, kicking away the scrubs tangled around his ankles.

“But doesn’t that make it better?” Dean grins, tipping his head back to give Cas better access. “He would be livid.”

“It’s a little on the kindergarten side, but I’ll take it,” Cas concedes. His mouth moves against the bolt of Dean’s jaw, arms locking around him so tight Dean barely has any room to breathe. Despite his ribs being squished in Castiel’s hold and the hard edge of the desk digging into his pelvis, Dean finds himself relaxing into it, into the familiarity and security. The sense of urgency is still there, though, pulsing low in his stomach and causing him to buck up into Cas when he can’t take it anymore.

“C’mon, Cas,” he goads. “Why even bother having desk sex if you’re gonna make it mellow.”

Castiel slides both arms under Dean’s thighs and hauls him up to a sitting position, ignoring his startled yelp. The documents lying on the desktop crumple under Dean’s weight, the sound of paper creasing and crumpling inaudible to Dean through the rush of blood in his ears. Cas must have much more reason left in him than Dean does, because he takes a moment to lift him up briefly and sweep the documents to the floor with the back of his hand.

“Good idea,” Dean pants, settling back on the now mostly empty desk.

“I’m only leaving your coat on because I like it,” Cas informs him before pushing him flat on his back and knocking Crowley’s hand sanitizer to the floor in the process. Fingers tucked under Dean’s bent knees, he leans down to mouth at his inner thigh, leaving a few hickey here and there as he slowly moves up. He seems entirely focused on his task, and Dean watches him work through half-lidded eyes, gasping at the increasing pressure. It’s embarrassing how quickly the pleasure builds inside him, even though Cas hasn’t even touched his cock yet. His breathing grows heavier by the second, and when Castiel finally reaches the line of his pubic hair, Dean is ready to whine. Cas stops there briefly, breath ghosting hot over Dean’s skin, and then, at last, he looks up to catch Dean’s gaze. The sight of him like this – hair ruffled, eyes dark, lips slick with saliva – is what makes Dean’s coherence officially hightail it out of the room together with his self-control.

“Oh, fuck. Cas, please, fuck—”

“I intend to,” Castiel agrees. His voice has taken on that deep, raw quality that only makes an appearance when he’s really hot under the collar, and Dean can’t help but feel smug about that. However, right now he has other priorities than teasing Cas.

“Left pocket,” he says quickly.

Castiel’s hand delves into Dean’s coat and fishes out a packet of lube and condoms.

“You came well-prepared,” he says, not even trying to hide a smile.

“Hey, I’m a doctor. Health and safety first.”

“Very responsible.”

Dean’s eyes follow Castiel as he rips the packet open and coats his fingers with a generous amount of lube. When they first started doing this, Dean was always impatient to get the show on the road. He insisted they only do the bare minimum, quick and sloppy and just shy of insufficient, but Castiel would have none of it. He firmly ignored Dean’s whining and stated in no uncertain terms that his dick wouldn’t go anywhere near Dean’s ass if he couldn’t fit at least three fingers there first.

Dean quickly learned to appreciate the advantages of well-done prep after that.

“You promised you’d warm it up first, shithed.”

Castiel smiles and rubs his fingers together a few times.
“This will have to suffice.”

Upon the first press of fingertips against his rim, Dean’s whole body bucks.

“Motherfuck—”

“Dean, quiet,” Castiel scolds. “Someone will hear.”

“I’ll get you back for this, Novak,” Dean promises, though to be fair, it probably doesn’t sound too threatening when gasped out.

Castiel hums as he pushes his finger a little deeper.

“We’ll see.”

Before Dean can come up with an answer (the synapses in his brain seem to need more time than usual to communicate), there’s an arm sliding around his torso and he’s being drawn into a kiss.

It’s no surprise, this time; Cas always does this. It’s kind of his trademark move, to distract Dean from the initial discomfort by going to town on his lips. Now is no exception, and while Dean focuses on the warm tongue tracing his lips, Castiel stretches him with deft, measured movements, one finger, then two – enough to loosen the muscles, but not to get Dean off the way he wants.

“Come on, come on, come on,” he pants into Cas’s mouth, grinding against him to take him deeper. “For someone who was so afraid of getting caught just a few minutes ago, you’re going awfully slow.”

In lieu of response, Castiel bites at the underside of Dean’s jaw and bluntly slips the third finger all the way in, jamming it directly into Dean’s prostate like he knows exactly where to aim. Sparks explode beneath Dean’s eyelids as he grabs Cas’s shoulders and groans into the fabric of his scrubs, clenching around the new intrusion. It’s too much at first, searing and sharp, but when his body adjusts, it’s suddenly not enough. A minute passes, then two, and Dean finally catches on to the fact that Cas is not failing at finding his prostate again – he’s not even trying.

“Cas…”

“A little longer.”

Dean groans in frustration. There’s nothing he can do but rock back on Cas’s fingers, hold on to him and wait until he deems him ready. And Cas is taking his sweet time, working him open so thoroughly Dean might start climbing walls if he weren’t currently trapped under 170 pounds of a nurse.

At last – at fucking last – Castiel withdraws his fingers and lets go of Dean for long enough to slip on a condom. Then he gently places his left hand around Dean’s neck and uses his right to guide himself inside, slow and steady and entirely disregardful of Dean’s impatient fingers digging crescent shapes into his hipbones.

Once they’re flush, Dean lets out a long breath, squirming a little as his body gets used to the sensation. It’s never pleasant at first, but Dean is so turned on that all he can think about is how good it’s about to be.

“Are you okay?” Cas asks. His voice is soft, but his eyes promise the filthiest things.

“Move, for the love of fuck.”

Cas kisses him lightly and braces both hands on the edge of the desk on either side of Dean’s head.

“Legs around my waist, if you will, Doctor.”

Dean doesn’t need to be told twice. He wraps his thighs around Cas, drawing him closer until their bodies are as close as humanly possible.

“Thank you,” Cas says, and Dean almost laughs aloud at that. If there’s one person who can fuck the ever-living daylights out of you while maintaining impeccable manners, it’s definitely Castiel Novak, RN.

Dean is just about to make a nonchalant comment about that, advising Cas to practice his dirty talk and perhaps take the formality down a notch or two, but his systems go offline the second Castiel sways his hips.

“Cas, fuck!”

“So you keep insisting,” Cas remarks, gently nipping at the tendon of Dean’s neck.
This is infuriating. Dean has no leverage in this position, no way to move things along. He’s a hair’s breadth away from spontaneously bursting into flames out of sheer want, and all he can do is wait.

Well. And talk.

He treats himself to a fistful of dark hair and tugs at it until Cas’s ear is next to his mouth.

“Do I need to walk you through this, nurse? Or can you figure it out on your own?”

It’s either a very right or a very wrong thing to say, because there’s an honest-to-God growl tumbling out of Castiel’s mouth, and the arms propped on the desk flex, muscles shifting. It’s the only warning Dean gets before Cas abruptly pulls almost all the way back and… just hovers there.

So. A very wrong thing to say.

“I see your attitude towards my profession still requires some rectification.”

“Cas—”

“However, I’m afraid it will have to wait until we have finished fornicating on our employer’s desk.”

Dean opens his mouth to advise him never to use the word ‘fornicate’ during sex, or ideally in any other circumstances either, but the words turn into a whimper when Cas slides back in in one smooth move. The first few thrusts make him scramble for purchase on the desk, and Castiel wordlessly dives his left shoulder under Dean’s arm, letting him latch onto it. They quickly work through the initial awkwardness of having to set a good rhythm, and Castiel’s hips begin to slam into Dean’s in earnest, trying to find the right angle. As soon as he hits it, Dean screws his eyes shut and moans so loud he surprises them both.

The truth is, for all his big talk and flirting, Dean Winchester is fairly silent during sex. He might sigh or gasp or mutter a quiet encouragement, but usually that’s it. It’s not that he’s holding himself back; he’s simply too focused on how amazing everything feels to be bothered with engaging his vocal cords on top of everything. And yet here he is, moaning and groaning like a porn star. Perhaps there’s just something about this particular situation – the forbidden fruit factor, or the risk of getting caught, or maybe the position they’re in, Dean spread out precariously on top of Crowley’s paperwork and Cas looming above him, wild hair and eyes even wilder, making the desk shake and Dean’s bones rattle. Whatever it is, it’s actively contributing to some seriously mind-blowing sex.

While it’s harmless enough as such, in current circumstances Dean’s newly-discovered noisiness is potentially dangerous. He’s too far gone to realize it, but when the next snap of their bodies rips another sob out of him, loud and unabashed, Castiel intervenes.

“Dean. Somebody will hear.”

He dives in to cover Dean’s mouth with his own and drown him out, but it does little difference when at the same time he rocks his hips forward at a slightly changed angle, and again manages to slam squarely into Dean’s prostate.

Even if Crowley himself was standing behind the door, listening in for any sounds of movement, Dean still wouldn’t be able to contain a muffled cry that gets caught between their lips.

“Dean, you have to keep quiet.”

Castiel’s voice is hitching in his throat, but apparently he’s able to form complete sentences, which is more than can be said about the state Dean is in. The desk moans and judders beneath them on every thrust, and Dean clutches at Castiel’s arms, buries his face in his neck, bites his shoulder, but it’s not enough to stifle the breathy sounds escaping his throat. The closer he is to coming, the louder he gets, and finally Cas has no choice but to lightly press his palm over Dean’s mouth.

There’s something delightfully dirty about the gesture, and it sends Dean spiraling to release even faster. He wants, needs to touch himself, but both of his hands are occupied – his left white-knuckling on the edge of the desk, and his right slung around Castiel’s neck, clinging to him for dear life. He’s helpless to do anything but whimper against the fingers pressed to his lips, and that he does, at the same time pushing up against Cas’s stomach in search of friction.

Cas seems to realize what he’s asking, because his movements slow down minutely, and he seeks out Dean’s gaze.

“Are you— Dean, are you close?”

A muffled groan is all Castiel gets by way of reply, but it’s enough to infer the rest.
“If I take my hand away, will you promise to keep quiet?”

Dean nods frantically, rutting up against Cas. He doesn’t care if it makes him look needy or desperate; if he doesn’t come in the next few minutes, he’s going to explode.

Cas nods back, and then his fingers are gone, leaving Dean gasping with his mouth open in a wide ‘o’. He doesn’t get to savor it for very long though, because Cas takes him in hand and begins stroking leisurely as he resumes their previous rhythm. It doesn’t take much from there, and soon Dean is coming all over his stomach, biting his lips and smushing his face into the crook of Castiel’s neck to silence himself. His body is still trembling when a handful of thrusts later Cas tumbles after him, coming deep inside Dean with a groan and slumping against his chest.

As the sensations slowly fade, Dean sighs with contentment, sinking his fingers into Cas’s hair and beginning to rake through it languidly. Their ragged breathing sounds deafening in the otherwise silent room, and now that his head starts to clear, Dean wonders how it’s possible that no one came to check out the noise they must have made.

“Well, that’s one item to cross out from my bucket list,” he jokes, stroking the short hair at the base of Cas’s neck.

“Mmm,” Cas agrees eloquently. He pushes himself up on his hands and looks down at Dean, his eyes a little unfocused.

“You did keep quiet,” he says softly. “I asked you to promise, and then you barely even made a sound.”

Dean flushes slightly, but doesn’t look away.

“Uh. Yeah.”

Cas nods solemnly, and Dean is certain he’s just filed this particular tidbit of information for later.

“Since you did so well, let me take care of you now,” Cas says, sliding off of Dean and pulling his scrub pants back on.

Dean’s light blush turns more aggressively red, because what the hell. Who says things like that? And at any rate, he doesn’t need to be coddled after sex.

He’s about to say as much when Cas’s hands are on him, putting back his clothes and cleaning him up with gentle, practiced movements of a person who makes a living taking care of people. Dean’s protests die in his throat, and he settles for simply watching Cas, a small, fond smile blooming on his lips. What a weirdo. What a considerate, adorable, kooky little weirdo.

Half of Crowley’s custom-made Kleenex box later, all evidence of two really great orgasms is erased, and Cas pulls Dean off the desk into a slow, warm kiss, placing both hands on his cheeks. It’s in such a stark contrast to the pounding he gave him a few minutes prior that Dean lets out a giggle into Cas’s mouth.

“What?”

“Nothing. So, did that work for you, nurse Jackie? Was the revenge to your liking?”

Cas shakes his head, but the smile splitting his face speaks for itself. He draws Dean closer by his coat and deepens the kiss.

Dean reads between the lines, and within each press of their lips he finds a heartfelt thank-you.
Three days after their risky sexcapade to Crowley’s office, Dean musters up the courage to ask the question that has been sitting heavy on his tongue for far too long.

“How about we go somewhere?” he blurts before he has a chance to change his mind.

Cas looks up at him from the paperwork he’s filling out and tilts his head questioningly.

“We could go eat a regular dinner for once. You know, as opposed to the same old grub they serve in the cafeteria.” Dean gives a sheepish smile and quickly busies himself with studying the MRI image pinned over the wall opposite Cas. His heart hammers in his chest and when there’s no answer in the next two seconds, he starts backpedaling faster than the Tour de France peloton.

“I mean… you don’t have to say yes, of course. I just— I just thought it would be nice to get away from the hospital. Stop breathing in the antiseptic for a while.”

Dean’s back is turned from Cas, but he’s sure the tension in his shoulders betrays how anxiously he’s awaiting the response. The room is still ominously quiet and as is his habit, Dean begins to panic. Goddammit. God fucking dammit. He should have shut his stupid gob. Why would Cas want to meet up with him in his free time? Why would he want more? They were just fooling around. It was a good deal, this colleagues-with-benefits thing. It was an easy way to get laid for two guys who live and breathe their work, and rarely get a chance to meet somebody outside the hospital. And he just threw it all out the window because what, he wanted to hold hands and make googly eyes at Cas over some overpriced meal in a restaurant in Manhattan? What the fuck is wrong with you, Winchester.

By the time Cas speaks up, Dean is on the verge of retreating without even waiting for an answer. He’s such a moron, a complete and utter idiot with all the wrong ideas. He rushed it, and now it’s all going to blow in his face, and—

“Like a date?”

Castiel’s voice cuts through Dean’s frenzied thought process like a saw, calm and neutral, and— wait, did he say ‘date’?

Well, there goes the ‘first-go-out-as-friends-and-work-up-to-the-top’ strategy. Dean opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of water, trying to wrap his head around the sudden change of scenario. Once his brain catches up, he realizes that Cas has just given him a perfect out. All Dean needs to do is say “What? Nah, ‘course not, just as friends.” He could save face, and he and Cas could keep doing what they’re doing. Everything would stay exactly as it is now.

Unless, of course, Cas wants it to be a date, in which case Dean treating him like nothing more than a fuck buddy will hurt him and maybe even make him want to stop.

Why is this mushy stuff so fucking complicated. And when did Dean Winchester’s life become a televised Bravo article, for Christ’s sake.

As Dean turns around, he still doesn’t know what his answer’s going to be, but when his gaze zeroes in on Cas, it becomes crystal clear. Something real. Any risk. In for a penny, in for a pound.

“Yes. Like a date.”

Cas nods, once.

“Okay.”

Castiel could have made a different choice.

He could have followed Meg’s advice and put an end to his and Dean’s arrangement altogether. He could have kept it going, but at the same time inform Dean in no uncertain terms that sexual relations are all he seeks. He could have and perhaps should have done one of those things. Things that might have been safer for his heart, if past experiences were anything to go by. However, it just so happened that Dean, unbeknownst to himself, asked him out in the most opportune moment – that is, the day after Castiel realized it was already too late for any damage control.
The circumstances were, ironically, quite mundane. It was the end of a particularly busy, stressful week that saw them perform nine different surgeries. Although as usual Dean tried to mask his tiredness with cheekiness, Castiel could see the dark circles under his eyes and the increased sluggishness of his movements. And then, late on the Thursday afternoon, Castiel walked into the doctors lounge only to find Dean asleep on the couch, snoring gently with his face smushed into a pillow.

The sight made him go still in the doorway. He’d been meaning to unwind and watch some TV before going home, but he didn’t want to disrupt Dean’s rest. For reasons he couldn’t quite determine, Castiel quietly closed the door behind him and moved a few steps closer, finding himself pulled towards Dean. He stopped halfway to the couch, unsure what it was he wanted to do, but unwilling to leave. In the end, he just stood there and watched – and boy, were there a lot of things to observe and admire. The steady rise and fall of Dean’s chest. The tired lines on his face smoothed out in his sleep. The hands folded under his chin, dry and cracked from many hours of being trapped in plastic surgical gloves. The smattering of freckles over his cheeks, visible even in the dim light of the winter afternoon.

It wasn’t anything Castiel hadn’t seen dozens of times before, but for some reason that day he found it spellbinding. His eyes remained glued to Dean for so long that it took a good while before he registered the TV was turned on, and a random Dr Sexy MD episode was playing on mute in the background. As his gaze started to wander, he also noticed Dean’s tattered copy of Jailbird lying open on the table by the couch, right next to a red and blue thank-you card from Emma, a 5-year-old whose mother Dean had operated.

The contrast was almost comical, but it fit Dean. The book was smart, the show was silly, the card was touching, and between them, right in front of Castiel, there was a 6’1 man curled up like a little kid. He was drooling on the pillow, mouth half-open, his breathing even, and Castiel’s heart seized as he felt himself plummet.

Like Icarus, he thought. A cheap comparison, that’s for sure, but how accurate. Icarus too carelessly approached something blinding, foolishly thinking he could control the situation and escape unscathed and unaffected. He fell victim to his own hubris, and at that moment Castiel realized he did as well.

Perhaps there was a point when he could have turned around and walked away with his heart still his own and intact. But he missed it. The eleventh hour came and went, and Castiel was too busy staring into the sun to spot it. And so when Dean blushed his way through asking him out, stuttering and rolling his shoulders to hide his nervousness, Castiel’s choice was already made for him. After all, there was no use in flapping his arms once the freefall had begun. He could only let it happen and pray the wind would carry him to safety.

Dean Winchester doesn’t get nervous before dates. He simply undertakes the conscious effort of pumping substantial amounts of adrenaline into his system so as to improve his performance. He may have been taught that people can’t control their hormone levels with sheer willpower, but hey, medicine is a tricky science. There are exceptions to every rule, and who’s to say Dean is not one of them? Because he is not anxious. It’s not like anything depends on the outcome of the evening, anyway. Whatever happens tonight will not influence his day-to-day coexistence with Castiel at all.

He keeps telling himself that, but the voice in his head sounds more and more panicked the longer he waits. People pass him on all sides, rushing up and down the street as the wind whips about them, and Dean’s teeth start to chatter in the cold. He draws up the collar of his jacket and stomps his feet a little to get the blood going. It’s his own fault that he came so early.

He almost jumps out of his skin when his phone begins vibrating in his pocket, and as soon as he sees Castiel’s name flash on the screen, there are a dozen tragic scenarios already popping up in his head. He changed his mind. He can’t make it. There’s an emergency surgery and they both need to go to the hospital immediately. He had an accident on the way and is probably dying. Or someone else had an accident, and he was a witness, and he rushed in to help the victims, and he crawled into a flipped car to save a little girl, or a dog, or a little girl AND her dog, and he brought them back to safety, but got stuck on his way out and—

“Dean? It’s me. I’m calling to let you know I’m going to be a few minutes late. I’m sorry to keep you waiting, but my bus didn’t arrive on time.”

“It’s fine, man,” Dean says, silently breathing a sigh of relief. Not dead or dying or even worse, no longer interested. “No worries.”

“Perhaps you should go inside? It’s rather cold today,” Castiel suggests. There’s a steady thrum of
traffic audible in the background, with occasional sounds of cars blowing their horns at each other.

“Nah, I’ll wait outside. The entrance is pretty inconspicuous, I wouldn’t want you to miss it.”

“Are you sure?” Cas insists. “I don’t want your pneumonia on my conscience.”

“Shut up and get over here. I’ll wait.”

He hears Cas huff an amused sound into his phone, and the call ends.

Five minutes later stomping his feet stops having any effect. Seven minutes later his fingers begin to go stiff even though they’re stuffed as deep into his pockets as they can go. Ten minutes later Dean feels like there are icicles forming on his eyelashes, but he still refuses to go inside like Cas advised him to.

“You’re a very stubborn man, Dean Winchester.”

Dean swivels around on the sidewalk and comes face to face with a familiar half-smirk.

“Like you don’t know it,” he says, and that’s all he manages before the sight in front of him fully registers, knocking all air out of him.

Castiel’s cheeks are pinched by the cold, making them almost as rosy as his lips. There are single snowflakes peppered in his (surprisingly neatly styled) hair and over his shoulders, which are clad – Dean almost takes a step back as he realizes this – in an elegant black coat with an upturned collar. Although it looks warm, it also hugs Castiel’s body in all the right places, accentuating the broad line of his shoulders and the curves of his arms. It makes him look slightly taller, too – or maybe it’s just because Dean’s knees went weak, bringing him closer to the ground.

“You said the restaurant was fancy,” Castiel explains when he sees Dean’s eyes examine his outfit. “I hope I didn’t overdress?”

“No,” Dean says weakly. This is a low blow. He’s only seen Castiel out of his scrubs a handful of times, and it was always in casual clothes. What he’s witnessing right now is a whole new level of unfair.

“Shall we…?” Castiel begins, gesturing towards the restaurant door.

“Oh, yeah. After you.”

The next fifteen minutes make Dean rue the moment he picked a posh French restaurant over, well, virtually anything else. He could have gone with one of Charlie’s suggestions, but no, he just had to settle on something chic and totally not him in a lame attempt to impress Cas.

As a waiter takes their coats and shows them to their table, he already starts feeling vaguely out of place, and it only gets worse with every passing minute. Selecting a wine is stressful enough (shouldn’t a man be knowledgeable about wines? All Dean knows is that he prefers red over white), but the true downfall begins when the waiter comes back with their bottle and hands them the menus. Dean scans the meals in horror, realizing all the names are in French. It’s not just that he doesn’t know what they mean; he can’t even pronounce them correctly.

He begins to turn the pages, searching for any sort of help, but there is none. A quick glance across the table tells Dean that he’s the only one here in a pickle. His date (and wow, Dean likes the sound of that) is reading the menu attentively, not showing any signs of uneasiness. To be honest, Cas looks perfectly in place here, and could very well pass for a regular. It might have something to do with his clothes, though – as it turns out, the coat was hiding a navy blue jacket and a white dress shirt that would make Dean’s mouth water if he weren’t currently freaking out.

It’s much too soon before the waiter comes back to their table, and stands right behind Dean’s shoulder. He leans in with an attentive look on his face, ready to take the order, and Dean starts sweating like a whore in church. This was a terrible, terrible idea.

“Could we have a minute, please?” Castiel asks suddenly. Dean looks up with surprise, as does the waiter.

“Pardon, sir?”

“We will order in a minute,” Castiel explains, putting his open menu on the table to get his meaning across. “If you would be so kind as to come back a little later, we would greatly appreciate it.”

The waiter blinks, but says nothing and bows his head comically before leaving them alone. As soon as his back is turned, Dean raises his eyebrows in silent question.

“Everything alright?” he asks.
“Not quite.”

Dean’s heartbeat quickens at the words, his imagination already ripe with possible explanations – and none of them are pleasant. He takes a few solid sips of his wine to calm his nerves. And then a couple sips more. He forces himself to put the glass down and then immediately moves to pick it up again.

“Dean,” Cas says softly, reaching out across the table to stop Dean’s hand mid-way. “I am very flattered that you went into all this trouble to invite me somewhere nice, but you’re like fish out of water here.”

Dean laughs nervously and withdraws his hand, but he still eyes the glass wistfully.

“Am I that obvious?”

In lieu of answering, Castiel studies Dean’s face as if he expected to find something more there than just growing uneasiness.

“May I make a suggestion?” he asks.

Dean’s stomach lurches, because that sounds a lot like a segue to “this was a mistake, let’s call it off and never try to date again, since it’s clearly not working.” God, he was so damn stupid. What the hell was he thinking? He should have invited Cas over to his place, like he’d originally planned to, and make him a homemade dinner. But no, Dean Winchester wanted to be clever, wanted to do it right, and of course he ended up overdoing it. In all honesty, he can’t even blame Cas for wanting to hightail it the hell outta this place. It’s giving him the creeps too, with those stiff, unnaturally white tablecloths and smartly dressed waiters who look like they have to spend ten minutes every day on removing that stick from up their asses.

“Yeah, sure,” he allows, slumping his shoulders in resignation.

“We haven’t ordered the main course yet, so I suggest we forgo it altogether.”

Dean grabs the glass and downs the remaining wine in one gulp. His head is already buzzing, but not nearly enough.

“Okay,” he agrees despondently.

“And then, if you’ll allow me, I’d like to take you to one of my favorite dining places,” Cas continues. “I have a feeling it might be more to your liking.”

Dean shoots him a surprised look, which Castiel returns with unnerving calm.

“What dining place?” Dean asks suspiciously. The last thing he wants is for Cas to see that he can’t behave in not one, but two fancy restaurants. Fucking Upper East Side.

“Just trust me,” Cas says, nodding at their waiter, who hovers worriedly nearby.

“Are you ready to order, sirs?”

Cas looks pointedly at Dean, and the waiter’s eyes follow his gaze. Great, now they’re both staring at him.

Dean clears his throat.

“Actually, we’ll skip the meal.”

The waiter doesn’t seem to comprehend at first, and once he does, he plasters a concerned expression on his face, one that screams oh boy, there must be something severely wrong if you’re willing to give up a feast of a lifetime at Le Veau d’Or. Dean almost starts to feel sorry for the guy, and leaves him a generous tip. The wine was good, after all.

Once they’re standing on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, Dean turns to Castiel to apologize for making a disaster out of their first date, but to his surprise, he’s met with a smile.

“What are you so happy about?” he frowns.

His confusion only serves to make Cas grin wider. He turns away a little, hands slipping into the pockets of his coat, but he doesn’t manage to hide the fondness in his voice as he says:

“You looked so uncomfortable in there.”

Dean snorts.

“I know. Thanks for bringing that up. Not all of us are used to dining in 5-star restaurants where the napkins cost more than a normal person earns in a week.”
Castiel’s smile fades a little when he meets Dean’s eyes.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m not making fun of you, Dean. It’s just so… refreshing.”

Jesus, Dean is really out of the loop here.

“Refreshing?”

“Usually, I’m the one who acts awkwardly in social situations,” Cas explains. “It’s a nice change to have somebody else take my place for one night.”

Dean wants to sulk, but his brain doesn’t get the memo in time and lets a small smile slip past his lips.

“Glad to be of service. But for the record, you totally are making fun of me, and I expect to be placated with a nice dinner.”

“Right.” Cas straightens and points his chin behind Dean. “That way.”

They quickly fall into step together, leaving Le Veau d’Or behind as they walk down the street. Their arms brush lightly, but neither of them makes the effort to put some distance between them. The closeness feels natural, even though they’re always trying to play down the physical gestures in public. Well, not in public; in the hospital. Here, with people passing them by in a steady stream, nobody knows them and nobody cares.

And so, Dean gets bold. He can’t even pin it on being buzzed, since he’s only drunk one glass of wine, so he tries not to think too hard about why he wants this so badly. He battles with himself for a few minutes, fingers flexing nervously inside his pockets, and he’s on the cusp of making a decision when Cas beats him to it.

“Dean, I appreciate how committed you are to playing the awkward one tonight, but everything has its limits.”

Dean shrugs and just goes for it, taking Cas’s hand in his own. Its weight is warm and solid, a nice contrast against the biting December air. Dean tightens his grip on it. Victory.

“I don’t do PDAs,” he announces.

Cas throws him an amused look.

“Then what’s that?” he demands, lifting their joined hands.

“It’s cold and I forgot my gloves.”

“Oh. Understandable.”

“It really is,” Dean defends. “It’s a miracle my fingers didn’t fall off while I was waiting for you.”

“I told you to go inside, Dean,” Cas tuts. “It’s not my fault you’re so obstinate.”

“Seriously, you reproach me for trying to be romantic?”

As soon as the words are out, Castiel goes quiet and Dean goes red. Did he really just say that?

“So, how far is that restaurant?” Dean asks quickly. “I’m telling you, it’s too freaking cold out to strut around New York. Shouldn’t we take a taxi? Or the subway, at least. I’ve met my quota for freezing my ass off today.” He knows he’s babbling, but right now he’s more concerned with covering up the r-word slip-up than with trying to act cool.

“It’s there,” Castiel says simply, pointing his hand at the building thirty feet ahead of them.

The restaurant in question is perched on the corner of the street, warm, inviting lights pouring out through large windows onto the sidewalk. A plain sign above the white-and-blue awning reads “Burger Heaven.”

“That’s your favorite place?”

Cas nods seriously, opening the door and holding it for Dean.

“I consider myself enough of a gourmet to recognize the value of French cuisine, but I still believe there’s nothing better than a well-prepared burger.”

Dean stares at the name of the place, then back at Cas.

“Dude.”
“What?”

“Marry me.”

Castiel’s lips twitch minutely.

“Do you always bring up marriage on the first date?”

Dean certainly doesn’t turn scarlet, because he is in absolute control of this situation and he hasn’t come out of the pages of a Jane Austen novel.

“Do you always take everything so literally?” he mumbles for lack of a better comeback.

“You should know by now that this is indeed how I usually go about interpreting things,” Cas answers calmly, gesturing for Dean to come into the restaurant before him.

When Dean steps inside, he’s instantly hit with a wonderful smell of grilled meat, spices, and fresh bread. His stomach growls emphatically.

“God, I’m famished.”

“It’s a good thing we’re in a place that serves food, then,” Cas’s voice rumbles behind him.

The place isn’t too crowded, so they easily find an empty booth by the window. Dean slides in first and grabs a laminated menu, eyes scanning hungrily over the page. Cas takes a place opposite him and when Dean lowers the menu, he finds him staring. Typical.

“Oh, sorry. You wanna take a look?”

“No, I already know what I want.”

Dean nods and goes back to reading through the names of various burgers, but before he can make up his mind, a tired-looking waitress appears by their side.

“What can I get you?” she asks, raising a pen over a small notepad in her hand.

“Classic burger with extra cheese and a lemonade for me,” says Cas.

She jots it down and turns to Dean.

“Oh... the same? Except with beer instead of lemonade.”

“Coming right up.”

When the waitress disappears, Dean stuffs the menu back into the holder and risks a glance at Cas, who – of course, he’s watching him like there’s the most fascinating medical documentary playing on Dean’s forehead.

“You’re going to regret ordering beer instead of lemonade,” Cas tells him, shrugging off his coat and throwing it over the seat. “They make it from scratch, from fresh lemons.”

“Then you’ll let me have a sip of yours,” Dean says dismissively.

“Will I?”

Sometimes Dean just can’t tell if Castiel is being serious or not, and this is one such occasion.

“Um... won’t you?”

Cas only smirks at him.

By the time their drinks and food arrive, Dean is so starved he drops all pretense of manners and takes a huge bite of his burger, humming around it in appreciation.

“Holy shit, it’s delicious,” he mumbles, spitting breadcrumbs everywhere.

“I can see that,” Cas teases, raising a pen over a small notepad in his hand.

“Classic burger with extra cheese and a lemonade for me,” says Cas.

She jots it down and turns to Dean.

“Uh... the same? Except with beer instead of lemonade.”

“Coming right up.”

When the waitress disappears, Dean stuffs the menu back into the holder and risks a glance at Cas, who – of course, he’s watching him like there’s the most fascinating medical documentary playing on Dean’s forehead.

“You’re going to regret ordering beer instead of lemonade,” Cas tells him, shrugging off his coat and throwing it over the seat. “They make it from scratch, from fresh lemons.”

“Then you’ll let me have a sip of yours,” Dean says dismissively.

“Will I?”

Sometimes Dean just can’t tell if Castiel is being serious or not, and this is one such occasion.

“Um... won’t you?”

Cas only smirks at him.

By the time their drinks and food arrive, Dean is so starved he drops all pretense of manners and takes a huge bite of his burger, humming around it in appreciation.

“Holy shit, it’s delicious,” he mumbles, spitting breadcrumbs everywhere.

“I can see that,” Cas teases. He takes a (much smaller) bite of his own burger and studies Dean over his plate. “You know, it was practically the only food I used to eat when I first moved to New York. It was faster and easier than cooking for myself.”

“Where did you live before?” Dean asks, chomping away on his burger.

“San Francisco.”

“Wow. That’s... a long way away.”

Cas nods silently, taking a sip of his drink.
“What made you move all the way here? I’m sure there’s plenty of good nursing jobs in California.”

The question hangs between them for long enough that Dean starts to wonder if he’s being too nosy. Isn’t that what people on dates are supposed to do, though? Talk about themselves, get to know each other?

“I needed to get away,” Castiel answers eventually, not looking at Dean. He runs the pad of his thumb through the layer of condensation gathered on his glass and looks out the window, where darkness has already settled over Manhattan. “I think it’s going to rain,” he mutters.

Dean makes a mental note not to push too much on the subject of Castiel’s past and resolves to concentrate on easier topics instead.

“So, can I?” he asks innocently, pointing to the lemonade between them. Cas was right, it does look very appealing. Unlike soda, it’s cloudy and opaque, bits and pieces of real lemons swirling around together with ice cubes and mint leaves.

“I think you need to earn it,” Cas decides, curling his fingers around the glass as if he expected Dean to snatch it out of his hands. “You mentioned you have a younger brother, and you seem very fond of him.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Tell me about him.”

“Dude, lemonade in exchange for information? That’s not a fair trade.”

“It’s a very good lemonade, Dean.”

Dean pretends to weigh the pros and cons, a display meant to tease Cas rather than be a part of a genuine decision-making process. There’s nothing to consider here, really; of course he’ll tell him about Sam. Dean would never miss a chance to talk about Sam to somebody who is truly interested, so for the next fifteen minutes, he indulges Castiel. He tells him about how Sam was always one of the smartest kids in his class, even though they moved around a lot and he had to constantly switch between textbooks and teachers and curriculums. He tells him about the time Sam surprised both Dean and their father when one day he started conversing in decent Spanish with a shop clerk in New Mexico, and when they pressed him about it, he confessed that he just picked it up from the telenovelas Dean watched while Sam was doing homework. He even shares the iconic tale of Sam’s self-proclaimed girlfriend, a 10-year-old named Becky who was five years younger than him and followed him around everywhere. She was undeterred by Sam’s failure to reciprocate her feelings, and kept stuffing gifts in his locker, writing him love letters, and vandalizing school property by carving “B+S” inside the shape of a heart on every available surface on the school grounds.

“She even knitted him an ugly-ass sweater for Christmas,” Dean says, grinning as he recalls the face Sam made when he showed it to him. “The girl was a first-class creeper, but Sammy was too polite to directly tell her to piss off. It took us moving again for her to leave him alone. I was half-surprised she didn’t chain herself to our car in protest when she found out we were skipping town.

“Why were you skipping town?” Castiel asks.

Dean tenses marginally, but a full stomach and the warmth of Cas’s gaze have him relaxed enough to loosen his tongue and to let the answer slip.

“Dad got himself into debts again. No one in town would sell him booze on the tab anymore, and he picked one too many fights at the bar. Made people look at him askance. So we moved.”

“Where is your father now?” Cas asks softly. The poking and prodding doesn’t irritate Dean as much as it should, though he doesn’t fail to notice the double standard. While he opens up to Cas about his rather unimpressive life story, Castiel’s own still remains a mystery. However, the alcohol is making him warm and relaxed, and the blue eyes examining his face convey not only curiosity, but also genuine concern. What’s the harm in telling, anyway?

“He’s in a rehab clinic in Pennsylvania. He’s been on and off the program for almost three years now. Always relapsing.”

“I’m sorry,” says Cas. He pushes his glass across the table and doesn’t comment any further, for which Dean is infinitely grateful.

“Lemonade earned, Doctor Winchester.”

Dean rolls his eyes, but he’s not too prideful to accept the drink. Hell, there’s never a good reason
to refuse food and drink.

It was totally worth all the emotional exhibitionism, because the lemonade turns out to be delicious, bittersweet and cool and minty and simply perfect.

“You were right. I should have ordered an entire glass only for myself,” he says, taking another sip.

“You should have,” Cas agrees, “but you can have the rest of mine.”

“Really? You’re an angel.”

“Only this once,” Castiel clarifies. “And if that was a pickup line, it’s horrible.”

“But you kinda are, aren’t you?” Dean teases. “Professionally—”

“If you are about to launch into cliché comparisons that liken nurses to angels, I’m leaving.”

“But it’s true!” Dean protests, laughing openly now. “Haven’t you ever heard of the Angels of Bataan? Those nurses were freaking badass. It’s a compliment, Cas.”

Castiel’s eyes widen.

“I have heard of them, but I did not expect the same to be true about you,” he says.

Dean wants to be offended at that. He reads, okay? He knows stuff. Why does everybody always write him off as a guy who’s only interested in food and sex?

He tries to muster up some righteous indignation, but he gets way too distracted by how genuinely impressed Castiel looks. He’s leaned forward, elbows resting on the tabletop and head tilted to the side, watching Dean as if he was the most intriguing thing he’s ever come across.

“Meg was wrong about you,” he says thoughtfully.

Dean makes a valiant effort to hold back an eye roll and rein in the annoyance that bubbles to the surface at the mere mention of Meg’s name.

“Do you often spend your shifts bad-mouthing me?” he asks sullenly.

Cas gives him a stern look, and Dean immediately regrets having said that. Accusing Castiel of backbiting is like accusing a monk of promiscuity. He’s pretty much the last person on Earth who’d talk shit about people behind their backs.

“How do you know this story?”

Dean props his elbow on the table and rubs his palm against his cheek.

“You know how I worked in a hospital in L.A. before I came here? The head nurse there was sort of a… well, she was like my hospital mom.” He smiles a little, eyes cast down to the tabletop.

“During my first few weeks in Sandover she really took me under her wings. She showed me everything, made sure I ate and slept every once in a while. And she told me things. A lot of things. She’d come over when I was on break, she’d ask about my day, and then she’d tell me stories. I’m not sure why she chose me to talk to, actually.”

“I might have an idea,” Cas says quietly. “You listen.”

“Right.” Dean stares at the lemon bits dancing in his glass, not trusting himself to look up. “I think… I didn’t want to grill her about it, but I heard she had lost her son a few months before I started working there. I guess…”

“You reminded her of him?”

“Maybe. Anyway, I couldn’t complain. She had a real knack for storytelling. Most of her stories were about the people she encountered as a nurse, but some were a little different, like the Angels of Bataan. It really stuck with me, that one.”

Dean falls silent and starts collecting the crumbs off of his plate with the tip of his finger. He’s not sure what made him go into so much detail when all he needed to say was “The head nurse from my previous hospital told me.”

“Dean?”

He looks up, expecting a change of subject.

“Yeah?”
“Meg wasn’t the only person wrong about you.”

Castiel’s eyes are alight with something Dean can’t quite put his finger on. They’re watching him as intently as ever, but it’s more than that. They’re determined.

“Can we get out of here?”

“Uh, sure?” Dean tries to stifle his disappointment at having the evening end so soon and gets up from his chair. They throw a wad of bills on the table and put on their coats in silence. Outside, the cold night air greets them once again, attacking them with a whipping wind as they begin walking down the street.

“Um… Cas? Where are we going?” Dean asks after a few minutes.

“Central Park,” Castiel replies shortly. Dean has nothing to say to that, so they walk in silence until they find themselves at the bank of The Pond.

“I hope you have something in mind, because I’m about to freeze my butt out here,” Dean says, looking around them. The nighttime and the harsh weather have driven most people out, and from where Dean and Castiel are standing, they can only see a couple distant figures, too far away to even make out their faces.

“This is good enough,” Castiel says, reaching out a hand to stop Dean.

“You’re scaring me, man. What are we doing here?”

“Seeking privacy,” Cas answers, once again succinct to a fault.

“We could have gone to my place,” Dean sighs, rubbing his numb hands together. No rest for them today.

Castiel ignores him and steps forward a little. They’re secluded enough, with The Pond on the left and a line of trees and bushes on the right, that had Dean come here with a stranger, he would feel uneasy.

But this is Cas.

Cas, who watches Dean through those dark eyes lashes, expression so grave that to an onlooker, it would appear almost hostile.

“You were right,” he says, voice tight.

“What? When?”

“You never gave me any reason to doubt your appreciation of my profession. I was biased when we met. I saw what I expected to see, but what was never really there. You were right to call me out, Dean.”

“Dean,” Cas says firmly, in an unmistakable please let me say what I need to say tone. He takes a deeper breath, as if steeling himself. “I have worked with at least five different heart surgeons during my professional career. Most of them ignored me even as they received my help surgery after surgery. They were condescending, conceited, or at best patronizing. I’m proud of my profession, but I have never met a surgeon who’d let me have that pride. I tried to be unprejudiced, but on some level I still expected you to be no different. And then you barged in breaking the lamp and flirting with Pam, and I pegged you as a troublemaker.”

“I didn’t—”

“Let me finish,” Cas interrupts. It seems like he can’t stop once he started talking; he moves forward, crowding Dean against the nearby tree. The moonlight reflects in his eyes the same way it does on the surface of the water behind them, and Dean’s breath catches in his throat. Castiel resembles a force of nature when he’s like this, yet another incomprehensible phenomenon that feigns harmlessness during the day only to come to life by night.

“You seemed like trouble,” he says. “A disturbance to the natural course of things. There was order, I had my work and everything ran smoothly, and then you came in and started knocking down walls like they were dominoes. I kept waiting for you to become that jerk I expected, but all you did was stare at me and blush when I caught you doing it.”

Dean’s mind reels when Cas steps even closer and places a hand against the tree trunk next to Dean’s head.

“I thought I had you all figured out before I truly got to know you, and I’m sorry for that.”
Cas’s other hand moves up as well, boxing Dean between his arms.

“Can we forget about the hospital for a moment?” he asks softly. “About the whole surgeon/assistant thing, and about our sexual arrangement?”

Dean’s eyes briefly flit down to Cas’s lips.

“Yeah,” he croaks.

Cas leans into Dean’s personal space, a small puff of air leaving his mouth in the harsh winter air.

“Had we met differently, and had I had no preconceived ideas about you, I would have asked you out long before you gathered the courage to do it yourself.”

Dean lets out a breathless laugh, instinctively leaning in so that his lips hover right next to Cas’s.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So you admit you were prejudiced against me?”

“I just did. And I do. Can you forgive me?”

Dean grabs the collar of Cas’s coat with one hand, fingers of the other cupping his jaw, and covers his mouth with his own.

It’s nothing like any of the many kisses they shared so far. It’s not painful and messy, with teeth clanking against each other. It’s not laced with annoyance or anger. It’s not aggressive or demanding. It’s not desperate. It’s not playful. It’s not lazy. It’s not an act of defiance against the hospital policy. It’s not foreplay.

It’s a declaration.

They may have jerked and sucked each other off countless times (not to mention fucking on a desk and a couple of other not entirely safe places), but this is still the most intimate thing they’ve ever done. For the first time, they open up to each other without holding anything back, deflecting or hiding what they truly want. Dean’s hands tangle in Castiel’s hair, but unlike for the past two months, they’re gentle. He doesn’t tug or pull, just runs his fingers almost shyly through the dark strands, all the while stroking Cas’s cheekbone with his thumb and sighing contentedly into his mouth. Castiel for his part can’t seem to get enough of Dean’s lips, though once again it’s not even remotely similar to how he usually goes about kissing. He doesn’t dive in and take; he coaxes Dean to open for him with delicate nips and licks across his lips, tracing the lines of his face with the pads of fingers.

Dean feels lighter than he has in months, if not years. He’s lost to the sensation of warmth and safety and being wanted for nothing more or less than himself. The thing that brings him back to reality is the uneven bark of the tree that digs into his back. He hisses, and Castiel pulls him closer by the middle, away from the tree and further into his arms, so that Dean doesn’t know where he ends and Cas begins.

He doesn’t really care. Why would he when there are warm hands, warm lips, warm Cas everywhere around him. He’s not even cold anymore.

“Cas,” he whispers a few seconds, or minutes, or maybe hours later. “I think it’s snowing.”

They part and look skyward, where the fresh snowflakes twirl around against the ink-black backdrop.

“We should go home,” Castiel mutters. “We’re going to freeze here.”

“I told you, man.” Dean gives him a playful poke in the ribs. “But I guess you don’t take to heart everything the ‘guy who seems like trouble’ says,” he adds. “Right? Or do I no longer seem like trouble?”

“You no longer seem like trouble,” Cas admits gravely. “Now I know for sure that you are trouble.”

Dean laughs heartily and wraps his arms around Castiel’s neck.

“Should have thought about it before you let trouble take you out on a date,” he says. “So what, you wanna back out?” His tone is humorous, but he’s only partly joking.

“It’s way too late for that now,” Cas replies. He rubs his thumb across Dean’s cheek with a thoughtful look on his face, and repeats in a hushed whisper: “Way, way too late.”
The Word of Mouth

Dean stares at the blank screen of his hibernated laptop, and his own reflection stares back at him, looking as nervous as he feels. The hand of the clock on the wall moves at the same time agonizingly slow and way too fast. Ten minutes left. Nine. Eight and a half.

With seven minutes to go, Dean snaps and grabs his phone from where it lies next to him on the couch.

“Dean?”

“Heya, Cas. Did I wake you?”

“No, I just went to bed but I haven’t fallen asleep yet.”

There’s a faint rustle of sheets in the background and a creak of a mattress that confirms Castiel’s words. Dean smiles, imagining him cocooned under a duvet that probably has something really stupid and Cas-like on it, like bees or smiley faces.

“Do you need something or did you just call to say goodnight?”

“How sappy do you think I am?” Dean says indignantly.

“Very.”

“I would explain to you in detail how wrong you are, but I don’t have the time. Sammy’s gonna be on Skype in five.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end, and then:

“Are you going to tell him?”

“Yes. That’s why I’m calling. Are you absolutely sure you want… I mean…” Dean runs a hand through his hair and musses it up in an unconscious attempt to gain some self-confidence. “You don’t have to come, Cas. I’ll understand completely if you’d rather go to San Francisco and spend Christmas with your family. Sammy’s girlfriend is coming, so there’ll be three of us. And, you know, we’ve only been dating for like a week. You don’t need to be saddled with my sorry ass for Christmas. You should, uh, go be with your family if you want. I—”

“Dean,” Castiel interrupts. “Stop talking.”

“Right.”

“First of all, I’m not sure where you got the idea that I want to go to San Francisco for Christmas. I would be staying in New York anyway, and I would love nothing more than to meet your brother and his other half. And you do realize that we’ve been together for much longer than a week, don’t you?”

“Have we?”

“Yes, Dean. I’m pretty sure we started dating long before either of us noticed, but that’s not the point. Unless you’re trying to dissuade me in a very convoluted way, I want to come over and spend Christmas with you.”

Dean is helpless to contain the grin that spreads across his face, and since he’s alone, he doesn’t even try to.

“Awesome.”

“My sentiment exactly,” Cas agrees. “Now go tell your brother and let me sleep.”

“Oh shit, you’re right, it’s almost time. Night, Cas.”

“Goodnight, Dean.”

When a minute later Sam’s easy smile appears on screen, Dean’s nerves are pulled so taut he feels he might burst. He’s not even sure if he’s more anxious or excited to finally tell Sam everything, so in lieu of greeting, he blurts without preamble:

“My boyfriend’s coming!”

Needless to say, Sam’s confused puppy face is priceless.

“Your what? Wait, what? How about a hello first? Nice to see you too? Wait, you have a—
“What?!”

“Take your time, Sammy.”

Sam’s eyes are so wide it looks like they might pop out of their sockets entirely.

“You have a… wow. So that date you had worked out?”

Oh. That.

“Not at all. It was a total bust.”

Sam looks so lost that Dean decides to take pity on him and spare him the guessing game. He omits the more saucy details (notably defiling Crowley’s desk), but otherwise relays the story of his and Castiel’s bumpy relationship from day one to the present. To Sam’s credit, he only interrupts a couple of times, limiting himself to quietly rolling his eyes and shaking his head at some of Dean’s more stupid moves.

“So now we’re together and I’d like him to come for Christmas, if that’s okay with you and Sarah,” Dean finishes.

“Dean, it’s your first Christmas in New York and you’re organizing it all on your own. You could invite half of your hospital and I’d be cool with it.”

“So when are you coming?” Dean asks, trying not to show the excitement that begins to overtake him. He assumed they’d have a low-key Christmas this year, with only his brother and a modest meal, but it’s setting up to be a really good one.

“December 22nd. We’re gonna be heading back to California for New Year’s Eve, though.”

Dean hides his disappointment at that and asks a boatload of follow-up questions (“What time do you land? Should I come get you from the airport? Did you pay for extra luggage so that you can bring all of my presents?”). He hoped he’d get to have Sam and Sarah over for longer, but honestly, he’ll take what he can get. Besides, with Cas staying in the city, Dean’s plans for New Year’s don’t look so bad after all.

The whole secret relationship thing goes up in smoke, ironically enough, over a trifle. After all the sneaking around and banging in inappropriate places, it’s a stupid little hickey that gives them away.

“Hey, Dean?” Charlie says casually one Tuesday morning. They’re having early lunch in the hospital cafeteria, a sort of tradition they developed to be able to catch up with each other even when they’re both busy.

Dean looks up from his plate and “hmms” distractedly.

“Look to your left,” she instructs.

“What for?”

“The girl sitting two tables from us looks like a carbon copy of Natalie Dormer.”

Just as expected, Dean’s head whips to the left, where he sees no one who’d even remotely resemble Natalie Dormer. Before he can ask what the hell was that about, he hears Charlie’s triumphant “A-HA!” followed by jubilant laughter.

“Somebody got lucky last night,” she says with delight, pointing at Dean’s neck. “Guy or gal? Come on, spill.”

Much too late Dean realizes that Cas left him a little token of his affection yesterday, and that he should have taken better care of concealing it. Charlie looks at him expectantly with a knowing smile, and Dean, like the complete dumbass that he is, panics. Instead of saying it was a one-time thing with a stranger and nipping it all in the bud, he chokes up and stutters out an unconvincing “uugh, nobody.”

Charlie narrows her eyes at him, and Dean already knows he’s in trouble.

“Why be so coy about it? That’s not like you,” she wonders aloud. “Unless…”

Her mouth falls agape, and that’s it.
“Oh my God. It’s someone I know, isn’t it? Otherwise you would have told me. It’s someone from the hospital.”

“No, it’s not. It was just a one-night stand. It’s nothing,” Dean says desperately, though it’s clear that the train has left the station. Charlie’s way too smart to buy into his bullshit, and once she caught wind of his fibbing, she won’t back down until she gets to the truth.

Dean’s aware of all this, yet the speed with which she nails her target still takes him aback.

“I bet it’s Cas,” she deadpans.

Dean’s mouthful of mac n’ cheese goes absolutely everywhere, effectively confirming Charlie’s guess. Bits and pieces of macaroni splatter over the formica table as Charlie fist pumps in victory.

“I knew it! Pam owes me twenty bucks.”

Dean is still too preoccupied with trying not to choke on his food to ask what she means, but Charlie explains it without prompting.

“She said it’d take you at least till Christmas to jump each other. But I believe in you, so I bet her $20 you’d get there faster. You just won me some extra money for Dorothy’s present, Dean.”

“Glad to be of help,” Dean croaks out once his respiratory tract is clear again. “Jesus, Charlie, does everybody know?”

“Most of us had some suspicions,” Charlie admits, patting him on the hand. “You’re more obvious than you think.”

“So I’ve been told,” Dean sighs, thinking back to his conversation with Jo.

“Are you worried about Crowley finding out?”

“He won’t like it.”

Charlie shrugs.

“So what? He won’t fire you. You’re both too valuable to him.”

“But he’ll bitch at us to his heart’s content. He could make our lives a living hell if he wanted to.”

A small smile tugs on Charlie’s lips as she pushes her glasses farther up the bridge of her nose.

“Then you must decide what’s more important to you. Would you rather lose Crowley’s favors or sneak around like a teenager till Judgement Day?”

Dean wipes pieces of his food off the tabletop and throws a dirty napkin on his plate. He knows the answer to that question. The secretive factor was thrilling for a while, but it’s overstayed its welcome. All Dean wants now is to let everybody know that Castiel Novak, RN, with his constant bedhead, distaste for inaccurate medical dramas, weakness for well-made burgers and heart too big for his chest is officially off the market.

“I’ll talk to him,” he says, more to himself than to Charlie. “But you, um… don’t tell anyone just yet.”


He smiles at her and stands up, grabbing his tray. What he did to deserve a friend like her, he might never know.

“One more thing,” Charlie says, making him stop in his tracks. “That community center I found for you, and this whole volunteering thing you got rolling… It was for him, wasn’t it?”

Dean looks down at his tray and shakes his head, just slightly, fighting with both an embarrassed smile and a blush that threaten to overtake his features.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Charlie laughs and shoos him away with a wave of her hand.

“You totally Mr. Darcy’d him. You’re so smitten, Winchester. Get out of my face or I might start throwing up rainbows.”

Dean would flip her off if he had a free hand, but as it is all he can do is roll his eyes so hard it’s a miracle he doesn’t strain anything.

He’s not smitten. He just happens to date Castiel Novak, and it’s hardly his fault the symptoms are
“Charlie knows.”

The finger that has been tracing lazy circles on Dean’s thigh stills, and Cas turns away from the TV to look at him.

“Did you tell her?” he asks calmly. He doesn’t sound angry or disappointed.

“Not exactly. She saw this.”

Dean pulls his scrubs down a little to tap on the reddened mark on his neck. Cas gives a self-satisfied smirk and turns his gaze back to the screen.

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself,” Dean huffs.

“I don’t remember you complaining when I was giving it to you,” Cas points out serenely, his finger resuming its trek across Dean’s thigh. “Would you like another one on the other side of your neck to make it symmetrical?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of ‘an eye for an eye’, actually,” Dean murmurs, leaning down to drag his lips along Castiel’s clavicle. His hand moves to rest over Cas’s chest, and the quickened heartbeat he detects there almost makes him forget what he set about to discuss.

“But first I need to ask you something,” he continues, pecking lightly at Cas’s collarbone. “Do you think… (that collarbone is downright criminal) …that we should… (and those muscles flexing and shifting just beneath the skin, Christ Almighty) …perhaps… (wait, what did he want to say? Oh, right) …tell everyone?”

He feels Cas freeze beneath him, and then turn his head so that Dean’s lips are left hovering in the air.

“How do we… let people know?”

Dean sighs and sits back, making peace with the fact that hickey time has to be postponed.

“Tell everyone what?”

“About us. Charlie found out, and… I don’t know. Don’t you feel tired of hiding it?”

Castiel frowns, and Dean recognizes the beginnings of that head tilt of his already forming.

“Of course I do, Dean. It’s exhausting. But I was under the impression that’s what you wanted. The administration considers intrahospital relationships a nuisance, and it wouldn’t gain you any favors with Crowley.”

“I know,” Dean says. “I also don’t give a shit.”

Cas blinks, which makes him look like a confused owl. A very endearing confused owl.

“You don’t?”

“Not a single shit,” Dean repeats with feeling. “Frankly, I just want it out in the open. I want people to know I’m dating an idiot who uses the word ‘intrahospital’ in an actual conversation.”

He expects a retort of some kind – woe betide anyone who makes fun of Castiel’s occasionally stiff language – but all he gets is a soft smile and a “Me too.”

Wow. So. They’re really doing this.

“Tell everyone what?”

“I could always give you a hickey in a more noticeable spot,” Castiel offers.

“Right,” Dean snorts. “I bet Crowley would be over the moon if he got complaints from patients who didn’t like being examined by a guy covered in love bites.”

“He’s not going to like it either way,” Cas reminds him.

“So what, should we just start making out in the main hall?” Dean says, throwing his hands in the air. “Have sex on the table in the cafeteria?”

“You’re full of good ideas today, Dean, though I regret to say that they might be a bit too much
for our coworkers to handle. I think a safer and more effective way to do it would be to use Meg’s
exceptional skills.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning if I tell her today to circulate the news, everybody will know by tomorrow. She’s very
capable when it comes to sharing gossip.”

“I should’ve guessed,” Dean mutters, falling back against the couch. For Cas’s sake, he does his
best to conceal his antipathy towards Meg – he knows they had been friends for a long time before
he came around – but he’s never been any good at hiding his dislikes.

“I know you’re not fond of her,” Cas says, proving that Dean didn’t succeed in being subtle this
time. “But I care about her, as she does about me. She knew about us for the past couple of weeks
and she didn’t breathe a word to anyone. I trust her.”

Dean springs upright and stares at Cas with disbelief.

“She knows too? Shit, why do we even bother telling anyone? It’s old news, apparently.”

“She figured it out on her own. She’s a very astute observer.”

“Good for her,” Dean pouts. He knows he’s being childish, but no matter how hard he tries, he
can never hold off the little pinpricks of jealousy he feels whenever Castiel speaks highly of Meg
or demonstrates his fondness of her – which, incidentally, happens quite often.

The only cure he’s found so far is reaching out to do what Meg isn’t allowed to, and so that’s
what he does now, leaning in to place light pecks over Castiel’s stubbly jaw and cheeks.

“Is that a yes?” Cas asks, his tone colored with amusement as Dean crawls almost on top of him.

“Yeah, whatever. Tell her to run her mouth all she pleases,” Dean says in between kisses. “So
everyone will get the 411 by tomorrow?”

“I estimate so, yes.”

“Good.”

Dean spends the rest of the evening sucking lovely, cherry-red hickey’s all over Cas’s skin in
sweet, sweet retaliation.

As soon as Dean steps into the hospital the next morning, he knows that Meg Masters has outdone
herself.

Elizabeth, who sits behind the registration desk as usual, gives him a knowing smile and answers
his “Good morning, Liz” with a playful “I bet it will be for you, Doctor Winchester.”

Tessa gives him a quick and totally unexpected hug right in the middle of the hallway. When she
steps away, she’s smiling wide and warm, and says: “I knew it, you were so happy recently.”
Dean fumbles for something adequately manly to say, but Tessa just pats him on the shoulder and
walks away.

Chuck starts rambling, because that’s what he always does, and amidst all the word vomit Dean
manages to catch a “Good for you, dude.”

Gordon glares daggers at him, though Dean notices with satisfaction that he’s not stupid enough to
voice what he thinks on the matter. The hostile silence between them is probably a win-win
situation, because if Gordon said a single unfavorable word about Castiel, Dean’s enmity would
overflow, most likely causing him to punch Gordon’s face in, and that wouldn’t sit well with
Crowley for sure.

Pamela shakes her head and sighs theatrically when she sees him. For a split second Dean’s chest
tightens with worry, but then she puts her hands on her hips, blocking his way out of the room,
and frowns so deeply it can’t be genuine.

“You cost me 50 bucks, Winchester. Couldn’t have kept your libido in check for a few weeks
more?”

“Not my fault your judgement is so off, Barnes.”

“It’s not off when I need it to be,” she says sadly, and that’s odd, Dean thinks, but then she’s
“Check in with me next time, we could split the spoils.”

“I do that a lot lately,” he admits, thinking about Aaron and their failed date. It feels like years have passed since then. In fact, everything that came before Central Park feels like it was centuries ago. “Wait, I thought your bet with Charlie was for $20?”

“It was. I had to pay another $20 to Gwen and $10 to Andy. I should have known. Your surgical team knows what’s up.”

“Traitors everywhere,” Dean says, though he’s neither mad nor surprised at this point. It just proves that he truly is as obvious as Jo claims.

Before lunch rolls around, Dean has gotten over a dozen more friendly pats on the shoulder, kind smiles and winks from his colleagues. Almost everyone, that is, except Crowley.

“Maybe the news doesn’t travel that fast,” Charlie speculates when they’re waiting for the elevator on the ground floor. “Besides, if he sits in his ivory tower all day long, then how is he supposed to find out?”

“He’s Crowley, Charlie. He knows everything.”

“That’s a very wise observation, Doctor Winchester.”

Dean and Charlie share the universal “oh shit” look before turning around to face their boss. His expression is blank, but Dean is willing to bet it’s a false indifference.

“I would like to have a word with you in private, Doctor Winchester. Now.”

“I’ll take the stairs,” Charlie blurts, and she’s off before Dean can do anything about it. The elevator doors open, and Dean enters inside with his head bowed like a man heading for the gallows. As the doors slide closed, Crowley turns to him, expression inscrutable, and goes straight to the point.

“Certain rumors have reached me, and I would like you to confirm or dispel them for me,” he says without preamble. “Is it true that yourself and nurse Novak have become an item?”

“Yes,” Dean says, doing his best not to sound as defiant as he’d like to.

“You said they’re not explicitly forbidden,” Dean points out, his nervousness giving way to irritation. Whatever punishment Crowley plans to dish out, he should just get on with it already and stop wasting Dean’s time.

“I also recall saying they’re strongly discouraged, especially if they’re only physical. While I understand the circumstances might be favorable for having a little dalliance on the side, it never ends well, and I’m not eager to lose one of my best surgeons and surgical nurses over their inability to keep their pants on.”

“Who said it’s only physical?” Dean asks, properly angry now. Of course, it was only physical for the most part, but he’s not about to tell Crowley that. It isn’t anymore, and that’s what counts.

“It was love at first sight, I’m sure.”

It wasn’t, but Dean won’t tell him that either.

The elevator doors open on Dean’s floor, but Crowley pushes a button to close them again, and then another button to take the elevator back to the first floor, where his office is.

“If I could have a few more minutes of your time?” he says. Although phrased like a plea, it certainly isn’t one. Dean grits his teeth and nods, wondering why the fuck his boss cares so much about who he’s hooking up with.

Once they arrive at the office door, Crowley stops and gives Dean a hard stare, his usual, skin-deep politeness cracking at the surface to reveal the unforgiving, stone-like self Dean always suspected was there.

“I don’t want any drama or nonsense in my hospital,” he says in a cold, steely voice that makes the hairs on Dean’s neck stand on end. “I don’t care if you cheat on each other, argue, try to kill each other or never want to speak to one another ever again. I expect seamless cooperation from both of you, regardless of your personal entanglements. Understood?”

Dean has a harsh response waiting on the tip of his tongue, and it’s with a great deal of self-restraint and willpower than he manages to keep it in. The man in front of him writes his checks,
“We’re both professionals,” he says instead, with as much calm as he can muster.

“Glad to hear it. Now that we’ve sorted this out, I won’t detain you any longer.”

And that’s it? Dean wants to ask. No more consequences, only some finger-wagging?

Well, that wasn’t as bad as it could have been.

He turns to leave and find Cas to share the news with him when Crowley’s voice stops him once again.

“Doctor Winchester.”

“Yes?”

“Although the video tape from the backup camera in my office has wonderful erotic value, I feel compelled to warn you that the next time you decide to smear my furniture with your bodily fluids will also be the last time you set foot in my hospital.”

He smirks and disappears in his office, leaving Dean with his cheeks burning and ready for the ground to open up and swallow him whole.
Dean must be getting old, because Sam manages to sneak up on him unseen all the way from the arrivals and almost gives him a heart attack. Two grizzly paws land on Dean’s shoulders, and he jumps like he’s been poked with a hot rod.

“Jesus shit!” he exclaims, spinning around only to be drawn into a bear hug so tight he can barely breathe. “Sam, let me go, you yet. And warn a guy next time, would you?”

“Happy to see you too,” Sam says brightly, releasing his vice-like grip on Dean’s arms and leaning back to look at him properly. “Wow, New York is treating you well. You look good.”

“I always look good.”

Sam shakes his head vigorously, which causes his hair to cascade all over the place.

“No, I mean it. You look healthy. It doesn’t show on the laptop screen, but you do.”

“Shut up, Sam.”

His brother only smirks, stepping away, and it’s then that Dean notices a girl standing behind him, wrapped up in a dark red coat. She’s watching them with a fond little smile, hand poised on the handle of her suitcase, waiting till they remember about her presence.

“How about you stop gushing about how handsome I look and introduce me properly, huh?”

“He’s nervous,” Sarah says, her mouth quirking up. “He was freaking out the entire flight.” She leans towards Dean, ignoring Sam’s betrayed expression, and her voice takes on a conspiratorial note. “If you ask me, he really wants us to get along. And I do too, because I have a feeling that if we don’t, I’ll be the one to go.”

“Hey, that’s not—” Sam begins, but Sarah waves her hand with a smile and he stops mid-sentence. Dean concludes with utter delight that his brother is whipped.

“We’ll never have to find out who’d be the one to go, Sarah Blake,” he says, taking her suitcase from her.

“I’ll take that,” Sam jumps in, but Dean swats his hand away.

“Back off, Prince Charming.”

“Actually, I’ll take that,” Sarah says, taking her suitcase back from Dean. She buttons up the top of her coat and starts to walk across the arrivals hall, gracefully maneuvering her way through the crowd. “You coming or not?” she calls out when they don’t immediately follow. “I thought we had a Christmas to prepare.”

Dean elbows Sam in the ribs.

“Dude, she’s so out of your league.”

Sam just shrugs, as if to say Yeah, what else is new, and they both follow Sarah outside into the snow-dusted New York evening.

“Did you see it coming?” Sam asks curiously, taking a sip of his eggnog.

Dean slides the apple pie on a large plate and dives into a drawer in search of a knife. Every Christmas he attempts to recreate his mother’s recipe, but the final product is never quite like the one she used to make. Someday, though – someday he’ll get it right.

“See what?” he asks, deftly cutting the pie into even pieces.

Sam points his head towards the living room, where Cas and Sarah are engrossed in conversation. They both offered to help with washing the dishes, but Dean announced that he’d be damned if he let his guests do the dirty work. Sam however wasn’t exempt from kitchen duty – Dean would rather die than treat his little brother like a guest in his own house. As a result, they ended up standing by the sink in a perfectly synchronized washing-drying off tandem, while Cas and Sarah migrated to the couch to continue their conversation about contemporary art.

At least, that’s what they were talking about when Sam and Dean left them. After Sarah realized
Castiel was more knowledgeable about art than both Winchester brothers combined, it didn’t take long for her to draw him into an animated discussion about Gormley, Twombly, Watwood, and other people Dean had never heard of. All he and Sam could do was trade a surprised look and watch with growing amazement as Cas and Sarah delved deeper and deeper into topics Dean would never expect to be brought up at his table at Christmas. He knew Sarah was an art history major and therefore in the know, but Castiel? He was just… just Cas. He was smart, obviously. Brainy, even. Dean just had no idea extensive knowledge of contemporary art was part of the package.

“Dude, I’m just as surprised as you are,” he says, putting the knife down and turning the plate around to inspect his work. “But it’s awesome they hit it off so easily.”

Sam nods, a smile spreading across his face.

“You really like him, don’t you?”

Dean shrugs, but his face grows hot. He should have known Sam would see through him in no time flat.

“He’s great, you know,” Sam adds, unprompted. He can tell Dean is itching to ask for his opinion, but unable to find the right words. “Out of the eight million people who live in New York you could have chosen a lot worse.”

“Fuck off,” Dean says, though there’s no bite in it. He’s too elated at Sam befriending Cas to even try to sound like he means it.

“Is the pie coming or not?” Sarah calls out from the couch. “I was promised pie and I’m not leaving this room until I get one.”

Dean turns to Sam, expression schooled into the very picture of seriousness.

“Samuel,” he intones gravely, “marry that girl.”

“I intend to,” Sam replies casually. “I’m looking for a ring.”

The apple pie almost falls victim to the unexpected announcement, and it’s only Dean’s quick reflex that saves it from crashing to the floor.

“You’re shitting me!”

“She’s it for me, Dean.” Sam’s smile is simultaneously so shy and so radiant Dean feels warm just looking at it. “I’m sure of it.”

Dean wants to make a snarky comment, but the words get stuck in his throat. His brother is going to propose. Little snot-nosed Sammy with perpetually scraped knees is not so little anymore and he’s going to be engaged, and then married, and then have 1.5 kids, a dog, a house in the suburbs, and a private law firm, and Dean is so overjoyed he has to blink back tears.

“Good for you, Sammy,” he says softly.

Sam takes another sip of his eggnog, hiding his shit-eating grin behind the rim of the mug.

“If you blabber to her about it or give it away somehow, I’m gonna murder you and dump your body into the Hudson River,” he warns, and yup, there’s the little shit Dean grew up with.

“My lips are sealed,” he vows. “Grab the forks, would ya?”

When they file back into the living room, Sarah scoots up the couch to make room for Sam, while Dean perches on the armrest next to Cas and puts the pie on the coffee table. Everybody treats themselves to a fork, and less than twenty minutes later all that’s left is an empty plate peppered with crumbs.

“That was delicious, Dean,” Cas says. He licks the last pieces of filling off his fork and hums in appreciation, heedless of the way Dean’s pupils widen at the sight.

Sarah on the other hand must notice, because she puts her hand over her mouth to hide a smile.

“I think Sam and I will retire for the night,” she says, giving Dean a meaningful look behind Castiel’s back. “And I call dibs on the shower.”

When she passes Dean on her way to the bathroom, she slides her arm over his under the pretense of a goodnight hug, and leans in to whisper in his ear:

“Don’t let my and Sam’s presence stop you. Just close the bedroom door and you’re good to go. I hear Brooklyn brownstones have very thick walls.”
“Shit,” Dean exhales shakily, his body going loose and limp on the bed. The fingers he twisted into the sheets relax and flex. “Cas, come ’ere.”

There’s a rustle of covers, and Castiel’s head resurfaces from underneath them, his hair ruffled and sticking out in about a dozen different directions. The bed springs creak as he crawls his way up and into Dean’s arms, kissing him softly. Dean sighs into his mouth and brings his hands around Castiel’s naked back.

“You still taste like apple pie,” he murmurs.

“And your release, I imagine,” Cas deadpans.

“Cas, just shut up.”

“Alright.”

They make out slowly for a while, unrushed and sweet, before Cas gently rolls Dean onto his side and spoons behind him, his arms winding their way around Dean’s torso. As they begin to drift off, Dean squeezes Castiel’s hand and whispers into the dark:

“Cas, you awake?”

“Tragically, yes.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How do you know so much about art?”

The question must have been expected, because Castiel responds without missing a beat.

“My parents were very particular about me and my siblings receiving a well-rounded education.”

It’s the first time Dean has heard Castiel mention his parents, or the fact that he has more than one sibling. He doesn’t want to overstep, since Cas always shows reluctance when talking about his family, but his curiosity gets the better of him.

“Do they live in San Francisco?” he asks cautiously. The pulse beneath his fingertips increases minutely, but Cas doesn’t try to withdraw his wrist from Dean’s hold.

“They died in an accident many years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean mutters, tracing his thumb across the back of Castiel’s hand. He hopes the gesture will make a better job of comforting Cas than his inadequate words can. “How old were you?”

“Thirteen. Go to sleep, Dean.”

Dean’s mouth presses into a thin, displeased line, but he doesn’t push further. It must still be painful for Cas to talk about it, and Dean’s not about to ruin one of the best – if not the best – Christmas days he’s ever had on account of his own nosiness. He chooses to let it go, squeezing Castiel’s hand once again and making peace with the fact that’s all the information he’s gonna get for now.

Funnily enough, the universe decides otherwise.

At 2:04 am they’re both woken by Castiel’s phone, flashing on the nightstand and giving two short, but excruciatingly loud beeps to announce a new text message.

“No,” Cas mutters, hiding his face in Dean’s neck.

“Might be someone from the hospital,” Dean mumbles, voice thick with sleep.

Cas groans and only tightens his grip around Dean’s waist.

“Cas, this really might be important.”

“If it were the hospital, you’d get a message too,” Cas reasons.

“But—”
“You answer it,” Cas grumbles. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Dean sighs and props himself on his elbow, reaching for the nightstand to retrieve Cas’s phone. The bright light of the screen blinds him for a moment, and when his eyes adjust, they fall on the sender’s name: Gabriel Novak.

Dean’s heart leaps at the realization that the text must have been sent by somebody from Castiel’s family. His finger hovers unsurely over the read button, itching to open the message. It’s probably nothing more than generic Christmas wishes, anyway. And it’s not like he’s snooping around – Cas knows Dean is touching his phone. He told him to answer it, didn’t he? If he didn’t want Dean reading his messages, he would have said so.

Although the reasoning is paper-thin, it’s enough of a crutch for Dean’s growing curiosity. Before he can change his mind, he taps on the screen.

```
02:04 12/26/2015
From: Gabriel Novak
To: Castiel Novak
Still not your fault
```

Dean stares at the text, blinking confusedly. What the hell? He reads it again, and again, and two times more, but the words remain as mysterious as before. Then he catches sight of the previous message in the conversation, so he scrolls up a bit.

```
23:02 12/25/2014
From: Gabriel Novak
To: Castiel Novak
Still not your fault
```

Not only is the text a year old and phrased exactly like the new one; more importantly, both of them were left unanswered. Dean scrolls up some more, and discovers a batch of other texts, all the same, all one year apart from each other, all without a response.

```
15:56 12/25/2013
Still not your fault

22:19 12/25/2012
Still not your fault

19:31 12/25/2011
Still not your fault
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Dean scrolls and scrolls through the seemingly endless thread of identical messages until Cas taps him gently on the hip.

“Well, what is it?” he asks sleepily.

“It’s...” Dean’s mouth goes dry, but he gathers his courage and continues. “It’s not your fault, apparently.”

The hands draped around him stiffen instantly and then withdraw. Dean can hear Cas sit up on the bed, and a moment later the light from the bedside lamp floods the room. “I forgot about it,” Cas says. There’s a note of genuine surprise in his voice, which makes Dean roll over and look at him. Although Castiel’s face is turned away from the lamp and mostly shrouded in the shadow, there’s no mistaking the emotions crowding there.

“Gabriel texts me every year on Christmas day, but this is the first time I forgot I should be expecting it. I was... too busy actually enjoying Christmas.”

Dean moves closer and reaches for Castiel’s hand.

“What isn’t your fault, Cas?” he asks softly.

He’s not surprised when his question is completely ignored. Cas turns off the lamp and lies back on the bed, moving so that they can resume their previous positions. His arms wind around Dean
anew and draw him near as he murmurs a gruff “Let’s go back to sleep.”

They lie in silence, both pretending they can’t feel and hear the other’s increased heartbeat. A few minutes later Dean manages to relax a little, and begins to drift off, hoping Castiel will follow soon. He’s already swimming at the very edge of consciousness when he hears Cas speak again, muffled words so quiet he thinks he might be imagining it at first.

“I wish he would stop.”

Castiel’s voice is small and broken, a cracked sound that makes Dean’s heart ache. He wants so desperately to soothe whatever pains Cas, and he doesn’t know how.

“Please tell me.”

Cas just holds him tighter and breathes out against Dean’s neck, damp and shaky.

“No use dredging up the past. Goodnight, Dean.”

“How about this one?” Dean says, tapping on the glass.

“No touching, please!” the lady behind the counter admonishes, rushing to them with a cloth in her hand to wipe away the greasy fingerprints Dean has left. Sam looks half amused, half embarrassed, and mouths a quick ‘sorry’ on Dean’s behalf.

“I prefer something silver. It’ll look better on her.”

“You sap,” Dean sighs. “Then this, maybe?”

Sam lowers his head to peer through the glass and frowns.

“It’s too big. I want something more subtle.”

“I didn’t know you had such strong opinions about women’s jewelry, Sammy. Is there something you wanna tell me?”

“Very funny,” Sam huffs, moving to another display. “If I had known you’d be so unhelpful, I never would have asked you to come.”

“Hey, I told you I don’t know the first thing about shopping for an engagement ring. All I can offer is moral support.”

“By which you mean being an ass.”

“That’s the way I do it and you know it,” Dean says, flashing his brother a cheeky smile.

They wander around the shop for another fifteen minutes, much to the exasperation of the saleswoman (who Dean suspects is still offended by the fact that they declined her help). Sam examines the contents of all cases as if they held the secrets of the universe, while Dean tags along and tries to stifle yawn after yawn.

And then, Sam sees it.

“That’s it,” he says. “Dean, look.”

They both lean over one of the cases, Dean’s elbow bumping into Sam’s side.

“What one again?”

“The one on the left.”

The ring is beautiful – even Dean, with his untrained eye and utter indifference to sparkly things, can tell that much. It’s a simple, silver band set with a delicate diamond, almost modest in comparison to the rings that surround it. They all have larger, precious gemstones like rubies, sapphires or emeralds, but none of the grace of the ring Sam pointed to.

“It looks great,” Dean admits, and Sam lights up at that. However, his face falls when he notices the price tag.

“Damn it. I was hoping for something cheaper. Maybe we should try another store, something in a less expensive part of the—"
“Hold on, hold on, are you kidding me?” Dean interrupts. “I thought you said it was the one?”

Sam sighs and rubs his neck.

“I don’t have that much money, Dean. I’ve been so busy with studies lately that I couldn’t even take extra hours at work. It’s perfect, but I just can’t afford it.”

“I can. We’re taking it.”

Dean can easily anticipate Sam’s protests, so he raises his hand before his brother can as much as open his mouth.

“Don’t even think about disagreeing. I’m not giving your lame ass any money; it’s a loan. You’d better believe you’ll give it all back as soon as you can.”

Sam still looks uncertain, but Dean is already walking over to the counter to ask the saleswoman – Maria, her nametag says – to open the case.

“That’s not right,” Sam mumbles when Maria unlocks the display and retrieves the ring. “I should be paying.”

“And you are,” Dean says breezily. “How much did you plan to spend?”

Sam gives him a price and Dean nods.

“Sounds reasonable. So you’ll pay that, and I’ll pay the rest.”

“I really shouldn’t agree to this.”

“I’ll take 4% interest and the right to give you two consequence-free smacks over the head.”

“Deal.”

Once the ring is nicely wrapped, paid for, put in Sam’s innermost pocket and hidden under the dizzyingly numerous layers of clothing he’s wearing, they leave the Rockefeller Center and make their way to the ice-skating rink outside, where Sarah and Cas are whizzing around on the ice.

“What a nerd,” Dean says, watching as Cas whooshes past a woman who evidently still grapples with the concept of skating, a couple who seem more interested in each other than moving around, and two elderly ladies gliding slowly while holding hands. Most people are either learning or don’t care about technique, which makes Castiel stand out among the crowd with how much grace and confidence there is to his movements. His legs carry him effortlessly across the ice, and for some reason it reminds Dean of the way Castiel behaves in the OR, the same agility and concentration in every twist and turn of his body.

“Are you about to start salivating?” Sam asks, and Dean immediately uses up the first of the two smacks he’s been granted.

“Shut up, Sam. It’s called aesthetic appreciation.”

“Okay, okay, ow,” Sam says, rubbing the top of his head. “Honestly, I get it,” he adds as his eyes track down Sarah, her burgundy coat swirling around her as she chases after Cas.

“You think mom would like them?” Sam asks suddenly. Bewildered, Dean looks over to him, but his brother keeps his gaze fixed on Sarah.

“Yeah,” Dean says, his eyes darting to find Cas in the crowd again. And there he is, helping up a girl who fell on the ice. Dean puts his hands in his pockets, fingers flexing, and out of the blue he feels his throat choke up. Sam doesn’t remember Mary Winchester, but Dean does. He remembers her cooking, the way she used to hum under her breath when she was making him breakfast, and the smell of cinnamon that always clung to her. And he remembers her smile.

“She would love them both,” he says, not doubting even for a second that it’s true.

When Cas and Sarah spot them standing by the side of the rink, they come over and despite Dean’s vigorous protests, they force both brothers to rent skates and join them on the ice. Dean stares death in the eye as he fights to stay upright, clutching desperately at Cas’s arm and pretending he’s not.

“I’m holding you. Just relax and try to take a step.”

“No.”

“Dean, you have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Except a concussion,” Dean scoffs. “You think I haven’t seen my fair share of cracked skulls
“During med school? Thanks but no, thanks.”

Cas rolls his eyes and helps him reach the railing, which Dean grabs like it’s the Holy Grail, leaning over it and exhaling with relief.

“Can we go now?” he asks.

Cas stands next to him, elbows propped on the railing and head tipped back as he looks up to the already dark sky.

“We’re not going anywhere,” he says calmly. “I’m just letting you catch your breath.”

“What? Come on!”

The corners of Castiel’s mouth twitch in a barely-contained smile as he grips Dean and turns him backwards to the rink, gentle hands resting over Dean’s hips. He stands behind him, leaning close until his chest presses against Dean’s back. When Castiel’s breath ghosts against his ear, Dean shivers for reasons entirely unrelated to the cold.

“Dean Winchester, I will teach you to skate if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Good fucking luck with that,” Dean grumbles, but he presses back into Cas, instinctively reaching for his hand. For support, of course. He still doesn’t do PDAs.

In the next twenty minutes Dean manages to fall on his ass the grand total of eight times, as well as to lose a glove to the sharp edge of his skate (he couldn’t explain how that happened). It’s hardly comforting that he is, without a doubt, the worst skater out of the four of them. Cas and Sarah are naturals, but Dean expected at least his brother would join him in misery – after all, neither of them had the time or the means to practice ice skating when they were kids. That’s why when Sam dons a goofy smile and reveals that his girlfriend has been tutoring him, Dean feels like he’s been stabbed in the back.

“Traitor,” he mouths every time Sam and Sarah pass them on the ice. Or at least each time he’s not too busy trying to stay alive to notice them.

Castiel has the patience of a saint with him, turning a deaf ear to his curses and whines as he steers him across the rink. The physical activity and the cold have turned his cheeks a bright shade of pink, and that doesn’t help either, because now Dean is constantly tempted to stare at him instead of where he’s supposed to be going. Needless to say, his skills are not ready for that.

When the four of them finally leave the ice, Dean has a set of freshly-blooming bruises to show for his efforts, and he doesn’t neglect to voice his displeasure the entire ride back to his apartment. It’s only when Sam and Sarah have disappeared inside the guest bedroom that Dean stops grousing and lets himself sink to the couch with a deep sigh. Every part of him aches, and he’s too sleepy to take a hot bath that would help to ease the tension in his muscles. Lucky for him, Heaven decides to answer his unarticulated prayer, and a minute later Castiel emerges from the bathroom holding a bottle of Arnica massage oil.

“Oh, now you feel bad,” Dean mumbles, shifting to his side and wincing when the movement causes a spark of pain in his back.

Castiel sits down on the edge of the couch and gives him an unimpressed look.

“Take off your clothes,” he instructs.

“As much as I usually love to hear you say that— HEY!”

Dean yelps as Cas unceremoniously pulls his pants down and then proceeds to divest him of the rest of his clothes until Dean has nothing on except for his boxers.

“Lie on your stomach.”

Dean rolls over and burrows his head in the pillow, letting Cas settle on top of him.

“D’you take classes in physical therapy or somethin’?” he slurs.

“There was an elective course during my second year at UCSF,” Castiel confirms, pouring a small amount of oil over Dean’s back and starting to rub it in in small circles. Dean groans when Cas’s fingers begin to dig deeper into his skin in an attempt to loosen the knots there. The man clearly knows what he’s doing, and soon enough Dean is practically drooling and purring with satisfaction as Castiel’s skilled hands work him over from the base of his skull to the bottom of his spine. They even venture below the waistband of his boxers, but there is nothing sexual in the way Cas carefully applies more Arnica to the bruising on Dean’s backside and rubs it in with slow, soothing strokes of his thumb.
While Castiel works his magic, Dean’s entire body sags into the couch, surrendering to the sensations, and he only realizes that he’s nodded off when Cas wakes him up almost half an hour later with gentle kisses to the back of his neck.

“You have to move to the bedroom, Dean,” he whispers, his fingertips trailing up and down the length of Dean’s bicep. “If you sleep here in this position, the whole massage will have been for nothing.”

“Doctor’s orders?” Dean mutters, still too out of it to know what he’s saying.

Cas laughs softly into his neck.

“No. Nurse’s orders. Come on, on your feet.”

It takes some coaxing, but eventually Dean lets himself be guided to his bedroom – their bedroom – and drops dead the second the bed appears in his line of sight. He doesn’t hear Castiel’s martyred sigh, the sound of the door closing and the shuffle of feet as Cas walks around the bed, nor does he feel it when he’s being gently rolled onto the sheets and the covers are pulled around his shoulders.

In fact, he doesn’t hear or feel anything until the next morning, when his senses go back into online mode. As he wakes, he registers familiar voices in the kitchen, the duvet sliding against his sleep-warm skin and the distinct scent of Arnica lingering in the air. The bruises still make him wince as he shifts around on the bed, and of course he’s going to complain about them all throughout breakfast, but secretly Dean decides that maybe, just maybe ice skating doesn’t suck so bad. What comes after is nice. And the comforting feeling of knowing somebody will pick you up from the ice when you fall – well, that’s quite nice too.

The lights on the Christmas tree flicker to life, casting a colored glow over its branches. It looks lovely, the hues reflecting in the surface of the glass ornaments like in a kaleidoscope, and Castiel allows himself a few moments to appreciate the view before moving to sit at the kitchen table. His cold hands wrap around a mug of freshly-brewed coffee, elbows bracketing a book that lies in front of him.

It was a joke, of course, that book. Cas doesn’t think Dean actually expected him to read it. His eyes were shining with mischief as he handed it to Cas, all wrapped up in a nice red paper and complete with a golden ribbon.

“How Doctors Think,” the title cover said.

“What thoughtful,” Castiel huffed, flicking through the pages. “You do realize presenting me with this is like giving your mother a guide on how to be a better parent?”

“Dude.” Dean’s nose wrinkled. “Don’t compare yourself to my mother. We banged like two hours ago.”

Cas ignored the comment, folding the used paper to set it aside and letting his eyes scan over the book once more.

“Now every time you try to argue with me I’ll refer you to this,” he said, grinning.

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“Dude.” Dean’s nose wrinkled. “Don’t compare yourself to my mother. We banged like two hours ago.”

Cas ignored the comment, folding the used paper to set it aside and letting his eyes scan over the book once more.

“Thank you,” he said. He leaned in to press a kiss to Dean’s cheek, and he knew even before he pulled away that it did the trick. Dean’s face flushed slightly and he rolled his eyes trying to hide his embarrassment.

“You’re no fun,” he grumbled, reaching behind himself to pull a small gift box from beneath the couch cushion. “You can’t thank me when I’m teasing you, moron.”

“Can’t I?” Cas said, smiling wide as he put his new book on the coffee table. He made quick work of unpacking the real present, a pair of elegant leather gloves, but he didn’t forget about the first one. To Dean’s great astonishment, he started reading How Doctors Think that very evening, with genuine interest. Now, two days later, he is halfway through it and he fully intends to finish it before his Christmas break is over.

The steam rising from the mug curls into wisps as Cas turns page after page, accompanied by the lazy ticks of a clock on the wall. Its hand indicates 8:11 in the morning when the door of the guest bedroom opens and a sleepy figure emerges from it, making a beeline for the kitchen.

“Having a book club without me?”
Cas puts a bookmark between the pages.

“Good morning, Sarah.”

She slides onto a chair next to him and rubs her eyes to get rid of the last dregs of sleep. Her hair is all over the place, and there’s a sleep crease on the left side of her face, probably from being pressed against a pillow.

Cas smiles warmly at the sight. He’s known Sarah for barely a week, but in that short timespan he’s managed to develop a soft spot for her. She’s smart, quick-witted, and has a dry sense of humor similar to Castiel’s but not quite the same, which makes her a perfect sparring partner. Surprisingly enough, Sarah seems to have taken to Cas as fondly as he did to her. He’s still not sure how it happened, since making a good first impression isn’t his strongest suit, but he’s grateful for it nonetheless. There’s a sense of camaraderie between people who are comfortable being silent together, and it was there the minute they shook hands.

“You’re staring, Cas,” Sarah says, interrupting his musings. “I just rolled out of bed, okay? Not everyone’s bedhead can look as good as yours. Nothing to see here.”

She tucks the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and snuggles into it, the visible excess of material dwarfing her delicate face.

“This hoodie is too big for you,” Cas remarks, reaching out to pull gently on one of its strings.

“It’s Sam’s,” Sarah explains, tapping her chest. It’s only then that Cas registers there’s a big letter S imprinted on the front. “I have one too, but everybody knows it feels better to wear your boyfriend’s clothes than your own.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Cas says, biting his lip to mask an amused twitch of his mouth. “Would you like some coffee? There is some left in the pot.”

“God, yes. Coffee sounds amazing.”

Cas nods and gets up from the table, making sure to walk slowly past Sarah so that she has the time to notice – and sure enough, notice she does.

“Hey, wait.”

She grabs his wrist and tugs at it until Cas turns around to face her. Her gaze sweeps over his chest, taking in the words printed there, and when she looks up, her eyes are brimming with laughter.

“Stanford School of Medicine, huh? You said you studied at UCSF.”

“I did.”

“I see I’m not the only one pillaging a Winchester’s closet,” she quips. “On the other hand, at least your Winchester had the decency to buy a red hoodie. Mine had no consideration at all for the fact that I don’t look good in gray.”

“You look good in everything,” Sam announces as he shuffles into the kitchen and takes a seat next to Sarah. “Even though you keep filching my stuff.”

“Are you calling me a thief?”

“Your words, not mine.”

“Lawyers,” Sarah huffs indignantly.

“Do you want coffee, Sam?” Cas offers.

“Yeah, thanks, Cas. Dean’s not up yet?”

“No. I suppose our yesterday’s exploits on the ice must have worn him off.”

“You mean you wore him off,” Sarah corrects.

“Technicality,” Cas says with a sly smile. He hands Sam and Sarah their coffee and retakes his place at the table, crossing his socked feet at the ankles. The silence that falls after that is light and pleasant, the three of them tanking up on their caffeine as the sun rises up behind the window.

“So, breakfast?” Sarah says when all of their coffee mugs are empty. “Unless you want to wait for Dean to wake up.”

“That might take a while,” Cas points out, drawing a snort from Sam. “How do you feel about fried eggs?”
Both Sam and Sarah express their enthusiasm for the idea, so Castiel dives into the fridge in search of the ingredients. He's already familiar enough with Dean’s kitchen to know where everything he needs is, and in a matter of minutes there’s a delicious smell wafting up from the pan. Sarah joins him to offer an extra hand with the plates, and Sam, wanting to help as he always does, follows her.

“This kitchen is way too small for this to work,” Cas warns, but neither Sam nor Sarah pay him any mind.

When Dean appears in the kitchen 15 minutes later, yawning and scratching his unshaved chin, he’s greeted by a truly apocalyptic view.

“What the fuck,” he mutters. “What the actual fuck.”

He crosses the kitchen in two quick strides and stoops down next to Cas.

“Is that one of my plates?”

“It was,” Cas confirms, sweeping the broken pieces onto a dustpan.

“It was my fault,” Sarah says, blushing to the very tips of her ears. “I startled Sam.”

“So it was Sam’s fault,” Dean amends.

“She pinched me!”

“She what?”

“Oh God,” Sarah groans, pulling the hood so that it covers her entire face. “Don’t look at me ever again.”

“It was my fault, actually,” Cas says calmly with one final sweep of the brush. He gets up to throw away the remains of the plate and puts the dustpan aside.

“You’re saying it was you who pinched me?” Sam jokes.

Cas smirks, but takes pity on him.

“No, Dean, I did not sexually harass your brother. I merely attempted to be a gentleman and divert your attention away from Sarah’s unfortunate faux pas.”

Dean stares at him with disbelief, but then a semblance of a smile crosses his face. He shakes his head helplessly and grabs Cas by his hood strings, pulling him forward and wrapping his arms around his waist.

“You’re a horrible person.”

“Yes,” Cas agrees. “I made you fried eggs, though.”

Dean pretends to consider it, leaning close enough for their noses to brush. His hands slip into the pockets of Cas’s hoodie, and Cas’s own follow suit, letting their fingers tangle together.

“Okay,” he says eventually, placing a kiss behind Cas’s ear. “Sounds like a fair deal.”
“Awww,” Sam coos mockingly.

“Shut up, Sam. You just broke my plate – you don’t get to talk.”

Sam scoffs, so Dean frees his hands from Castiel’s hold and brings them to his face, cupping his jaw and giving him a feather-light kiss. Cas’s eyes flutter closed, but Dean’s remain wide open as he throws a daring look at his brother over Cas’s shoulder. Sam makes a gagging sound, so Dean dives in once again, kissing Cas in the most obscene way he can possibly muster.

“Jesus Christ, guys—”

“Revenge for the plate, Samuel,” Dean explains breezily. He’s still a little sluggish after having slept in, still a little bruised after yesterday’s evening, still a little shell-shocked after believing for a few minutes that his boyfriend groped his brother, but none of that matters when he’s holding Cas in his arms in the middle of his kitchen. Somewhere in the background Sarah laughs quietly and tugs at the sleeve of Sam’s pajamas, dragging him out of the room, but all Dean can really focus on is the warmth pressed against his chest. Cas’s body is hot like a furnace, and Dean can hardly regret melting into it, even when they’re done and he’s left with swollen lips and a plate of fried eggs that have long since gone completely cold.

Sam and Sarah head back to California on December 29th, which is much too soon in Dean’s opinion. They all take a taxi to the JFK, where he keeps them company, teasing Sam and chatting with Sarah until it’s time for them to go through the security check.

“Promise you’ll come to my graduation,” Sam says, drawing Dean into a hug. Unlike the previous time, Dean doesn’t even try to pretend he objects; instead, he hugs back as hard as he can, so that it’ll last him for the upcoming, unfairly Sam-less months.

“I wanna see somebody try and stop me,” he says louder, turning to Sarah, who smiles and extends a hand for him to shake. He squeezes it, and they look at each other for a few seconds before they both pull the other into a hug at exactly the same time.

“Make sure the giant baby takes his vitamins and doesn’t overwork himself.”

“I’m 25 years old,” Sam says mildly.

“This changes nothing.”

“I will look after him, but that won’t stop you worrying, will it?”

“Sarah Blake, you’re scaring me. You know way too much about me already.”

“You’re way too easy to read,” she shrugs, but she’s still smiling that gentle half-smile Dean’s sure Sam is in love with, the sap.

“We really need to go,” Sam says, putting a hand on Sarah’s shoulder and grabbing his suitcase with the other. Dean doesn’t trust himself to speak, so he just waves at them one last time and watches silently as they make their way to the check-in, Sam’s huge silhouette towering over Sarah’s slender one. When they’re out of sight, he feels smaller than ever, standing alone in the middle of the crowded departures hall.

On his way back home, he idly wonders what is the socially acceptable amount of time that has to pass before he can start planning his and Castiel’s trip to California. It’s only polite to pay a visit in return, right?
The Sins Revisited

It’s just Dean’s lousy luck that the cable of his phone charger frays and stops working on Tuesday of all days.

He plugs and unplugs it from the socket time and time again, stupidly hoping for a miracle he doesn’t need an engineering degree to figure out is not possible. The cable is clearly broken, and his dead phone will have to wait until Dean manages to buy a new charger. He heaves a sigh of frustration, puts the temporarily useless device on the bedside table and goes to sleep.

When Castiel phones him at 4:20 in the morning, the call doesn’t even come through.

Dean doesn’t start to worry until late into the Wednesday morning, when at 11:30 he realizes there’s still no sign of Cas anywhere. He uses the hospital landline to call his cell, but the number is out of reach. He asks Missouri if Cas called in sick, but she states she hasn’t heard from him.

“It ain’t like him not to warn anybody he won’t come to work,” she says, her brow furrowing.

“I know,” Dean mutters. He likes it less and less by the second.

He makes a round of the usual places where Castiel can normally be found, but he comes up with nothing. He asks around his coworkers, but nobody seems to have seen him since yesterday. It’s as if Castiel has disappeared into thin air.

The moment Dean is free after his appointments with patients, he gravitates towards the breakroom. Against his hopes, the only person he finds there is Tessa, who seats in the corner with her headphones on, her foot swaying a little to the rhythm as she eats a belated lunch. She smiles when she notices him.

Dean stands heavily in the threshold, fighting the waves of apprehension that ripple through him.

“Tess, can I talk to you for a second?”

She nods and takes off her headphones, sliding them around her neck. A faint bass line seeps through just loud enough for Dean to recognize the song – Blue Öyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear The Reaper.”

“You have a good taste,” he says, mustering up the energy to smile faintly at her.

“Thanks. How can I help you?”

Dean taps his fingers against the doorframe a couple times and bites his lip.

“I was wondering if maybe you’ve seen or talked to Cas lately.” He tries his damnedest to keep his voice level and calm, but the worry still manages to sneak its way in.

“No, I haven’t seen him since… yesterday, I think. Why, is everything okay?”

“I don’t know.” He forces a smile. “Might be nothing.”

It sounds weak even to his own ears, and Tessa is on her feet in no time, putting away her headphones and grabbing her cell. She taps on the screen a few times, turns on the loud speaker and holds the phone between them as the signal beeps once, twice, three times, again and again until they both have to admit no one’s going to answer.

“That’s weird,” she says, frowning. “He always answers his phone.”

“I tried to call him I don’t know how many times, Tess. Low hundreds, probably. He didn’t come to work today, didn’t call in sick, and I have no clue what to do.”

“Go to Meg,” Tessa advises. “They’ve always been close. She might know something.”

“Yeah,” Dean says reluctantly. “I’ll do that.”

Dean’s antipathy towards Meg is very much mutual, so he doesn’t look forward to speaking with her. The only upside of the situation is that she cares about Cas too, and she’ll help Dean in case… in case. In that case that won’t happen, because it can’t. Because Cas is fine and his phone broke, that’s all. Or his charger did. Hey, it happened to Dean, so why couldn’t it happen to Cas? He’s probably home, sick with a flu or something. It’s nothing. Dean just needs to make sure.

“Lovesick much?” Meg smirks when Dean explains his concerns to her.

“Worried, is that a crime now?” he barks. “Do you know something or not?”
“You’re not asking nicely,” she tuts. Dean takes it to mean she hasn’t heard from Cas either.

“Forget it,” he mutters, turning away to leave.

“How long has it been?”

He stops and looks back at Meg. Although her face doesn’t give away much, the mocking expression is dimmed, and with a bit of squinting Dean can see genuine concern hidden there.

“The whole day. We’re operating in two hours, and if he doesn’t show up, we’re gonna have to reschedule.”

“Crowley will be furious,” Meg says. Her sarcastic tone is gone, and if that isn’t enough of a sign she’s truly worried, then nothing is.

“Tell me about it. Cas never missed a day from work as long as I’m here. This looks really fucking bad, Meg.”

“Yeah, I got the gist, Winchester,” she huffs. “If he doesn’t show up for the surgery, come find me after work.”

“And how will that help?”

“Do as I say or keep wandering in the dark, your choice,” she says coldly.

Dean grits his teeth, but there’s not much he can do except give a stiff nod, retreat, and hope Cas will make it in time for the surgery, sparing Dean the torture of crawling back to Meg for help.

The next two hours pass in slow-motion, Dean’s fingers tapping nervously on his thigh as if he was counting sand grains falling one by one inside an hourglass. Seven thousand two hundred excruciatingly long seconds fly by, and Castiel remains absent, officially missing the surgery and causing Dean’s insides to twist painfully. He just knows something is wrong, he can feel it deep in his gut. He stays only long enough to inform the patient about the change of plans and promise to clear up the mess, and then he’s off, running to find Meg and force her to do whatever it is she was talking about.

“His apartment,” she says curtly. “I have the key.”

Despite being in a relationship for almost two months now, Dean has never been to Castiel’s place. His own apartment is much closer to the hospital and, as Cas assured him, bigger and more comfortable. In the end, it was simply more convenient for both of them, and it never occurred to Dean to demand that Cas invite him over, much less give him a spare key. He realizes all that, and yet the fact that Meg has access to Castiel’s apartment while he doesn’t irritates Dean like an itch he can’t scratch.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Meg tells him.

Dean looks up at her and frowns.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

They are in Meg’s apartment, only stopping by so that she can grab the keys to Cas’s, and apparently Dean eyeing them angrily as if they did him wrong didn’t go unnoticed by Meg.

“Then you’re dumber than you look,” she says, locking the door behind them and leading the way to the subway station. “I know that you don’t like me, and I honestly don’t give a fuck, but the jealousy is just unbecoming.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Sure thing, Othello. You just get your panties all in a twist because a guy who’s crazy for you gave his friend a spare key so that she could water his plants while he was away that one time in 2010. If only there was a word for that. Oh wait, there is – it’s called jealousy.”

The horrible thing is that she’s right. Dean is jealous without a good reason, and he can’t help it. His and Castiel’s relationship has been a goddamn rollercoaster from the beginning, and so much has happened in the course of it that it feels like years, but they have known each other for barely six months. Though he would never admit it out loud, Dean frets the test of time. Sooner or later, Castiel will come to see things that he doesn’t like. Dean sure knows they’re there. The failures accumulated over the years, weaknesses and shortcomings, all his crap covered by the cocky smiles. The way he wasn’t able to protect his father from his drinking. The way he couldn’t protect Sammy when he had fallen in with the wrong crowd as a teen, which almost caused him to drop out of school. Castiel will see, whether it takes him another month or another year, and it’s all gonna be over. Meg will stay, and Dean will become just another name on the list of heart surgeons who weren’t worth Castiel’s time.
Perhaps it’s not jealousy, then. Perhaps it’s just plain fear.

Although Dean knows that Bedford-Stuyvesant enjoys a rather unsavory reputation, he didn’t expect Cas’s apartment to be situated in a shabby-looking house on a corner of a street Dean wouldn’t want to walk down alone after dark.

“Not a pretty sight, huh?” Meg says, taking out the keys and opening the door to let them inside.

“Why doesn’t he rent somewhere else?”

“He’s saving money. Don’t ask for what, though. I haven’t got the faintest.”

They climb up the staircase and stop before the door marked with number 5. Meg slams on the doorbell, which emits a piercing noise that drills into Dean’s skull like a jackhammer.

“Jesus!” he hisses, covering his ears.

“I know. Sounds like a pig being slaughtered.”

When the sound mercifully dies down, no movement Dean was hoping for can be heard from the inside.

“Open it,” he says flatly.

“Oh, Doctor Chase. Let’s investigate.”

The place is indeed smaller than Dean’s apartment, and it’s definitely empty. The burners on the oven are cold, the windows are closed, and a lonely, half-full mug of coffee stands on the counter. Despite his best efforts to remain calm, Dean feels his heart pound away against his ribcage, cold dread clawing at his throat. Not at the hospital. Not at home. Castiel is now officially missing, and Dean wants to scream.

“Stop looking like you’ve just seen your puppy being hit by a car and go search his bedroom. Maybe we’ll find a clue or something,” Meg instructs.

Dean is too wrapped up in his fear to notice she’s bossing him around, and he obeys without question. He enters the bedroom not knowing what it is he’s looking for, but one glance around tells him everything.

The closet doors and drawers are all wide open, with empty spaces where clothes used to be, and there are single items of clothing thrown haphazardly on the floor and on the bed – an unmistakable sign that Cas packed in a hurry.

Packed. As in, packed and left. Away. Cas is gone.

Dean can practically hear the loud thunk his heart does when it sinks to the floor. He stumbles farther into the room, hands shaking as he inspects the clothes and the empty drawers. It’s a dead end, of course. There’s nothing left to be found out, and Dean slides heavily onto the bed. He hides his head in his hands, fighting to get himself under control.

“You gonna sit there and cry or do something about this?” she asks angrily.

“Do tell, what should I do? Report a missing person? He clearly left of his own will. Call him? Already have. What the fuck do you expect me to do?” He feels like screaming, but his tone is clipped as he stands up from the bed, hands clenching and unclenching as if he wanted to punch something. (He does. He wants to punch Castiel for leaving him without explanation.)

Meg doesn’t respond right away, staring him down coldly from the threshold.

“This is a perfect opportunity for you, you know.”

“Opportunity for what?” he spits.

“To prove how serious you are about him. You can either sit at home and snivel or move heaven and earth to find out what happened.”
She tosses him the keys and leans against the doorframe, eyeing him thoughtfully.

“You are serious about him, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Dean grits out, grabbing the keys midair. “I’m dead serious.”

She gives a short nod, as if to herself.

“Fine. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I have a feeling it might have something to do with Cas leaving. Did he ever tell you about his family?”

“I know he has a brother.”

“He has three. All older than him, and real dicks from what I’ve heard.”

Dean sighs. That explains the wistful look on Castiel’s face when he watched Dean and Sam tease each other over Christmas in that way siblings do. Siblings who get along, at least.

“He used to have four, though,” Meg continues. “Didn’t you ever wonder why Cas visits the pediatric ward?”

“Because… he likes kids and he’s a good person?”

“No, you clueless son of a bitch. He feels guilty.”

Part of Dean can already guess where this is going, but he refuses to accept it.

“He had a younger brother, too. Samandriel, or something equally pretentious. Cas was really attached to the kid. I got no clue what happened to him, but whatever it was, Cas blames himself for it. Idiot,” she sighs. “Anyway, that’s all I managed to find out. Cas hates to talk about it, and I only know as much as I do cause I met one of his older brothers. A couple of years back he came to the hospital looking for Cas, so I wheedled him until he gave me some basic info.”

“Was it Gabriel?” Dean asks, even though he already knows the answer.

“Yeah. I think the reason Cas took off like a prom dress in May has something to do with his fam. That’s all I can tell you, though. From here on out, you’re on your own.”

Dean doesn’t say anything, too busy processing the news. It’s hurtful to think Castiel didn’t want to share such an important part of his past with him, but even more hurtful to think what he had to go through.

“Lock up when you leave,” Meg says, and then she’s gone. Dean flops down on the bed, his head landing on the pillow. He turns his face a little and inhales the familiar scent of Cas, wondering how long it’s going to be before it evaporates completely. If Castiel doesn’t contact him again, the memory of that smell will be all Dean will have left of him.

“I’ll track you down whether you like it or not, you bastard,” he says aloud to the empty room. “You won’t leave me that easily.”

The first thing Dean does when he leaves Castiel’s apartment is find an open store and buy a new charger. As soon as he’s back home, he plugs his phone in and turns it on, praying he has a text message from Cas waiting for him.

He doesn’t.

“Damn it. God fucking damn it,” he says uselessly, pacing across the room in an endless loop, five steps, turn, five steps, turn, five steps, turn.

There must be something he can do. His hands itch to take action, call someone, go somewhere, anything not to sit pointlessly at home staring at the ceiling.

In an act of desperation, he grabs his coat and goes outside, hoping that the cold January air will help him clear his head. He walks quickly down Carlton Avenue, stride purposeful and fingers clutched around the phone in his pocket.

He only makes it as far as the intersection with Willoughby Avenue when his phone begins to ring.

“Castiel Novak, where the bloody fuck have you been.”
“Dean,” Cas says, his voice so small it shuts Dean up better than any shouting could. There’s a short pause on the line, followed by an audible swallow.

“Dean,” he repeats, like he’s fighting to keep his tone steady. “I’m so sorry I left without warning. I have no excuse. You have every right to be angry with me.”

Well, that’s no use. Dean can’t be angry with Cas when he sounds so broken and defeated.

“What happened, Cas? Where are you?”

“In California.”

“Cal— what the fuck are you doing in California?”

“Dean,” Castiel repeats yet again, like it’s a plea and a comfort all at once. “My brother called me early this morning.”

“Is… is everything okay?” Dean asks hesitantly. Meg was right; it seems the reason Cas left New York in such a haste was his family. He stops at the corner of the street, too focused on the call to keep walking.

“Yes,” Cas says. “And no.”

“You wanna elaborate?” Dean presses. “You just dropped everything and flew across the country. Can I have some freaking backstory?”

“This is not a conversation we should be having over the phone.”

“No. Not like this.”

“Then I’m coming over.”

“What? No, Dean—”

“Either tell me what the fuck is going on or I’m joining you.”

Cas sighs, and even though Dean can’t see him, he can picture him rubbing his temples. He always does this when he’s exasperated, especially if Dean is the reason.

“I will keep it as short and to the point as possible. My eldest brother Michael called to tell me that Samandriel, the youngest of us, who had been kidnapped and presumed dead for the past thirteen years, is alive. I’m currently at the San Francisco General Hospital waiting for him to wake up. Is that enough of a backstory?”

Dean slumps against the nearest streetlamp, ignoring a strange look he receives from a woman who walks by. This is way too much information to handle in such a short amount of time. He barely managed to reconcile the Cas he knows, his Cas, with a childhood shadowed by a tragedy such as the death of a younger sibling, and now it turns out he’s not dead after all?

“Dean? Are you still there?”

“Yeah,” Dean manages. “Cas, why didn’t you— why—”

Although he doesn’t finish the sentence, he doesn’t have to. They both know all the possible endings of it. Why didn’t you tell me. Why didn’t you let me comfort you. Why did you hide such an important piece of yourself from me.

“I have to go, Dean,” Cas says quietly. “My brothers are waiting for me, and they don’t tolerate tardiness. Once again, I’m sorry I failed to warn you about my absence, and if—”

“Cas, save your breath. I’ll be in San Francisco on board the first plane that goes out of JFK today, okay?”

Just as expected, Castiel protests heatedly, insisting there’s no point in both of them missing work, spending money on a plane ticket, etc., etc. Dean doesn’t even pretend to listen.

“It’s not your choice, Cas.”

“Crowley won’t give you time off,” Castiel points out, though Dean can hear his resistance waver. He knows Cas wants him there. Needs him there.

“Fuck him. I’m coming.”

“Dean, you don’t have to.”
“If you think I’m gonna just sit here with my thumbs up my butt while you’re 3000 miles away reliving a childhood trauma, fucking think again.”

Dean expects further protests, but what he gets instead is a long silence, and then, at last, a relieved “thank you.”

It takes him less than twenty minutes to go back home, pack a suitcase and call a taxi. Once he’s heading to the airport, he calls Charlie to let her know he won’t be coming to work for a while, and then Crowley, who is justifiably enraged at him taking time off at such short notice.

“Fire me or give me unpaid leave of absence,” Dean says coldly.

He’s given a week of leave and a strict order to call in case he’s not going to make it back to New York after that.

Dean is in such a hurry to get to Cas that he somehow manages to forget about his fear of flying. It’s only when the plane takes off that he remembers, clutching desperately at the armrests of his seat like they’re the last vestiges of the world that disappears beneath his feet.

The flight to San Francisco takes over five (highly stressful) hours. When Dean gets off the plane, it’s 9:25 am local time and he can barely hold himself upright after a sleepless night at the airport and an equally sleepless trip. Still, it doesn’t even cross his mind to make a detour to check into a hotel. Instead, he asks the taxi driver to take him straight to San Francisco General.

The nurse behind the registration desk instructs him to leave his suitcase in the cloakroom and directs him to the second floor, although she refuses to disclose any information regarding Samandriel Novak’s condition. Dean passes by the elevators and runs up the stairs, taking two steps at a time until he’s at the top of the staircase and collides with a person who stands there.

“Cas?”

“Dean.” Castiel breathes out his name like it brings him deliverance to say it. “I didn’t expect you to make it so fast.”

“I took the earliest flight possible. How are you doing?” Dean asks. He takes hold of Cas’s hands and examines his face, heart dropping at what he sees. There are dark circles underneath Castiel’s eyes, his clothes are rumpled, and he’s even more disheveled than usual. It doesn’t take Sherlock Holmes to figure out he didn’t catch any sleep since the moment he left New York.

“I’m fine,” Cas lies, squeezing Dean’s fingers in return. “Just tired. I was actually going to get a cup of coffee when you ran into me,” he adds, pointing his head towards a coffee vending machine down the corridor.

“Yeah, sorry about tackling you,” Dean chuckles, but his face immediately turns serious when Castiel doesn’t smile back. “Tell you what. I’ll buy you that coffee and you’ll tell me everything. Deal?”

Cas nods silently and lets go of Dean’s hands, his own dropping heavily by his sides as if he didn’t have the energy to hold them up. Judging by how exhausted he looks, it’s not too far from the truth.

When they sit down with their coffee a few minutes later, Castiel rubs at his eyes tiredly, but he starts to speak without prompting.

“Samandriel is still under. He was very agitated when they brought him in, so he was given a solid dose of sedatives. I haven’t spoken to him yet.”

“What happened to him?” Dean asks softly.

It takes visible effort for Castiel to get the words out; he inhales deeply and clutches his Styrofoam cup a little too tight.

“Samandriel is significantly younger than the rest of us,” he begins. “I was thirteen when he was born.”

“Didn’t you say your parents...” Dean says, but he stops mid-sentence. The obvious conclusion is so unfair he can’t force himself to even say it out loud.

“They died when he was three months old. Michael was already eighteen by then, so we weren’t separated or sent to a children’s home. After our parents’ death, my father’s company went down
to Michael, and we didn’t need to worry about money. My brother hired a nanny to care for Samandriel, but it was mostly me who spent time with him. My mother used to call him her little late gift, and it felt only right to take care of him when she couldn’t.”

Cas pauses to take a sip of his coffee, or perhaps just as an excuse to compose himself.

“And then I failed him. He was five and we were in a park,” he says. His voice is completely flat now, devoid of any emotion as if he was retelling a story that happened to somebody else. “I sat down on a bench with a book to revise for my finals while he was running around in the playground. Between one page and another, he was gone. I couldn’t have let him out of my sight for more than five minutes, but it was enough. Two days later they found his jacket with blood on it. The body was never recovered – obviously – but he was presumed dead.”

“God, Cas,” Dean whispers.

“It haunted me for the past thirteen years, and yesterday I find out he’s alive and in San Francisco and I…” Castiel swallows, and Dean thinks he might be reliving it. “I called you after I found out, but you didn’t answer, and then I was packing and driving to the airport and I really don’t remember most of it. I meant to call you again, but——”

Dean shakes his head and grabs Castiel’s free hand.

“Don’t explain yourself to me. I get it.”

The fact that Cas still feels bad about disappearing on Dean without warning causes a warm wave of affection to wash over him. Even amidst the worst emotional turmoil Castiel has such an amazing capacity for the smallest acts of kindness, and Dean doesn’t know how to say it, how to thank him for caring about it when he’d be more than justified not to, so he just squeezes Castiel’s hand harder.

“Cas…” he begins, desperately searching for the right words even though he knows there aren’t any. He tries to imagine himself in the same position, and Jesus Christ, if Sam was taken from him like that, he would fucking lose it. For Dean Winchester, who’d walk through hellfire for his little brother, it’s unthinkable. For Castiel, it was reality for over a decade of his life. Just thinking about it makes Dean nauseous.

“You know it wasn’t your fault, right?” he says gently. Castiel raises his head, and oh, now he’s pissed.

“It was mine and mine alone.”

“Christ, Cas, you were just a kid yourself——”

“I was 18 years old and I was supposed to be looking after him. He was in my care.”

There is so much raw pain in Castiel’s eyes that Dean can barely stand to look at him. But he does, because Cas has been dealing with this alone for long enough. He puts away his coffee cup and uses his now free hand to draw Cas closer, gently tipping his chin and leaning in so that their foreheads almost touch.

“Don’t do this to yourself, Cas. I blame myself for a lot of things I couldn’t have prevented, and trust me, it’s a shitty deal. If you let it, it’ll eat you alive, and I want you in one piece. He’s fine now, right? Focus on that. Be there when he wakes up.”

Castiel manages to nod, just the slightest movement of his head, and Dean decides that under the circumstances it has to be enough.

“You should get some shuteye. I’ll wake you if anything happens.”

Disappointingly though unsurprisingly, Castiel refuses to go to sleep until Samandriel wakes up. He sits in his chair, posture rigid, eyes fixed on the door across the hall where his brother is. After some nagging Dean learns that Cas’s older brothers are staying in a hotel nearby, and that Cas would rather sleep on the floor than join them.

And so they sit together in silence, waiting, regretting things past and fretting things to come.
“How touching.”

Castiel’s shoulders go stiff, and he forces himself to move slowly so as not to disturb Dean’s sleep.

“What do you want, Gabriel?” he asks, turning his head to look at his brother. He’s standing a few feet away, hands in his pockets, watching Cas with an unreadable look on his face.

“Nothing. I have as much right to be here as you do, kid.”

It’s true, so Cas waves his free hand, gesturing for him to sit. Gabriel slides onto a chair on Castiel’s left, kicking his feet out in front of him and throwing his brother a curious look.

“I see you got yourself a little lovebird,” he says conversationally. “He’s cute.”

“Gabriel, don’t,” Cas warns him.

“What? It’s a compliment.”

Castiel doesn’t respond, and Gabriel sighs.

“Come on, Cassie, throw me a bone here. We’re both waiting anyway.”

Right then Dean stirs in his sleep, a little snore escaping him as he nuzzles his face into Castiel’s shirt. Cas looks down at him, and thinks about how many times he wanted to reach out to his brother and tell him about Dean. He didn’t care about Michael’s or Lucifer’s opinion, but Gabriel… Gabriel would listen. True, he would crack a million and one inappropriate jokes in between, but he’d listen. He’d be happy for him, and he’d promise to come over for Christmas to embarrass Cas by telling Dean all the humiliating childhood stories about him. Countless times did Castiel pick up his phone only to put it back down, unwilling to reopen a wound that barely began to heal. Gabriel was part of the past Castiel never wanted to revisit again, but now everything changed. Samandriel is alive, Gabriel is sitting next to him, and Castiel can’t find it in him to run anymore.

“His name is Dean,” he says softly, not turning to look at Gabriel. “He’s a heart surgeon in my hospital.”

Gabriel leans out of his chair, craning his neck comically to look Dean up and down.

“Huh. A surgeon you say? He looks more like an underwear model to me. Or a Chippendale. Are you sure he’s not moonlighting?”

“Hands off,” Castiel mutters, and Gabriel laughs.

“There’s my brother at last.”

Although the words are light, Castiel flinches as if he’s been pinched. In the past decade him and Gabriel didn’t keep in touch save for an occasional email and those goddamned texts on Christmas, and as a result they drifted apart farther than Castiel would have thought possible. For the first thirteen years of his life, Gabriel was the only brother whose company Castiel enjoyed. He may have been annoying and brash, he may have indulged in stupid pranks, and yes, that one time he almost dropped Cas out of an open window, but beneath all that, Castiel never doubted his brother cared for him. Being reminded that Gabriel must have missed him makes him feel even worse than he already did, and that’s saying something.

“Hey, Cas?”

Castiel looks up, surprised by the lack of nickname. Gabriel never calls him that to his face; not when he can go for something sufficiently irritating and/or endearing. When they were 9 and 7 respectively, he spent an entire month referring to Castiel solely as “ugly duckling.” The fun wore off after a while, but the nickname, abbreviated simply to “duckling”, still made reappearances from time to time – mostly when Gabriel tried to show his affection in the clumsiest way possible. “Cas,” however – that was rare.

“Yes, Gabriel?”

“Does Freckleface make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Cool.”

Cas waits for more prodding, for the inevitable innuendo or jibe, but Gabriel only nods and distractedly pokes his tongue against his cheek.

Even though Castiel knows it would be wiser to let it go, he can’t stop himself.
“Cool?” he parrots.


“Cut it out, Gabriel. I know you have questions and you’re dying to ask them.”

“Is that so?”

When Castiel only squints at him in silent disapproval, Gabriel shrugs.

“Okay, maybe I do, but that was the priority question. Just wanted to make sure I didn’t neglect my duties as an older brother, Cassie.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’d need to kick Sleeping Beauty’s butt if you answered differently. The rest is…”

Gabriel shrugs again, reflexively. “Secondary. But if you’re so willing to talk about it, then who am I to disappoint my duties as an older brother, Cassie.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m regretting it already,” Cas says, though when he looks over at Gabriel, he can’t bring himself to act mad. His brother smiles crookedly, like he knows it. He divets his hand into his jacket pocket and fishes out a piece of gum, popping it into his mouth.

They sit in silence for a while, Dean snoring. Cas letting his thoughts drift and Gabriel drumming his fingers against his leg. The quiet seems ominous, like a calm before a storm, and sure enough, only a few minutes pass before Gabriel decides to drop the bomb.

“You didn’t answer any of my texts.”

Castiel purses his lips into a thin line.

“We’ve already had this conversation.”

“And we’ll continue to have it until you join us in reality. What happened to Sammy was because there are freaking psychos walking God’s green Earth and kidnapping little kids. If you think it’s your fault, you might as well take the blame for global warming.”

Nobody has referred to Samandriel as Sammy in so long that it makes Castiel’s eyes sting.

“Gabriel,” he begins weakly. “I really—”

“Shut your cakehole for once and listen. Our brother was kidnapped by a fucking psychopath who kept him in lockup like a museum piece. It’s that bastard who’s to blame. We – all of us, our entire family – are the victims. Get it through to that thick skull of yours or I’ll send you a text a day, not a year, until you see sense.”

“That would be very costly,” Castiel remarks woodenly.

“I have money,” Gabriel counters in an authoritative, discussion-ending tone. He gets up from his chair and svivels in place, a mannerism Castiel is familiar with and which means that the serious talk is over.

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Perhaps I’ll go find a doctor or something, huh? Sammy should be waking up by now.”

Before Cas can answer, his brother disappears down the corridor, followed by a distinct aura of smugness and insufferableness that Castiel missed more than he can express.

“Dean, wake up.”

The voice is deep and husky, and much too loud.

“Dean, come on. I need you to wake up.”
It’s familiar, too. Deep and familiar.

“Please, sweetheart.”

That pet name (so seldom used, much too seldom) said in that voice would bring Dean back from his grave. Slowly, he blinks his eyes open and looks up at the man above him. He smiles, and Cas smiles back.

“While I don’t mind filling in for your pillow, I would appreciate the opportunity to go to the bathroom,” Cas says, waving his empty coffee cup.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.”

Dean sits up, and it’s only then that he realizes in what position he was lying.

“How did I end up with my head in your lap?”

“You squirm and toss a lot in your sleep,” Cas explains, standing up. The movement causes his bones to crack so loud even Dean can hear it. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll go buy us another round of coffee,” Dean offers, standing up as well.

A few minutes later he still dawdles in front of the vending machine, rummaging through his pockets in search of some spare change. Meanwhile, Castiel comes back from the bathroom to find a man standing in the middle of the corridor, his eyes fixed on the door to Samandriel’s room. He doesn’t look like a member of the hospital staff, dressed in a brown, bulky jacket and ordinary jeans.

“Can I help you?” Castiel asks.

The man turns to look at him, a slow, oddly calculated movement.

“Is he in there?”

“Who is?”

“Alfie. Is he in there?”

“I don’t know who that is. This is my brother’s room.”

“Yes,” the man nods, as if that made sense to him. “Yes, I saw you together in the park.”

The blood in Castiel’s veins runs cold.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” he says, his voice scratching on each syllable. This man can’t be who he thinks he is.

“Alfie used to talk about you. I didn’t like that.”

Castiel’s legs suddenly feel like cotton, his knees going wobbly as if they were about to give out. He stares at the man in front of him in horror and disbelief, mouth dry and eyes wide.

“It was you,” he says. He doesn’t hear the words he speaks, just the thunderous beating of his heart. “You took him.”

The man shrugs, like it was no big deal.

“I don’t understand why he ran. He’ll come back home with me now.”

The shock Castiel felt dissolves at those words, leaving nothing but cold fury. This man kidnapped his baby brother, kept him locked up and deprived him of his childhood, and now he had the audacity to come here and demand him back?

“He’s not going anywhere. He’s staying here, and you’re going to answer for what you did to him.”

“No, no, he’s coming with me,” the man repeats stubbornly. His hand delves into his pocket, and that should have been a clue, but Castiel is too livid to notice.

“You took my brother from me,” he says, as loud and forceful as he can, because Dean and Gabriel were both right – it’s this man’s fault they lost Samandriel. It’s all his fault. All the grief and anger accumulated over the years suddenly find a single outlet as Castiel’s hands clench into fists, ready to punch and hit and make the real culprit pay. This man is the epicenter of it all, the cause of their family’s misfortune, and Castiel will be damned if he lets him get away with it.

“I’m calling the police.”
“You shouldn’t do that,” the man says, shaking his head as if he was disappointed with Castiel’s choice. He squares his shoulders and takes two steps forward, which brings them no more than three feet apart. The adrenaline begins to flood Castiel’s system when he realizes he’ll have to restrain the man with physical force. Honestly, he can’t wait to pin the bastard to the ground.

“Cas? Is everything alright?”

When Dean finally makes it back, balancing two cups of coffee, he discovers that Castiel has new company. At first he assumes the newcomer must be one of his older brothers, but their body language suggests otherwise. There’s no familiarity in it, only hostility and tension. The stranger has his back to Dean, but Castiel looks as if he was five seconds away from tackling the guy.

“Cas? Is everything alright?”

At the sound of Dean’s voice, Castiel’s eyes flit to him, wide and anxious. It only takes a moment, a split second of distraction. It only takes a moment, but it’s enough.

The man moves fast, startling both Dean and Castiel. He shoots forward and knocks Cas down, both of them falling to the floor in a heap of limbs. A second later he scrambles back to his feet and runs away, his short legs carrying him surprisingly fast down the corridor.

“Hey!” Dean yells. “What the fuck?” The man doesn’t stop, soon disappearing from view, and Dean moves forward to help Castiel up.

“Cas, you okay?” he asks. “Who is this guy? Should I be chasing after him? Is he…”

His voice trails off as he realizes that Castiel doesn’t try to get up or respond. He lies on his back, hands clutching his chest and his breathing shallow.

“Cas?”

Dean takes a couple more steps, and the coffee cups slip from his hands, the drink sloshing everywhere. His knees buckle in front of Castiel, and he forcibly pulls his hands away from his chest, revealing a stab wound and a quickly-spreading blood stain.

“No… no,” he chokes out. This can’t be happening; it’s impossible that the man had a knife and Dean didn’t notice; it’s unacceptable that he stood there and watched Cas get stabbed without doing anything to stop it, without even realizing. His ears and head fill with white noise, drowning out everything else until Castiel says his name. It’s barely there, just a soft, obviously pained whimper, but it jostles Dean out of his stupor. In a flash, his mind goes into DEFCON 1 mode.

“We need help!” he yells, and he keeps yelling until his throat is raw and there are three nurses running towards them from up and down the corridor.

“31 year old male with penetrating chest trauma. Get a gurney, we need to take him to the block,” he orders. “Can you breathe?” he asks, squeezing Castiel’s hand while examining the wound. The cut looks deep, and judging by the location the knife could have easily pierced the heart. Traumatic cardiac penetration is highly lethal, with case fatality rates of 70-80%.

“Yes,” Cas whispers back, though his voice is weak. “I need…”

“I know. Help is coming,” Dean assures him. “Keep talking to me. Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“Good.” Dean reaches out his free hand to cup Castiel’s face and prevent him from looking down at the wound. It is important to keep the stabbing victim conscious and calm, diverting their attention from the injured part of the body.

“Have you ever heard about the Austrian Empress Elisabeth of Bavaria?” he says with a levy so fake even a child wouldn’t fall for it. “She was stabbed in the heart by an assassin, and then survived a carriage ride and a 100 yard walk before collapsing. And let me tell you, you’re tougher than the Empress of Austria.”

“She died, Dean.”

“Because 19th century medicine was shit and she didn’t have your luck of getting stabbed in the hospital next to a heart surgeon.”

With each new word he speaks, Dean’s voice turns more and more into a nervous squeak that
betrays how terrified he really is. The firm, but gentle grip he had on Cas’s jaw has loosened unconsciously, and now instead of keeping his head immobilized Dean runs his thumb over Castiel’s cheek in mindless, chaotic circles.

“Don’t leave, Cas,” he says thickly. “Don’t you leave.”

Before Castiel can think to form an answer, his chest seizes and starts heaving with pain, the shock that kept it at bay not enough of a distraction anymore.

“Dean,” he manages, groaning with the effort it takes to get the words out. “Tell my brother I’m sorry.”

“Don’t fucking do it,” Dean snaps. “Don’t you fucking dare give me messages to relay. Just don’t.”

Castiel shakes his head with difficulty.

“Dean…”

“Cas.”

“Dean,” Cas repeats stubbornly. “We both know.”

There’s no mistaking what Castiel is referring to, but Dean isn’t ready to admit it. He’ll never even let his mind wander in that direction.

“The gurney’s already coming, look,” he says instead. The wheels squeak as they roll across the floor, and surely, everything will be okay now, the gurney’s here and everything will be okay, the gurney’s here, everything will be okay, everything will be okay, everything will be okay.

Just when the denial starts setting in for good, Cas tears it all down again.

“Dean, we’ve seen injuries like this before. Seen how it ends. You have to tell him for me.”

“Fuck, Cas!” Dean shouts. He doesn’t mean to, but it’s out before he can do anything about it. “You’ll tell him yourself!”

The way Castiel flinches at his outburst feels like a punch to the gut. Out of the corner of his eye, Dean sees the people approaching and realizes he only has a few seconds left. Even though he tries to block it out, at the back of his mind he knows it might be the last opportunity he gets to talk to Cas alone. He clutches at his face all the more desperately, attempting to catch Cas’s gaze as it swims in and out of focus.

“I didn’t mean that,” he whispers urgently. “I’ll tell him. And then you will. Cas, I—”

“Out of the way!”

Suddenly, there are nurses and doctors everywhere, people rushing all around them, and Dean is being pulled away, Cas’s hand slipping from his.

“No, no, wait, I’m a doctor,” he explains. “I’ll operate.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but you have to wait here. We’ll inform you as soon as we know something.”

“What? No, no, you don’t understand. You have to let me operate.”

“Please step away, sir.”

“But I know how to do this!” he repeats helplessly. The nurse is barely listening to him, so he catches her sleeve and forces her to look at him. “I’m a cardiac surgeon, and he got stabbed in the heart. I have to fix it.”

“We have a very good surgical team already on site,” she says, prying her sleeve out of Dean’s hold.

“We have a very good surgical team already on site,” she says, prying her sleeve out of Dean’s hold.

“Please, you have to let me do it. Just let me fix it.”

“I’m afraid it’s impossible.”

As soon as it becomes clear that the nurses won’t let him go anywhere near the operating block, Dean changes strategy, and instead of begging, he starts demanding and yelling.

He storms his way through the crowd of nurses and back to Castiel’s side, ready to follow the gurney wherever they take it. What he doesn’t anticipate is that they immediately call the security. The guards are there within two minutes, two burly men with identical stern faces, and they drag Dean away as the gurney disappears down the hall. Once Cas and the swarm of people tending to
him are out of sight, the guards shove Dean into a chair in a now-empty corridor and walk away.

Dean slumps and closes his eyes, trying to control his breathing. Deep down he knows he’s being irrational, that they can’t very well allow a stranger who claims to be a doctor to stroll into the OR and begin operating just like that. He has seen his fair share of friends and family going mental outside the operating room, crying, shouting, ranting, wailing, even trying to storm the door, but he never thought he’d end up being one of them.

Since there’s nothing he can do, he tries to convince himself it’s for the best. Obviously, he can’t operate on Cas. Everybody knows you don’t operate on your family. A surgeon should never operate on their child, or parent, or spouse… you don’t operate on your loved ones. Those are the rules.

“Jesus,” he whispers to himself, hiding his head in his hands. He digs his nails deep into his palms, but the pain does nothing to dull his dread. All he can think about is how pale Castiel looked, how weak his voice was, how his fingers clasped around Dean’s hand with every ounce of strength that continued to leave him.

Dean got a good eyeful of the wound and he knows what to expect. The tiniest mistake made by any member of the surgical team will result in Castiel dying on the operating table. And even if they do everything right, he still might not come out of it alive. Even if they are the best goddamn surgeons this side of the Atlantic, it still might not be enough.

In all of his years as a doctor, in countless hours spent in hospitals where people die daily, Dean has never felt more helpless than now.
There’s a patch of blood smudged on the linoleum in a wide, wing-like shape, glistening sickly under the fluorescent lightning.

Dean is anything but faint of heart – after all, he’s seen a lot of blood in his life. He had his hands buried inside people’s chests and spent hours poking and prodding there, up to his elbows in viscera. And yet, seeing that one crimson stain has a bigger effect on him that holding an actual, beating heart in his palm.

Sometime later a janitor shuffles over with a bucket and a mop. He begins cleaning up, smearing the blood further across the floor until Dean thinks he’s going to start puking and never stop. He forcibly tears his eyes away and fumbles around in his pocket for his phone. With trembling hands, he types out a short message to Sam.

From: Dean Winchester
To: Sam Winchester
Cas got stabbed. San Fran General. Would b great if u came.

Sam calls him back less than five minutes later, and upon hearing his voice any guilt Dean might have felt about drawing him out of class dissolves.

“Dean! What the hell happened? Is he gonna be alright?”

Dean swallows audibly and clutches his phone tighter, pressing it to his ear just hard enough for it to be painful.

“I don’t know. He’s mid-surgery.”

“How did it happen? What are you two doing in San Francisco?”

“It’s… complicated, Sam.”

“But who stabbed him?”

Dean blinks. That’s actually a very good question. Amongst all the chaos and nerves, he forgot about the son of a bitch who did this to Castiel.

“I don’t know, but I intend to find him and skin him alive.”

“Christ, Dean.”

“I know you probably got classes or whatever, but it’s less than a one hour drive from Stanford. It’s fine if you’re busy,” he adds quickly, silently begging for it not to be the case.

“I’ll borrow a car and be there as soon as I can,” Sam says immediately. “Sit tight and call me if they tell you something more.”

“Yeah,” Dean manages, and hangs up before his voice can crack even more. He pockets his phone and takes a deep breath, forcing down the panic that bubbles under his skin. He can’t succumb to it until he knows the attacker is caught and locked up. Or dead.

He does everything he should, but it all seems slowed down somehow, like a movie played at half the normal speed. He goes down to the reception desk, makes sure the police has been alerted, and reports the incident to them when they arrive, all the while feeling like he’s looking at his surroundings through a thick wall of glass. None of it seems real, not the people, not the places. The only thing that does seem real is the fact that he might be about to lose the person he loves without ever having told them how he feels.

He never said it. He never said any of it. Not an I love you, not an I need you, not even a plain You’re important to me. He always thought what they had went without saying, that he didn’t have to name it because implicitly, they both just knew. It took the painfully real prospect of Castiel dying to finally make Dean Winchester understand why people are so attached to labels, and how deep the chasm between feeling things and voicing them really is.

While he’s waiting for the security guard to retrieve the images from the hospital video surveillance system, a short man approaches him, his face pulled taut with apprehension.

“You’re a cardiac surgeon. Explain to me what’s happening.”

“Who the hell are you?” Dean says aggressively, turning around to fully face the guy. He doesn’t
have the time or energy to be polite.

“Cassie’s brother. Come on, say it like it is. Those stupid ass nurses won’t tell me anything, they just keep feeding me some generic bullshit. Will he make it or not?”

Dean gapes at him.

“Which one are you?”

“Focus!” the man snaps, and it’s amazing how someone so tiny can look so threatening. “I’m Gabriel. What’s happening with my brother?”

Dean swallows hard, but he keeps eye contact with Gabriel as he responds.

“He was stabbed in the chest and he’s being operated right now.”

“Wow, thanks, that explains everything,” Gabriel barks. “I know that much, genius. What’s the prognosis?”

Dean wants to lie. He wants to assure Gabriel that the situation is under control, because maybe then he’d get to believe it as well. Unfortunately, years of learning how to gently deliver bad news without sugarcoating it take over.

“He was admitted for surgery very quickly, so exsanguination shouldn’t be a problem, but there is a risk of cardiac tamponade.”

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s when blood or fluid collects in the sac that surrounds the heart.”

Gabriel runs a hand over his face, visibly struggling to keep calm.

“Will he make it or not?” he repeats, as if he expected a better answer this time.

“I don’t know. I just… I don’t know,” Dean says helplessly. They stand there in silence, frozen in the middle of the main hall, both trying to deal with the possibility of a person so dear to them not coming back. Dean can’t help but think how wrong this is; these aren’t the circumstances in which they should be meeting for the first time. He should have met Gabriel the way Cas met Sam, over a warm meal, casual conversation and under Cas’s fond gaze. Instead, they made each other’s acquaintance over Castiel’s potential deathbed. It’s so messed up, so terribly wrong, so unfair.

“Mr. Novak?”

They both look up, noticing a nurse hovering next to them. In circumstances like these, having a nurse approach you is both a relief and a nightmare; you long for good news, but at the same time you have to steel yourself for the worst.

“Yes?”

“I thought you’d like to know that your brother has woken up.”

“Cas?”

“Erm, no,” she says, smiling apologetically. “Sorry. The other one.”

Dean is slowly losing his mind.

Gabriel has been sitting in Samandriel’s room for over half an hour. Castiel has been on the operating table for almost two. Sam still hasn’t showed up. That leaves him alone with his thoughts, which are becoming darker and darker, true to the principle that the longer you wait, the gloomier things look. And in that case, things looked pretty gloomy to begin with.

The worst part is that Dean has no control whatsoever over the outcome of the surgery. However bad things got, he could always do something. There were procedures at his disposal, choices to make and routes to take. Even if it ended badly, he had the (poor, but still) comfort of knowing that he didn’t stay idle throughout, sweating his guts out to help until the very last moment.

Now, there’s nothing. He can’t do a thing, not a bloody thing, while Cas, his Cas walks the thin line between life and death. It’s the most cruel joke the universe has ever played on Dean.
When some time later (might have been minutes or hours, Dean stopped counting) a nurse approaches him, saying she has news about “the condition of the stabbing victim,” anxiousness spikes through Dean like a jolt of electricity.

“Is he…?“

“He’s alive,” she assures him. Dean sits down, because it’s too much. Christ, he’s alive.

“But I’m afraid his condition is still critical,” she adds quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“I want to speak to the surgeon who operated him,” Dean demands hoarsely. He can see the nurse wants to protest, but something in his expression must make her rethink that.

“You said you’re a doctor, didn’t you?” she asks. He nods numbly.

“I see.”

To his surprise, she sits down next to him, her dark hair falling over her shoulder. Dean doesn’t remember her from the group of doctors and nurses who took Cas away, but then again, he can barely remember his own name right now.

“Are you family?” she asks softly.

“I… no. I’m just… He’s my…”

He pauses, because it hits him that the word “boyfriend” doesn’t even begin to cover what Castiel is to him. The term necessary to describe him would have to encompass such diverse notions as “my coworker”, “pain in my ass”, “the best fuck I’ve ever had”, “my personal nagger”, “my friend”, “my competition”, “the exception to every rule I have”, and, to be quite honest, “my everything”.

“Partner?” she supplies.

Dean swallows. He can tell where this conversation is going.

“I know the drill. I realize you can’t divulge information about patients to people who aren’t relatives or spouses, but I have to speak to the person who operated him. Please.”

She studies him for a moment, eyes searching his face as if trying to determine if he’s taking advantage of her goodwill.

“It’s against the rules for me to let you in there,” she says.

“Please,” he repeats, because that’s all he can do. He looks down at her nametag, then back up at her. “Please, Colette.”

She sighs.

“I will ask the surgeon if she can come here to talk to you, but please remember it’s not up to me.”

“Thank you,” he says, pouring as much gratitude into the words as he can. She nods sadly and puts a hand on his shoulder, the touch gentle and comforting.

“If you’re a doctor, then you’re familiar with all the stock phrases used for consolation in circumstances such as these. You’ve probably said them yourself dozens of times. But there is one that is always true, even if clichéd.”

Dean forces a tight-lipped smile.

“Yeah? Which one is that?”

She squeezes lightly at his shoulder.

“You need to hope for the best.”

Dean snorts before he can stop himself. He knows she’s only trying to help, but really? That’s the best she can come up with?

“Hope is useless,” he says bitterly.

“Hope is the only weapon at your disposal right now,” she retorts calmly. “Use it.”
Minutes pass, and Dean almost makes peace with the fact that he’s been blown off. Honestly, he understands how mentally exhausting an emergency surgery can be, and how a surgeon has no energy to pay a visit to the patient’s family afterwards, but it doesn’t make him any less disappointed. He’s just about to give up and go stretch his legs when a woman in scrubs rounds the corner. She looks worn out, hair tousled from the surgical cap and eyes drooping as if she was fighting to keep them open.

“I was told somebody is waiting to see me here?” she says.

Dean is all up in her personal space in three quick strides.

“How is he doing? Was there a cardiac tamponade? Did you put him on CPB?”

“Would you at least give me your name before I violate hospital policy for you?” The surgeon extends her hand, waiting until he squeezes it. “My name is Hannah. Colette told me you’re an acquaintance of our patient, and a doctor?”

“Yes,” Dean says, though he winces a little at the word ‘acquaintance’. “Dean Winchester. Please tell me exactly what you did and what is his condition now.”

“Winchester?” she repeats. “As in, Sandover Memorial Dean Winchester?”

“Not anymore, but yeah,” he says impatiently. It’s with great difficulty that he smothers the instinct to shake her arms until she spills all she knows.

“I read your PhD dissertation,” she says, a trace of excitement crossing her face. “Fantastic work. Are you planning further publications?”

“No!” Dean snaps, his nerves pulled so taut it’s a miracle his skin hasn’t started cracking yet. “I’m done with academic career. I prefer hands-on work. Will you please answer me now?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she says, finally remembering the situation they’re in. “That was very inconsiderate of me. Let’s sit down.”

They take a seat next to each other, and Hannah gives him a detailed account of what happened inside the OR, much more specific than those usually given to the family.

“As you can probably guess, he had increasing tachycardia when he was brought in to us,” she begins.

“How much?”

“100/120 beats per minute. He was struggling to breathe, so we inserted a left chest drain. Unfortunately, it clamped quickly because of a massive hemorrhage, so we removed it and we drained about 700 ml of blood.”

“Did you do a chest x-ray?” Dean asks. He does his best to detach himself from the case, to erase Castiel’s face and picture a nameless patient X. He operated on stabbing and shooting victims a hundred times before, and he just needs to pretend it’s a hundred and first. Just another poor, anonymous soul who landed on the operating table. Only then will he be able to get through this conversation.

“We did. It revealed persisting hemothorax and atelectasis.”

Dean closes his eyes, his resolution to remain aloof going straight to hell. All he sees is Cas fighting for breath as blood fills his pleural cavity, building up until his lungs can’t work properly.

“What then?”

“We gave him a transfusion of crystalloid fluid and red cells, but as soon as we reduced it, the blood pressure began to drop again and the tachycardia persisted, so we transferred him to the OR. After intubation we made a median sternotomy incision to get access to the heart.”

“When you opened the sternum, was there a cardiac tamponade?”

“No,” she says, and Dean can at last catch a breath. Thank fucking Christ.

“What about the wound? Where did the knife—”

“A cut in the lateral pericardium and a wound in the left ventricle, plus a stab wound in the left lung.”

“Both heart and lungs?”

It feels like the air is being steadily sucked out of the room. Dean grips the edge of his seat and grits his teeth. He doesn’t have a delicate stomach, so why does it feel like the sandwich he ate on
the plane is about to make a reappearance?

“We sutured the lung wound and put him on cardiopulmonary bypass,” Hannah continues, though she eyes him worrily as if expecting him to collapse on her. “Then we repaired the wounds of the left atrium and left ventricle.”

“Successfully?”

“As best as we could.”

Dean shakes his head, as if that was not enough.

“Was there anything else? Stroke?”

“No.”

“Cerebral infarction?”

“No. That’s it.”

“I want to see him.”

She sighs, though she doesn’t seem surprised.

“I already broke the rules by telling you all this. He’s in the ICU and can’t receive guests yet. Besides, he’s unconscious. We put him in a medically-induced coma.”

“But he’s stable?”

She gets up from her chair and sighs again. Dean remembers how exhausted she must be, but he still can’t feel bad about grilling her.

“Critical, but stable,” she says. “I’ll make sure you’re informed should anything happen,” she adds. As she leaves, Dean slumps back in his seat, muttering a quiet “thank you” after her.

Critical, but stable.

That means touch-and-go in the next few days.

“Critical but stable? What am I, Akinator? Should I be able to guess what that means?”

“Cases like this are often unpredictable,” Dean explains tiredly. Although his eyes are closed, he can hear Gabriel pacing restlessly up and down the corridor. As soon as he left Samandriel’s room and Dean informed him there was news about Cas, Gabriel unceremoniously pushed him back onto a chair and demanded to be told everything. And then, when Dean finished off by saying that there was nothing more to be done but wait, Gabriel practically exploded.

“Nothing more to be done? That’s a joke, right?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“You’re a heart surgeon! Who’s supposed to know what to do if not you?”

“Don’t you think that if I could do something, I already would have?” Dean yells. For some reason, his nerves choose this moment to finally snap. “Don’t you think I would have done anything? I mean, literally fucking anything? I can’t, and neither can anyone. Newsflash, shortbus: when people get stabbed, they often die. Now sit down on your ugly ass and stop pacing, cause it’s driving me up the fucking wall.”

After a tirade like this most people would at least stop shouting. Not Gabriel, though; he strides up to Dean and takes a deep breath.

“Listen to me, Ken doll. My brother cannot bite it. Get it? It’s not a possibility. Not until they talk.” He points at the closed door in front of them. “Not until they’re both in the same room and that stupid, stupid brother of mine can get some forgiveness. Even if he doesn’t need it.”

“He does need it,” Dean shoots back before he can stop himself. “I might have only heard Cas’s part of the story, but believe me, he does need it. Getting knifed tends to reveal your priorities, and it was all he talked about just before—”

He cuts himself off abruptly, just in time before his voice breaks. Fists clenched at his sides, he
glares at Gabriel, steeling himself for a comeback, but it never comes. Instead, Gabriel blinks at him and leans away, his eyes scanning Dean’s face as if he saw him for the first time. It’s hard to say what the result of his examination is, but the fight seems to leave him, since he rubs a hand against his cheek and sighs.

“What did Cassie tell you about this whole clusterfuck?” he demands, somewhat calmer now.

“Just the kidnapping part. That he looked away and…”

“…and Sammy went poof,” Gabriel finishes. “Yeah, that’s not all of it.” He gestures for Dean to sit and takes a place next to him, visibly resigned. “He probably neglected to mention that Samandriel adored him.”

Somehow, Dean doesn’t find that surprising, but he keeps quiet, waiting for Gabriel to continue.

“I mean, the little bugger was a ray of sunshine with everybody, but Cas was the chosen one. Sammy would follow him everywhere. You can imagine how a regular teenager would be pissed at having a toddler trail after him all the time, but Cas was equally in love with Sammy as Sammy was with him.”

Gabriel’s tone becomes melancholic, his gaze drifting off a little as he’s remembering the obviously better times.

“They were inseparable. When Cas practiced playing the piano, Samandriel would always come running to listen to him. I don’t think it made any difference to him whether Cas played The Moonlight Sonata or Itsy-Bitsy Spider. He could probably hit one note for ten minutes straight and the munchkin would go wild for it anyway. And sometimes, Cas would take him on his lap and let him drum on the keys as he pleased. The racket was awful, believe me.”

Dean smiles despite himself. Imagining Cas as a fifteen or sixteen year old doesn’t warrant any other reaction.

“What about your other brothers?”

Gabriel tenses at that, his nostalgic expression falling away.

“It was bad after our parents died, but when Sammy went missing it fell apart for good. We’ve always been a little fucked up as a family, and the kidnapping – the murder, we thought – was the final straw. Michael started working so much we barely saw him. Lucifer spent hours out, God knows where. Cas clamped up for good. And I left, because I couldn’t watch it.”

Dean opens his mouth to say something, then promptly closes it. There’s nothing to be said after an admission like that. And Dean thought his childhood was fucked up.

“Cas and I kept emailing each other for a while after I left, so I was up-to-date with the big fight over his studies.”

“Don’t tell me. They didn’t want him to study nursing.”

“Bingo. Michael insisted on some posh private business school, and Lucifer backed him up – a rare occurrence. When Cas refused, they cut him off from his fund.”

“Then how did he—”

“Come on,” Gabriel smirks, “don’t you know our Cassie is a little rebel in disguise? He showed them both a metaphorical middle finger, got a full ride into college and moved out as soon as he could. And after getting his degree he shipped his ass all the way to New York to be as far away from them as possible.”

“Can’t say I blame him,” Dean mutters.

Gabriel laughs, though it’s hollow and bitter.

“We’re not interested in the first two, but the third one is a very good question, Gabriel,” says an unfamiliar voice.

“Oh great. The evil twins are here.”
Gabriel doesn’t deign to get up from his chair, but Dean does, and he comes face to face with two men who have to be Castiel’s older brothers. The dark-haired one eyes him distrustfully, while the other has a half-smirk dancing around the corners of his mouth.

“Dean, meet Heckle and Jeckle,” Gabriel says, leaning back in his chair.

“I’m Michael Novak,” the taller man says. He doesn’t extend a hand for Dean to shake. “This is Lucifer. We’ve been informed Samandriel has woken up.”

“He did. You can go home now,” Gabriel says. Michael throws him a cold look.

“We both wish to speak to him.”

“I doubt he wishes to speak to you, though. He’s fallen asleep again. If you wanna make yourselves useful, go hurry the police so that they find the bastard who stabbed Cas.”

“Castiel has been stabbed?”

It’s the first time Lucifer speaks, and Dean decides he already likes him better than Michael. Though, of course, he hates them both on principle. The dicks made Cas miserable.

“He underwent an emergency surgery,” Dean says, directing his words only to Lucifer. “He’s in the ICU.”

“And who are you?” Michael asks bluntly.

“Haven’t you heard?” Gabriel interrupts again. “Our Cassie has a boyfriend now.”

“What is his condition?” Lucifer demands, voice hard and eyes still trained on Dean.

“Critical.”

“Were you here when it happened?”

“Did you let it happen?” Michael adds coldly.


“I agree with the boy-toy.”

“Gabriel, you’re not helping.”

“I’m just trying to balance the situation, Lu. A little unfair of you two to gang up on poor ol’ Dean. We all know that if Cas were here, he’d take his side and tell you guys to go screw yourself.”

That shuts them all up. Cas isn’t here, and instead of commiserating with each other, they’re having a shouting match. Dean takes a breath, trying to suppress his anger. Now is really not the time to get into an argument, no matter how much he wants to scream his head off at the Novak brothers. How fucked-up do you have to be if your reaction to finding out your sibling has been stabbed is to throw accusations at said sibling’s boyfriend? How messed-up is it that they barely even blinked upon being told Cas is fucking dying?

Dean’s efforts to get his blood pressure under control must be less inconspicuous than he’s hoped, because Lucifer throws him a knowing glance, like he realizes that Dean’s limits are being pushed to the extreme. Their eyes meet for a brief second before Lucifer looks away and turns to his brother, clearing his throat and bringing his hand up to put it on Michael’s elbow.

“We should go,” he says. “As crass as our little brother’s remarks are, he’s right. We won’t make a difference waiting here, but we can go persuade the police to double their efforts.”

“They’ll crap their pants,” Gabriel comments from behind them. Dean concludes that he’s one of those people who just never know when to shut up. However, he resolutely doesn’t say anything, counting down from 10 to 0 in his head.

Michael doesn’t protest at Lucifer’s suggestion. He glares at Dean, a we’re not done yet kind of look in his eyes, but then he gives his brother a short nod and they both disappear down the corridor. When they’re gone, Dean is at his third round of 10-to-0 countdown, and his shoulders sag.

He’s managed to go through the entire conversation without decking anyone. He should get a fucking medal for it.

“I can’t believe Cas really grew up with you three,” he says when the dangerous duo is safely out of sight. It escapes his comprehension how somebody as caring and kind as Castiel could have
spent his childhood with three sociopaths and still turn out the way he is.

Though now that he thinks about it, it explains Cas’s initial restraint when they met. Everyone would be guarded if they came from a home like that. Everyone would put up their defenses, trying to protect themselves from getting hurt even further. With baggage such as this, any little heartbreak is enough to cause an overflow.
The Mend

The next two days are a blur. People come and go, Dean’s cell bursts with text messages and phone calls (he lets it all go to voicemail), and he would feel overwhelmed by it if he could feel anything anymore.

Sam arrives late on Thursday evening, behind a wheel of a borrowed sedan Dean would make fun of in normal circumstances. He brings Sarah with him, and the first thing she does is come up to Dean and wrap her arms around him.

“He shouldn’t have dragged you here,” he mutters into the collar of her coat.

“I wanted to come,” she says, hugging him tighter before letting go. “Cas is my friend, remember?” She takes him by the hand and makes him sit down between her and Sam, whose puppy eyes are even bigger than usual, and much sadder. “Tell us everything,” she demands.

And so he does. He doesn’t feel any better for it, but saying it all again, complete with the story of Cas’s childhood, Samandriel’s kidnapping, and later disintegration of their messed up family helps him deal with all the information that has been dumped on his head in such a short amount of time.

Even though Sam and Sarah can’t offer him anything other than moral support and two pairs of ears willing to listen, their presence does manage to calm Dean down a little. His stomach remains twisted into knots, but his initial terror fades into a dull, throbbing pain at the back of his head. It’s still unimaginably bad, but it’s better. It’s a compromise.

The man who stabbed Castiel is caught three days after the incident, thanks to the images from the hospital surveillance cameras. Dean can only guess how much credit is due to the police and how much to Michael and Lucifer Novak. Regardless, the man tells the officers who arrest him everything. The only information he refuses to give is his name – apart from that, he confesses to the kidnapping and the stabbing without any prompting. As a lawyer, Lucifer estimates that his defense attorney will claim mental illness.

Dean is surprised by how little he cares about what happens to the guy.

The thing that occupies him till the end of the week, apart from the endless vigil at the door of Castiel’s room (where he’s still forbidden from entering), is calling up all his doctor friends to ask around for the best psychiatrists in the country. Although Samandriel is now free and safe from his kidnapper, the ordeal he went through must have done a lot of damage. Making sure he will get the best therapy possible becomes Dean’s way of helping Cas. It might be indirect, but it’s the only one available.

While Michael and Lucifer don’t show up at the hospital much, Gabriel takes to hanging around. He spends a lot of time in Samandriel’s room, and the rest of it with Dean, Sam, and Sarah. It’s a bizarre group they make up. Gabriel quickly develops a soft spot for Sam and begins shameless flirting, despite knowing full well Sarah is his fiancée. Sam gets increasingly flustered by the attentions, whereas Sarah finds them highly amusing. For Dean, they’re a welcome and much-needed distraction.

When three days pass and Castiel still hasn’t woken up, Dean calls Crowley to update him on the situation, and then Charlie, because he realizes he misses her.

She’s duly terrified by the news of what has happened, but she also says something Dean hasn’t expected.

“Pam thought it would be you.”

“What do you mean, me?”

Charlie goes silent, as if contemplating whether she can let him in on the secret.

“Pamela has these… premonitions,” she begins hesitantly. “Do you believe in psychics?”

“No.”

“But tell her that. She… I don’t know, Dean. Sometimes she sees things and they come true, weeks or months later. When Tessa’s husband died in Afghanistan, Pam knew before the news came. When one of our neurologists had a car accident, she knew too. And when you started to work at St. Hubert’s, she said she had had that bad feeling again, and that something terrible would happen involving you.”

“You think she meant this?” Dean asks skeptically. He doesn’t believe in the supernatural. Never has.
“Why not? I believe in science, but I also believe there are things that escape our understanding.”

“Then why did she say that bad thing, or whatever, would involve me? Cas is the one who might die.”

“You’re the one watching him die. Isn’t that worse?”

Dean sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers. He’s had an almost constant headache since Cas was transferred to the ICU.

“My life is not in danger,” he protests weakly.

“Isn’t that worse?” Charlie repeats.

Dean doesn’t answer. He knows it is.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Castiel wakes up.

Colette reports that he’s weak and in pain, but responsive. Dean asks her for permission to enter his room only out of politeness, and then comes in anyway, ignoring her half-hearted attempts to stop him.

The sight in front of him is heart-wrenching. It’s not even the tubes or the bandages; he expected those. It’s Castiel’s face, deathly ashen under the fluorescent light. It’s his eyes, sunken and barely kept open, their normally sparkling shade of blue dulled. It’s his lips, pale and dry. It’s seeing him on the wrong side of the hospital bed.

Dean takes a few steps closer, and Castiel notices him, mustering up a wan smile.

“Hello, Dean.”

His voice is hoarse from disuse, but the words sound so familiar that Dean almost breaks down on the spot. He swallows hard and sways unsurely on his feet, too scared to move as if it could make Cas disappear.

“Don’t ever do that again,” Dean says. It comes out harsher than he intended, but Cas only closes and opens his eyes, a substitute for a nod. The pads of Dean’s fingers slip from Castiel’s wrist and cover his hand.

“They caught him, Cas. The fucker who did this to you, he’s been arrested.”

Cas hums, and then seems to remember something.

“My brother?”

“He’s awake. I haven’t gone into his room, but Gabriel has – because I met Gabriel, by the way – and he says he’ll be fine. I mean, obviously he’ll need some help to get better, but physically he’s alright. He’ll be up and about before you will. I started calling up some old friends to ask for good psychiatrists. It’s gonna be expensive as shit, but I think your dickish brothers will chip in. They —”

Dean cuts himself off and shakes his head.

“Shit, sorry. You’re probably tired of my yapping. You should rest.”

“No,” Cas protests. “Stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Just try and go to sleep and I’ll sit here, okay?”
“No,” Cas repeats with determination. It’s clear that the longer he talks, the more difficult it becomes.

“I can’t, but you talk. Please.”

Dean’s eyes flit briefly to the heart rate monitor on the right, then back to Cas, and he nods. If Cas wants him to talk, he’ll talk.

The words come easily, since so much transpired while Castiel was unconscious. Dean tells him about meeting Gabriel, Michael, and Lucifer, about the man who stabbed him, about the call to Charlie and the outrageous claim that Pamela knew something like this would happen, about Sam and Sarah checking into a hotel nearby, about this and that and anything in between.

When Castiel tires and drifts off, Dean quietly gets up from the bed and takes a seat in a nearby chair.

Like promised, he’s not going anywhere.

Castiel’s recovery progresses slowly, but surely, and three days later he’s transferred from the ICU to a normal hospital room, where he can receive visitors. The first person to come in is Gabriel. He sits there for a long time, and comes out in a suspiciously good mood. Then it’s time for Sam and Sarah, who spend almost half an hour talking to Cas, showering him with comforting words and warm smiles. The last people in line are Michael and Lucifer – they don’t stay for long, and don’t speak to anyone as they leave.

Dean spends most of his time with Cas now, whether it’s to watch him sleep, talk to him, or simply be there for the sake of silent company. Gabriel jokes that one of these days he’ll glue Dean’s ass to the chair by Castiel’s bedside, and he won’t even notice. Dean flips him off or offers a lame comeback every time Gabriel makes a comment like that, but the truth is he doesn’t really care that much. Gabriel isn’t even exaggerating. Dean has turned into a mother hen, and he doesn’t give a damn. Case in point: he holds Cas’s hand even when there are other people around.

“I thought you were averse to public displays of affection,” Cas remarks one day, looking down to where Dean’s palm rests on top of his hand. Sam smiles behind the book he’s reading.

“I make exceptions for people who almost died on me,” Dean replies gruffly, though his tone is belied by the gentle way his finger moves across the back of Castiel’s hand.

“Lucky me,” Cas mutters, and Sam doesn’t manage to keep in a laugh.

“You,” Dean says, pointing an accusing finger at him. “Out.”

When Dean manages to usher his still-laughing brother out of the room and close the door behind him, he comes back and grabs Cas’s hand like it’s the most courageous thing he’s ever done.

“Shut up. Don’t say anything,” he warns.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.”

Dean sits back down and presses his lips to Castiel’s knuckles. He can feel the curious blue eyes resting on him, and his cheeks start to burn a little, but he doesn’t withdraw. He hasn’t spent a virtually sleepless four days fretting the worst only to deprive himself of this. If he wants to hold and kiss Castiel’s hand, then you better bloody believe he will, regardless of who’s watching and how sappy it makes him look.

“So, Cas. How do you feel about being my date for Sam and Sarah’s wedding?”

Dean is not present during Castiel and Samandriel’s first meeting after thirteen years. He waits outside the door, tapping away an uneven rhythm on his knee and fighting the urge to eavesdrop with the good old glass-against-the-wall trick.

It takes over an hour before Samandriel finally emerges from Castiel’s room. Dean hasn’t had many occasions to speak to the kid – or rather man, he’s almost 18 after all – but Samandriel purposely walks up to him.
“Go to him now,” he says simply.

“Is he alright?”

“Will be if you go to him. I think he’s in bigger shock than me.”

Dean nods and watches Samandriel walk away, his posture stiff and his legs dragging weirdly behind him. He can’t even begin to imagine the trauma the kid has been through. Gluing him back together will be a hell of a task, and Dean knows even without asking that Cas will want to be there every step of the way.

When he cracks the door open, Cas is sitting up in his bed, head in his hands. At the sound of Dean’s steps, he looks up and pats the spot next to him.

“How bad was it?” Dean asks, sitting behind him on the bed and slinging an arm around his waist.

“He was such a cheerful child,” Cas whispers. “And now he’s a shadow. A shell where my brother used to be.”

“He’s still there. It’ll take time,” Dean says gently, pulling Cas closer to himself and maneuvering them so that he doesn’t touch Cas’s bandages. “It’s all still fresh, and—”

“I want him to come back to New York with me.”

“Are you su—”

“He’s coming with me.”

Dean knows that tone. The decision is final, and all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t change Castiel’s mind.

“Then we’ll make it work,” he promises.

Cas gives him an uncertain look.

“It’s not really your problem,” he begins, and Dean has to remind himself that smacking a stabbing victim over the head is probably a bad idea.

“Yes, it is. It’s ours. Focus on healing that hole in your chest and I’ll take care of the rest of it. Capiche?”

Instead of answering, Castiel turns in Dean’s arms and kisses him, just a brief, chaste brush of his lips against Dean’s. It’s their first one since the incident, and Dean’s heart bursts with a steady stream of yes, yes, finally, it’s perfect, was it always this perfect, did I somehow forget? He cups Castiel’s face, the stubble there thick after weeks of neglect, and kisses him back for all he’s worth.

Castiel is released from the hospital several weeks later, and once he’s good to fly, him, Dean, and Samandriel take a plane back to New York.

The beginnings are hard, because they always are. Dean starts to work again, and he’s immediately buried under an avalanche of patients whose surgeries he’d missed. Crowley is anything but lenient, and he makes sure to convey how displeased he is at Dean’s weeks-long leave by working him into the ground.

Samandriel moves into Castiel’s apartment, and together they begin a long process of healing, both physical and mental. It’s slow, painful and frustrating, riddled with obstacles and challenges, but it’s heading in the right direction.

After two more weeks, some fighting and an inordinate amount of yelling on Dean’s part, Michael Novak transfers Castiel’s and Samandriel’s part of inheritance to their respective accounts. When money stops being an issue, the brothers move to a bigger apartment in Dean’s neighborhood. They now live within walking distance, and it makes things easier for everyone.

It’s still not ideal, obviously. It will be a long time before Dean manages to catch up with all the work accumulated during his absence, and he has to spend long hours in the hospital, which for the first time also means away from Cas. Castiel gets more and more frustrated with having to sit at home and recover instead of going back to his duties. Samandriel’s progress is marked by ups and downs – sometimes it gets really bad, and Dean comes over to visit the brothers only to find them curled on the couch, Castiel’s arms wound tightly around Samandriel, as if they were
It’s not perfect. Of course it isn’t. All three of them know that much more time needs to pass to allow both bigger and smaller wounds to heal, and that some of them might never go away completely. But in between Samandriel’s therapy, Castiel’s physical recovery and Dean’s work, they manage to get each other through the rough patches. Cautiously, they begin to map out a future – a future where Samandriel can go to school he missed and get an education; a future where Castiel calls Gabriel, like Dean has been nagging him to, and reconnects with him; a future where Dean at last pushes the L-word past his lips and means it with everything he has.

A future where, Samandriel having exchanged his room in Cas’s apartment for a college dorm, Dean and Castiel move in together and furnish their new place from scratch, complete with a stupidly expensive bathmat.

A fuzzy one.

From the moment they set foot back in New York, Castiel has been going out of his way to drag Dean into bed.

His injury has forced him into a long, painful period of abstinence that’s bad enough in itself, but made significantly worse by the fact that Dean is constantly by his side. Always there, always within reach, and as soft and caring as Castiel has ever seen him. It’s as if the same knife that plunged into Cas’s chest cracked something in Dean, too, making all the tenderness brimming within him spill out into the open. He will make them dinner, help Cas dress, do regular check-ups of the healing process, apply scar cream, cradle him in his arms the first thing in the morning and the last in the evening, and all that without ever making a pass at Cas.

Frankly, it’s been really annoying. As much as Castiel relishes the feeling of being cared for this way, he misses Dean’s usual cheekiness and ease in this department. He misses being pulled into a crushing embrace, pushed against a wall, thrown on a bed, straddled and kissed within an inch of his life. He misses times when Dean didn’t treat him as if he were made of glass – times when Dean reacted to his advances with a grin instead of a frown and a shake of his head.

Dean has been adamant like that for weeks, and Castiel is nearing his limits.

The obnoxious CNN anchor drones on and on in the background, but neither of them are really watching. Dean’s arm is slung around Castiel’s shoulder, tracing small circles into the material of his T-shirt. There’s a single fly buzzing lazily under the living room ceiling, and Cas’s gaze trails after it until it finally finds a way out through a half-open window. Once it’s gone, Cas sneaks a quick look at Dean, who’s making no effort to stop himself from drifting off to sleep.

“Dean?” he says quietly, putting a hand over his chest.

Dean makes a noncommittal “mmhmhm” sound, and his head lolls gently onto his shoulder.

Castiel leans in and plants a soft kiss to the underside of Dean’s jaw. This time he elicits a longer sound, so he continues to press his lips lower, down the line of Dean’s neck, and then back up all the way to his ear.

Dean starts humming appreciatively until his sleep-addled brain catches up with his body.

“Cas,” he groans hoarsely, blinking his eyes open. He tries to look down, but Cas gently cups the side of his face, tilting it a little for better access and holding it still while he keeps mouthing at Dean’s skin. His other hand sneaks up the length of Dean’s thigh to palm him through his jeans.

“That’s not fair,” Dean protests, squirming under Cas’s touch. He frees his arm and tries to put a stop to the attentions, but Cas slips into his lap and latches onto the delicate spot above Dean’s collarbone like it’s his job.

“Cas, no. You’re not——”

Cas grinds against him, and Dean lets out a sharp gasp.

“Cheater,” he accuses. “We’re not doing it, Cas. Your wound is still too fresh and I’m not risking anything.”

“My wound is healed, and I know my limitations better than anyone,” Cas replies smoothly, without stopping his ministrations. “Besides, don’t you miss it?”

Dean sighs, placing his hand on Cas’s waist.
“Low blow.”

“So you do.”

“For Christ’s sake, Cas, I just don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Castiel growls impatiently and sits up straight, fixing Dean with one of his trademark sick of this bullshit stares.

“How long, then? How long before I can touch you?”

Dean shivers at the wording and tightens his grip on Cas’s hips.

“We can still make out,” he reasons. “Or even jerk off. Just not—”

“No,” Cas cuts off angrily. “I want all of you.”

“Jesus, Cas—”

“We’ll be careful. We’ll go as slow as you want. And…”

Castiel hesitates, biting his lip and carding a hand through his hair.

“And what if we switched?”

Dean gapes at him. He must have misheard.

“Wait, are you saying what I think you’re saying? You wanna be… you wanna take the bottom bunk?”

Cas scowls.

“I want to be intimate with you. I couldn’t care less whose dick goes where, as long as we get to do it.”

Hearing his ever-polite Cas speak so crudely sends a new wave of arousal down south, and Dean grits his teeth, feeling his resolve melt away.

“Are you sure you’re fine with it? Bottoming, I mean? You’ve never…”

Dean lets his voice trail off, because he’s not sure how to say bro, you’re the toppiest top to ever top, who are you kidding.

Castiel doesn’t reply immediately, letting his fingers play with the buttons on Dean’s shirt. The sudden silence starts ringing in Dean’s ears, but he valiantly fights the urge to fill it. Instead, he simply waits while doing his best to ignore the tent in his pants caused by Cas’s attentions.

“I wanted to ask you ever since that evening in Central Park,” Cas admits at last. He looks up at Dean through his eyelashes and leans closer, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of Dean’s mouth.

“I’ve had my share of sexual partners over the years, Dean, as I’m sure you have too.” His left hand eases its way under the hem of Dean’s shirt and begins to trail lightly across his stomach.

“But I have never bottomed. Never found it appealing enough, I guess.”

“Okay?” Dean says cautiously. They’ve never had the “how many people have you slept with before me” talk, nor have they ever discussed their top/bottom preferences. The first one didn’t seem relevant or important, whereas the second felt so natural it sorted itself out without a single word being spoken.

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“After that night, I found myself wondering. I watched you, saw how much you enjoyed yourself, and I kept thinking what it would be like,” Cas continues slowly. “It’s not just about my injury, Dean. I’m curious. I want to see what it— what you’d feel like. Why not give it a try now, when we have a perfect opportunity? I know it would be easier for you to feel in control if you were the one on the top bunk, as you put it.”

Cas wets his lips, fully aware of the way Dean’s eyes follow the movement. He doesn’t say anything else, just smiles and leans his forehead against Dean’s, rubbing a hand over his cheek. It’s soothing, slow, and undemanding.

He’s giving Dean the time to think, and Dean is grateful.

As they sit there, an ambulance siren starts to wail in the distance, cutting through the low hum of the television neither of them notices anymore. It grows louder as it approaches, a high-pitched noise passing right outside their window and fading as quickly as it came, swallowed up by the usual buzz of the city. The room feels strangely silent in its wake, empty. Like it’s waiting, too.

“And you really want this?” Dean whispers. That is the deal breaker, after all; that’s what it all
comes down to. In his day, Dean found himself on both ends, giving and receiving, and he has no problem with either. What he does have is a preference. Because the truth is, he loves bottoming, and he loves bottoming for Cas specifically. No one has ever given it to him as good as Castiel did; no one has been able to take him apart so completely and then put him back together so wholly. It didn’t even occur to Dean to want more, to change things up, but now the offer is out there, on the table, and he’s ready to take it if it’s something Castiel wants. He’s too far gone to pretend he wouldn’t give Cas the world if he only asked.

Besides, it might be equally good. Castiel clearly seems to think so. Not only does he want this; he actually demands it. And at any rate, it’s really freaking hard to come up with possible downsides of switching when Cas is all heavy and warm in Dean’s lap, pressing up against him and teasing his fingertips over the soft, light hair just below Dean’s navel.

“Cas? You really want this?” he repeats more urgently.

“Yes, Doctor Winchester, I do.” There is a trace of a smirk in the upturn of Castiel’s mouth, the pad of his finger dragging slowly across Dean’s lip. His other hand travels up to tighten on the nape of Dean’s neck and make him move closer, always closer. “Please?”

Let it be known that one thing Dean Winchester really sucks at is saying ‘no’ to Castiel Novak.

“If you feel worse at any point, you tell me immediately, understood?”

“Grab the lube.”

“Even in the middle of the action, we’ll stop and I’ll check your vitals.”

“Alright, I’ll grab it for you.”

“I mean it, Cas. The last thing we need is you popping your scar like a can of soda.”

“Is that a medical term? I’m fairly certain healed wounds cannot do that.”

“It’s not funny. If you feel your wound acting up, or start feeling faint, or anything unusual—”

“More unusual than your cock up my—”

“You fucker, you know what I mean.”

Castiel sighs and tugs at Dean’s hand, pulling him closer until they stand nose to nose.

“Dean, you’re being irrational. It’s been over two months and I’m perfectly healthy. We both know there is no medical justification for your worry.”

Dean looks down at his feet. He knows Castiel is right. If their places were reversed, Dean would have already jumped his bones, gleefully ignoring any real or imaginary risks for his own health. But there’s no point in considering what could have been; the fact is that Cas is the one who got hurt, and Dean was the one who had to watch it. He still is, in a way; he’s still watching him get hurt, except now it’s when he closes his eyes every night. And there’s this problem with dreams – you can’t defend yourself with logic in them. However certain Dean is that Cas is in the clear, he’s helpless to explain that to his subconscious. As soon as he falls asleep, the part of him that bore the brunt of almost losing Cas rears its head and begins wreaking havoc so profound it bleeds out from the nightmare and into reality.

“I’m here now,” Cas says, soft, like he knows exactly what’s going through Dean’s mind.

“Cas—”

“You still look at me as if you expected me to die on you. Dean. I’m fine. Here.”

Cas unbuttons his shirt with swift, deft movements and drops it on a nearby chair. He then takes Dean’s hand and puts it over the scar on his chest. It’s healed nicely, and Cas said he didn’t mind its marring presence. He said it made him look like a rugged war hero. He said scars were just stories to tell. He said it was fine. He said he was fine.

Still, Dean’s fingers twitch as they graze over the raised skin.

“I was so fucking scared, Cas.” Despite his best efforts to keep it level, Dean’s voice breaks pathetically on the last word, and he would run if he could only stand to let go of Cas’s hand.

“I know. But it’s been months, Dean. You deal with death so often—”
“Not yours.”

“I didn’t die,” Castiel repeats patiently. “I’m here.”

Dean swallows and looks down at where Cas’s hand covers his. He hates that even thinking about what a close call it was turns him into such a mess. He spent his entire childhood developing thick skin out of necessity, and it irks him to see how little all those years of toughening up matter in the face of Castiel. There’s nothing he can do to drive away the remnants of his fright, no more than he can stop feeling guilty after unsuccessful surgeries or worrying about Sam. The only way he can get some peace of mind is by constant reassurance – reaching out to touch, to taste, to ensure that Castiel is there, and – isn’t it what they are supposed to be doing right now?

“Okay.”

Cas frowns, confusion making his brows pinch together.

“What?”

“You’re right. God, you’re always right, it’s infuriating.”

Dean winds his arms around Castiel’s middle and presses his face into the side of his neck, exhaling sharply.

“Indulge me. Promise you’ll tell me if anything’s wrong.”

“I promise,” Cas replies seriously, knowing it’s the only thing that will calm Dean down. The shaky breath tickling his clavicle tells Castiel he’ll have to take matters in his own hands if he wants to get laid sometime this century, so he grips Dean’s hips and walks them to the bed, where he turns them around and falls on the mattress, all but dragging Dean on top of him.

“Come on. I promised, didn’t I?”

Dean gives a tentative smile and props himself on his hands.

“Yeah, yeah. But remember that you promised something else, too. No topping from the bottom, okay? I get to go as slow as I want.”

“You’ll drive me insane,” Cas grumbles.

“Too bad. If I almost die on you some day, then you’ll get to talk. For now, I...” Dean’s playful tone deflates suddenly, and he takes a short breath before he continues. “For now, I need to do it my way.”

Castiel accepts that explanation without question, nodding and melting back against the bed. He closes his eyes and lets Dean do whatever he needs.

As it turns out, what Dean needs is a small eternity of touches. He starts out with his lips pressed into the hollow of Cas’s throat, and from there he moves in wider and wider circles, raining open-mouthed kisses on every inch of skin he can reach. Seconds stretch into minutes, and in any other circumstances Castiel would become impatient and try to hurry him up, pushing his head down or flipping them over. Today, though, he lets it go on and on. Dean’s lips are soft, his hands are warm, and if this helps him, Castiel is content to lie here like this for however long it takes. They have the time.

Before Dean finally ventures below Castiel’s waist, he has him so relaxed and pliant Cas almost slips into the sweet embrace of sleep. His eyes snap open when Dean takes him into his mouth, but they fall shut again as he realizes that here too Dean is in no hurry. Cas found out long ago that Dean Winchester is sort of an expert in giving head (he really has the ‘giving’ part down pat), and right now he uses all that skill to control Castiel’s pleasure and play him like a fiddle. He knows the technique, but more importantly, he knows Cas’s likes and dislikes. With that arsenal at his disposal, he has the means to make Cas soar without ever letting him get too close to the edge. It’s good, perfect even – but never quite intense enough.

Castiel never expected himself to enjoy such languid sex; he thought it’d be frustrating rather than pleasurable. It’s funny, then, that that’s what it takes to make him float.

The pace remains the same all throughout, every movement slow and careful. Dean slicks up his fingers, gently rubs them together to warm them up, and soon enough Castiel’s hips are stuttering, content sighs escaping his lips when the initial stretch and burn morphs into a new, surprisingly pleasant sensation. Dean’s eyelashes flutter against his cheeks as he drops little pecks all over Cas’s face, murmuring nonsense into his ear.

When Dean slides into him, all Castiel does is bring his arms around him and assure him that yes, he’s alright, and yes, he’ll kill him if he doesn’t get to it this instant.
The rhythm they set is free of any urgency, Dean’s body rocking slowly and Cas’s hips canting to meet him in very much the same way. The thrusts feel no less natural than their heartbeats, a steady pulse rather than a chaotic push-and-pull. Their eyes remain glued to each other, only closing for a brief kiss every now and then. Castiel’s hands wander to stroke Dean’s sides, brush his shoulder blades and glide across the sweaty planes of his back, feeling the tangible pull of muscles there.

As it becomes a little too much, Castiel gasps a soft plea into Dean’s ear, and then there are fingers closing around him, stroking and sliding easily. The added pressure makes his hips jolt forward, but Dean shushes him with a gentle kiss to his forehead and continues without pause, knowing it won’t be long now for either of them.

When Castiel feels the familiar heat coil in his stomach, he nudges Dean’s unoccupied arm to make him fall to his elbow and free his hand. Their fingers intertwine and they hold onto each other as they come, the gesture more intimate than the push of one body into another. Dean is dimly aware of Cas’s leg hooking tight around him, drawing him closer, deeper, and then he’s done for, choking out a breathless “Cas, Cas” into the crook of Castiel’s neck. He still mutters the same three-letter word like a mantra when Castiel follows him with a short gasp of “Dean!” on his lips.

They don’t talk after. They don’t have to. Dean throws away the condom, cleans them up and they lie in silence, pressed together, mouths moving slowly against each other. Dean’s arm snakes around Castiel’s waist to draw him close, letting Cas grab onto his hip and do the same. When the air hitting their heated skin becomes too chilly, they dip under the covers and soon fall asleep with the comforting warmth of the other’s body next to them.

Dean doesn’t dream about a body lying on the floor with wing-shaped stains of blood pooling around. His sleep is blissfully dreamless and peaceful.

Castiel doesn’t dream about a dark, faceless figure sneaking up on him and snatching his brother, 5 years old again, from him. Instead, he dreams about flecks of gold flickering in a pair of green irises.

They wake up when the sun is already high in the sky, the soft rays flooding the room through the half-open blinds. Dean rolls over to his side and props himself on his elbow, head in hand as he watches the steady rise and fall of Castiel’s chest, the heart inside working just like it is supposed to. It’s a little slower in his sleep, but the beats are regular, tireless, pumping the blood without a second’s rest and circulating it to keep its owner alive.

It has always irritated Dean that the heart is considered the symbol of love even though it has nothing to do with emotions. How he feels about Castiel is not magically lodged in that one muscle. It’s just not. In fact, it’s everywhere except there.

It’s in his skin, which turns a lovely shade of red under Castiel’s mouth and remembers the marks left by his teeth, if only for a day. It’s in his nerve endings, which carry the sparks caused by Castiel’s touch. It’s in his fingertips, which have traced all the lines of Castiel’s body. It’s in his vocal cords, without which Castiel wouldn’t be able to hear his own name panted and whispered and gasped countless times. It’s everywhere, hot and quivering, but not in the heart.

While Dean ponders on all the ways he’s in love, Cas begins to stir on the bed and then his eyes slowly flutter open. Dean leans in and kisses him good morning, reveling in the sleepy, squinty look he receives in return. For a moment he considers sharing his musings with Cas, because he’s always less guarded when they’re like this, still soft and bed-warm. The idea seems tempting for a whole of two seconds, and then Dean remembers that he wouldn’t be caught dead reflecting on sappy shit like that.

That’s why he shakes himself off, and the first thing he says to Castiel that morning is: “Just don’t get any ideas, Novak. It was awesome and all, but I bottom tonight.”

Cas snorts into his pillow.

But he does top the hell out of Dean that night.
"I forgot how fucking cold fall in New York can be," Dean complains, shrugging off his coat and throwing it across the seat next to him. "I can’t feel my fingers."

Castiel rolls his eyes and unties his scarf.

"Buy a cup of hot tea," he advises.

"No, I want lemonade. Did you know they make it from freshly-squeezed lemons?"

Dean is mighty pleased when the comment elicits a low chuckle. He wasn’t sure whether Cas would remember.

They order their burgers and fall into an easy conversation, soon forgetting about the stressful day both of them had. The delicious smells wafting in from the kitchen, the quiet chatter of the other restaurant-goers and the light sounds of the rain starting to fall outside make up a pleasant backdrop for the beginning of their weekend. It’s so nice that Dean decides it won’t be nicer. The circumstances are as perfect as they can be. There’s Cas and burgers and a knee brushing his under the table and those eyes looking at him fondly, God, those eyes, it all started with them and Dean hopes it will end with them too, except not really, because he doesn’t want any of this to end, ever, and— and there’s no point in waiting anymore. He’s been carrying it around for way too fucking long already.

The rain continues to pour over Manhattan as Dean Winchester pulls a small box out of his pocket and opens it with trembling hands.

Thick droplets drum against the window glass as Dean repeats the question he asked of Cas the first time they came here – except today, he means it. He means it with all he is and all he has, and even though he’s fairly certain he knows the answer, his heart pounds hard against his ribcage in anticipation.

A minute later, a woman named Naomi walks by the restaurant and the wind snatches a blue umbrella out of her hands. Let loose, it smacks against one of the windows and flies away as she chases after it, fruitlessly trying to catch it. The patrons sitting at the other tables look outside and point at her, commenting on her plight with derision, amusement or sympathy.

The only two people that don’t notice Naomi are a newly engaged couple sitting in the far off corner of the restaurant, gently cupping each other’s jaws and leaning across their table in a soft kiss.