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## Twist and Shout

by [gabriel](#), [standbyme](#)

### Summary

What begins as a transforming love between Dean Winchester and Castiel Novak in the summer of 1965 quickly derails into something far more tumultuous when Dean is drafted in the Vietnam War. Though the two both voice their relationship is one where saying goodbye is never a real truth, their story becomes fraught with the tragedy of circumstance. In an era where homosexuality was especially vulnerable, Twist and Shout is the story of the love transcending time, returning over and over in its many forms, as faithful as the sea.

### Notes

The following situations and characters are a work of fiction. Any similarities between real or actual events or people is purely coincidental and are in no way intended to offend or appropriate the subjects they have adapted to these particular circumstances.

Readers may encounter some ideologically sensitive material such as homophobia, depression, drug use, alcoholism, PTSD, warfare, violence, and terminal illness

# Chapter 1

*“We. We together. One being.  
Flow together like water.  
Till I can't tell you from me. I drink you. Now. Now”*

- The Thin Red Line

**April, 1965**

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Cas held his drink high as he navigated the crowd. It was as if the room were made of nothing but elbows as people pushed past him and into him, the threat of beer being sloshed onto his clothes an all too real danger. He jostled past Anna Milton, all long red hair and even longer legs, and she smiled at him, stopping a moment on her way to the back of the house

“Killer party, huh?” she said over the dull drone of people talking and the music flooding from the dining room. Cas nodded, grinning a little, using the back of his hand to push his glasses back into place. She giggled and touched the white collar of his shirt, kissing him on the cheek.

“It’s so good to see you out of the library. Finals are torture!” she laughed and Cas shrugged, pulling his drink down to chest level now that he wasn’t moving so much.

“Tell me about it.”

“You think you did ok?” she said, stepping closer, and he could smell her perfume and the powder she had used on her neck. It stood out on her white skin as a delicate film from the heat of the party and all the bodies packed into the tiny Sorority house; he was tempted to wipe away a smudge that hadn’t blended correctly out of some absent desire to fix it.

“I did as well as I could. You?” he answered, watching her roll her eyes to the ceiling, moving one shoulder casually.

“Same, I guess!” she suddenly smiled, pushing him slightly, “Don’t be so modest! We all know you aced!”

Castiel could feel the blush creeping up and coloring his ears, but he continued to shrug the compliment off.

“Well, enough talk about school. I’m glad you’re having a good time,” she tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear, “there’s lots of girls here, you know,” she pushed him again with her hand and Cas laughed nervously.

“Yeah,” he trailed, looking around. She was right. There were plenty of girls.

“Here,” she stepped forward and straightened his collar and his tie a little, smoothing her hands over his shoulders, “and remember to smile! You could get lucky tonight!”

“I doubt it,” Castiel coughed, and she let her hands swing back down by her sides. She gave him a long look and smiled.

“I don’t know,” she sing-songed, “Come on, for you it’ll be like shooting fish in a barrel!”

Castiel scoffed, taking a sip of his beer while she laughed at him. Finishing his swallow, he was just opening his mouth to say something else when there was a displaced roar from the front of the house. Several people turned to look, some fidgeting nervously.

An engine gunned and from the archway to the foyer, Castiel could see a bright beam of yellow light spearing through the front window.

“Cops?” someone said, a girl, her voice nervous. A friend shushed her and everyone was quiet, the music pouring out of the dining room seeming louder than ever in the gathered silence. A group of guys moved to the window, and though he could barely see over them he craned his neck to watch as they crowded around it, their hands on the glass.

“Who the hell invited *him*?” one of them said, pulling back from the pane to glare behind him at the party goers. Cas frowned and the engine cut off, the light going with it. “He parked right on the lawn!”

Cas’ eyes widened and his mouth fell open. Parked on the lawn? So that was the light he had seen. He felt his pulse quicken – whoever it was, they had guts parking on the Delta lawn in the middle of the night, especially when they were apparently not welcome.

“I can’t believe she did it,” Anna said, and Cas turned to see her shaking her head, sighing as she crossed her arms over her chest. She looked at Cas and raised her eyebrows. “If you heard it from *me*, I told her *not* to tell him about tonight. It’s going to be nothing but trouble.”

“Who?” Cas asked, looking back to what little he could see of the foyer.

“You’ll see,” Anna laughed, and when Cas turned to continue speaking to her, she was already half way across the room, slipping away into the kitchen. Cas blew a breath out of his mouth and then glanced back at the foyer, still curious. Two girls had replaced the boys at the window, and were whispering to each other as he approached. He stared over their heads, but it was too dark to see from his distance what they were looking at.

“Did you see him?”

“Martha, don’t look!”

“Oh, I can’t help it! He’s so *bad*! Would you look at that bike?”

“Can you even believe it? He and Lisa?”

They giggled into their hands, attempting to keep their breath from fogging up the glass, and one of them began tugging on their skirts a little in anxiety.

Cas’ brow furrowed and he tried to look past one of their heads to understand, but he could only manage to make out was a shadowy group of people in front of what must have been the motorcycle they were referring to. It was too dark to tell the model, but the group was really two – four Fraternity brothers that Castiel knew from school and one individual a little taller than them, his back angled towards Cas. Castiel blinked and then rolled his eyes as the girls squealed.

“Do you think they’ll fight? Rich looks like he’s just spoiling for one!”

“Beth, don’t talk like that! If there’s a fight someone will call the police for sure!”

Cas snorted at the conversation and turned away, trying to remember if he would end up in the dining room if he went past the staircase on his left. Someone had changed the album and now The Beatles was filtering through the house. Abandoning the otherwise uninteresting stranger, Castiel

made his way past the stairs, itching to dance. He bounced a little on his toes and hummed to the beat as he turned a corner – and excellent. The front parlor had been transformed into a makeshift dance floor, the sofas pushed to another room (one was even outside) to make space for the people already jammed inside, rocking with the music.

In the sea of people he could see Hester laughing and bobbing her head as a boy whispered something in her ear. She was looking in Cas' direction though, and he waved and she grinned, lifting her hand to beckon him over. He looked around for a place to set his drink and settled for the mantle already littered with bottles, and then hurried to her, pardoning himself as he knocked against the dancing people who were too engrossed in the music, or their partners, to care much.

“Cas!” Hester said, tugging his arm, coaxing him into a twist. He followed her example and soon the two of them were dancing, working into the groove of the group.

“Oh my gosh, so have you heard?” Hester said suddenly in an interlude, pressing herself close to him. Cas bent his ear instinctively to her, still moving his feet and she repeated herself, louder. “Did you hear?! About who came?”

Cas pulled back and rolled his eyes again, shoving his glasses back up his nose. He really needed to get the frames adjusted...

“I heard. Who is it?” he asked and Hester gaped at him, her arms swinging in time with the music.

“You mean you don't know?”

“Well, I mean, I guess it's someone Lisa knows?” he continued, barking a laugh, and Hester shook her shoulders in rhythm, even as she gave Cas the most incredulous look he'd ever seen. He frowned, annoyed.

“You just finished your first year and you don't even know who Dean Winchester is! Honestly!” She huffed, “I mean, he's only the top racer in the county – and the cutest repeat offender in the city. I think it's true he's got a record, but a lot of people think it's just rumors!”

Cas laughed at her, his curiosity piqued.

“So what about him?” he teased, twisting again. Hester bent closer.

“Well, you know, Lisa and him were *together* in high school! There's all this scandal about it because he's so bad and she's a Delta girl, you know?”

“Anna said she told her not to invite him!” Cas added. “I did know that much!”

Hester nodded enthusiastically.

“I'd believe it! A boy like Dean at a Delta party? That's asking for trouble!”

“He parked on the lawn.”

“He did not!” she shrieked, blushing, “Oh, gosh, he's just so bad, don't you think? Did Rich fight him? He said he would if he showed – those two hate each other...wait, did you see it? His bike?”

She grabbed his arm and Cas smiled at her, shrugging.

“Maybe?”

“Did you? Cas, *did* you?”

"It was too dark," he admitted and Hester let his arm go with a disapproving noise.

"You awful tease! That bike has won him so much money – he's going to be state champ this year, I just know it. We'll read about him in all the papers and then he'll win the big cup and take some lucky gal."

"You hoping it's you?" Cas prodded, stepping closer to her to get out of someone's way. She tossed her head.

"Not on my life! He's beautiful, but he goes through girls like seasons! Well, and all those rumors! Not on my life!"

"What rumors?" he stepped back again even though Hester held tight on his arm.

"You mean you haven't heard? Where have you been?" She laughed, getting nearer to Cas, her movements slowing so she could get a better look at his face. "You really haven't heard?"

Castiel shook his head and Hester tugged at his arm, dragging him through the waves of people and out, placing them near the stairwell where it was less crowded. She motioned for him to get closer, and he did so, ducking his head so that he could hear her more clearly.

"Apparently he's been raising his little brother since he was a kid himself, and his dad was a deadbeat or something like that."

Cas frowned and pulled away, holding his drink at his chest.

"That's awful."

"That's what I heard, and people say it's a rumor, but I think it's actually true."

"Well, if it's true, that doesn't really make it a rumor, does it?"

Cas didn't say anything, placing his drink on one of the steps behind Hester instead. She picked up a cup beside it and held it up to her nose, sniffing and making a face as she put it back. She coaxed him down to her level again and he followed, moving slightly closer.

"I also heard the reason why he and Lisa broke up was because he's a homosexual," she whispered it right in his ear, and Cas jerked his head back, his eyes wide behind his glasses. She shrugged again. "Only rumors again, Cas! Could go either way!"

Castiel pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose with his finger. Hester smiled and laughed at him and grabbed him by the wrist to drag him back into the mob of people before stopping near the kitchen.

"Wait right here-I want to get something to drink and then we can dance some more, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Cas smiled and leaned against the wall, watching the bodies in front of him move along with the music. A few minutes later Hester came barreling out of the kitchen, grabbing Cas by the arm again, surprising him and causing him to jump.

"Oh my God, Cas! I love this song!" she exclaimed, "Don't you just love The Beatles?" she moved her body and bobbed her head, holding Cas' wrist in her hand as he moved with her.

"Yeah, they're great!" he grinned, and Hester grinned back.

"We should go see them one day, huh? Maybe they'll play around here and we can go see them

together!"

"That would be cool, but-"

"But you'd rather see Elvis. I know, I know. Jeez, Cas, who are you? My mother?"

"Hey, without him your precious Lennon would never have gotten over here,"

"Don't be so bitter! Elvis is fine... if you're ancient!"

Castiel rolled his eyes and moved along with Hester, bobbing his head, and Hester wouldn't stop grinning, but then Cas' attention was drawn elsewhere when he saw someone walk out of the kitchen. Hester stopped when she noticed that Castiel wasn't dancing anymore, and she followed his eyes.

"That's him," she spoke low and jabbed Cas with her elbow, and he snapped his attention to her.

"Who?"

"Dean Winchester. Oh my God, isn't he just so handsome?"

Castiel watched as Dean walked through the crowded room, right past them, and he could feel the brush of his leather jacket against his arm, and it sent a sort of chill through his body. Dean continued walking without looking back, and he rounded a corner and disappeared.

"Hey!" Hester waved her hand in front of his face and he jumped back, bumping into someone behind forcing him to apologize quickly before turning back to face Hester. "Hey, are you okay? You sort of drifted off there for a moment."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay," he said, pausing for a moment, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "He looked angry."

"Rich probably tried to fight him, but he was probably asking for it. I heard he likes to start things, you know?" She shrugged and tugged at Cas' sleeve, pouting. "C'mon, let's keep dancing; this is the only thing keeping me from going insane here."

Cas stared at the spot where Dean had turned for a moment longer before nodding and letting his body start to reacclimatize acclimate to to the music, his attention back to Hester. "Yeah, okay." He smiled and Hester swayed in front of him, moving her arms at her sides, and he matched her motions, keeping beat with the song.

It didn't take very long before he had lost himself in the music and the drifting movements of the other people around them. He smiled at Hester and she bit her lip coyly, sneaking his hands to her waist. Cas stalled for a moment when his palms brushed over her dress, his throat growing a little thick. His fingers twitched and he settled them on her body, her own arms coming up over his shoulders. He took a breath and tried to look over her shoulder even as she tried to peer right in his eyes. He knew how Hester felt about him. She was constantly trying to get him interested, and it wasn't her fault. It really wasn't.

Cas wished, with every part of him, that he could reciprocate. He stiffened and kept rocking with her, trying his best to be at ease, but he felt so suddenly clumsy, and even though he didn't trip or anything, he felt supremely out of sync. It was maddening to be so offbeat, and yet he had to keep dancing anyway, regardless of how he felt.

It wasn't even like he could explain himself -the reason Hester was barking up the completely wrong tree. He wanted to just stop her as she experimentally slid her hand over his neck, but he

couldn't. He couldn't do anything about it because he was a boy and she was a beautiful girl and it was a Delta party and even if *he* knew the reason he sure as hell couldn't show it.

Hester tilted her head shyly at him and he smiled, and he hoped the pity he felt for her wasn't too obvious. She was one of the best friends he had, and he was desperate not to lose her. Things at school had been going so well. So much better than he'd ever anticipated and he would do anything not to ruin it like he had at home. He must have frowned because Hester suddenly looked concerned, blinking at him, his gaze zeroing in on her cat-eye liner. She had been poring over magazines for hours, probably, just to look as good for him as possible and it made his stomach drop.

"Something wrong?" she said loud enough for him to hear.

"Oh, no, just thinking," he answered quickly and she giggled, playing with his sweater.

"You know, you can tell me what's wrong..." she continued

*No, I really can't*, Cas thought desperately, but he just laughed a little, pushing away from her as the record transitioned into a faster song, one that didn't require any intimate touching.

"I know," he replied instead, Hester giggling nervously, fiddling with the ends of her hair. She was smoothing it down as she let her eyes drift over the room and she grabbed Cas' arm, her face suddenly scarlet.

"He's staring right at us," she squeaked, looking up at Cas.

Cas furrowed his brow. "Who?"

"*Dean*," she stressed, glancing around Cas' body again. "Right at us I can't even believe it – oh gosh, here quick, switch with me," she babbled, twisting and shoving Cas so that he was standing where she had been previously. He stared at her face, voice incredulous.

"Hester, I hardly think he's looking right at *us*," he began, but she wasn't listening, her face bright red. She peered up at Cas, starting to turn her head over her shoulder, but stopping herself.

"Is he still looking? He was looking *right at me*, it was horrible!"

"Horrible? Hester, really..." Cas teased, and he finally lifted his eyes.

"Is he?"

Cas sort of moved his head towards the sound of her voice, but only out of reflex. He couldn't have done much more.

It was frightening; slightly horrible, just like Hester had said, but not entirely. No. It couldn't have been all horrible because, while he felt trapped, he didn't want to run. He didn't want it to stop. His heart hammered and he immediately felt his palms start to get clammy as he held his breath. Dean Winchester held his stare and wouldn't let it go. Just watching him from the back wall of the room, his one hand fiddling with a bottle cap, the other holding a beer, and Cas finally remembered to inhale, and he smiled.

Small.

Cas' lips felt uncomfortably dry, and he was just about to dart his tongue out to soothe them when Dean finally broke the contact, his eyes flitting to Hester and then right back to Cas with no time for any sort of recovery.

“Cas?”

Cas opened his mouth to say something, and he could feel Hester digging her nails into his sweater, but it was like he was experiencing it from very far away. Dean raised the beer to his mouth and took a pull from it before lowering it and giving Cas a deeper smile, the corners of his mouth digging into his cheeks. Cas’ fingers twitched and Dean stepped forward from the wall.

Cas immediately feared that he was going to come straight for him, but Dean walked around to the other side of the room instead. Cas followed every step, still reeling, waiting for the young man to stop and turn around and – Cas’ imagination didn’t get any farther than that.

“When did Lisa come in here?” Hester whispered, and Cas found reality piling down on him as he was thrust back into the moment. Lisa...he saw where Dean stood now and there she was, in her yellow party dress, her dark hair laying perfectly on her perfect shoulders, and Dean was leaning his arm over her on the wall, smiling down at her bright face.

Cas blinked at the sight of Dean grinning at her. She laughed, moving to half cover her red lips with her hand, and whispered something into Dean’s ear before catching Cas’ eye and holding it for a moment. He watched Dean shift backwards and look over his shoulder. He winked.

Cas’ whole face ignited and Hester scoffed.

“He winked at me,” she breathed, scandalized, and Cas shook his head briefly trying to clear his thoughts, but his brain was too cloudy in the loud room with so many people.

“You’re flushed red, Cas, are you too hot?” Hester asked, and Cas pushed her hand gently before she could start her worried touching.

“Yeah,” he rasped, willing himself not to look at Dean again. “Yeah.” He coughed, lightly into his hand.

“I think I’m going to go,” he mumbled, and Hester put her arm back by her side, confused.

“Cas, really? It’s only 11 o’clock.”

“Oh, really?” He felt dazed, already trying to wade through the crowd, Hester following him.

“Cas, who’s going to walk me home?” she called, trying to catch up with him, stopping at the door to the house, hand on the doorframe.

“Sorry Hester, I’m not feeling well,” he muttered, and she sagged.

“Cas, you know, that’s not fair. You said you’d walk me home! Something’s all funny about this!”

“It’s just stress!” He insisted, standing on the front walk, her suspicion of him too much of a worry to leave hanging. “Finals. Really, Hester. You know how hard I was working...I guess it just sort of hit me.”

Hester stared at him for a long moment and seamed her lips together.

“Get some rest then,” she said blandly after a moment and Cas smiled half-heartedly, glad to hear she was simply unimpressed with him and not accusing him of anything. “I’ll tell Anna you left. I’ll just stay here for the night.”

“That’s a good idea,” Cas finished. He waited for her to go inside after a brief goodnight kiss on

her cheek that had her blushing too hard for him to be comfortable, and then he started up the walk again. He paused for a moment, looking at the bike still parked on the lawn. He took a sharp breath, eyes roaming on the handles and the seat, and then began the long trek to his apartment off campus. He hated the commute, and his apartment wasn't so much an apartment as a hole in a leaking wall, but it was better than being at the mercy of the guys in the dorms. He'd had enough of being teased as a kid, and he wasn't about to make his ventures into adult life as bad as elementary school if he had anything to say about it.

Besides, he liked the privacy. No one to stare at him, to try and figure anything out. Just him and the endless studying he did to keep his dreams of being a doctor alive.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to think of something other than Dean's eyes, or the sharp curve of his jaw, or the way his shoulders were set when he was at ease, or how he had never felt the bolt of lightning shooting down his spine the moment they looked at each other with any other human being in his entire life. It was living that Lou Christie song. All his life he'd heard about chemistry and he'd thought he'd had it once or twice, but it was obvious he was very, very, wrong.

Forget looking angry; Dean Winchester was positively predatory.

He walked down the sidewalk, the only light coming from the streetlights lining the road and the occasional car passing by, headlights streaking past and flashing in his face, blinding him for a moment before he was able to see again. The cool air of the night blew past and nipped at his skin, and he tugged his hands out of his pockets to pull his sleeves over his fingers, crossing his arms over his chest. He passed a couple of people on his way home, a small group of men and women making their toward the Delta house, toward the party back where Dean was, probably still talking to Lisa. It shouldn't bother him that much, and he tried to ignore the small sinking feeling he got when he thought about Dean speaking with Lisa, leaned against the wall and smiling down at her.

He breathed and walked toward his apartment, kicking at stone on the sidewalk, watching as it veered off and landed in the grass. He walked on, passing lamp post after lamp post, and after the small group of people, there was no one else in sight. It was lonely, and a little frightening, to be walking home by himself in the dark, but he could handle this. Plus, it wasn't too far to his place, and if he quickened his pace, he could make it there in no time.

The streets were quiet and Castiel pulled his arms closer to his body, stopping for a brief moment to look behind him before he turned around to start walking again. Okay, so he was nervous, but you would be too if you had to walk home by yourself in the middle of the night. He laughed softly, shaking his head, and started to hum, attempting to keep himself busy and worry-free.

"Well shake it up, baby, now," he began to sing, but before he could any further, he was interrupted by the roar of an engine that nearly had him jumping out of his shoes. He stopped abruptly and turned on his heels, his eyes first meeting a wheel, and the further they traveled up, the more he recognized. It was a motorcycle, the color dark, but he also recognized who was on it. His eyes continued up, and he stopped when he reached the face, and even in the dull light of the street lamp he could see the green eyes of Dean Winchester.

"Need a ride?" he spoke loud enough to be heard over the engine, and Cas blinked, looking around him before looking back at Dean. "Yeah, you. You're the only one standing there."

Immediately, Cas could feel his face grow hot and he looked down at the ground, taking a step back. "No, no, that's okay."

"What?" Dean planted both feet on the ground and cut the engine, sitting low in the seat. "I

couldn't hear you."

"I said, 'No, that's okay.' I can walk home on my own, thank you," Castiel turned and shoved his hands into his pockets, but he only made it a few steps until he stopped.

"Wait!" Dean shouted after him, and Cas turned around. "C'mon, it's pretty lonely out here, and walking home alone is a bummer."

He shouldn't trust this guy, because he only just saw him at the party and he'd never talked to him before, but there he was, offering him a ride on that fancy famous bike of his.. Castiel shifted on his feet, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth before nodding and taking a step forward. And Dean grinned, the most wolfish thing that Castiel had ever seen in his life, and started up the engine of the motorcycle as Castiel threw his leg over the back and seated himself behind him.

"Hang on - !"

Tentatively, Castiel wrapped his arms around Dean's middle and held on as Dean revved the engine and kicked off, sending them flying down the street. Castiel remembered with horror that he had never been on a motorcycle before. He'd just gotten on – he hadn't thought much about it really, but he had *never* been on one before this moment.

He squeezed his arms tighter as they lurched forward, and it was obvious that Dean wasn't paying much attention to the speed limit.

"Relax!" he said over his shoulder as they crossed an intersection, still smiling a little, and Cas grimaced, swallowing as he let the tension in his shoulders go. He slid his hands back a little, hovering right by Dean's waist, just above the hem of his jacket. He felt Dean's sides jump as he laughed, probably at him, and he leaned into a turn, Cas trying his best not to freak out about how close it felt like they were to falling. Under his fright there was a hint of exhilaration though, something fluttering and new. Dean was so at ease - they hadn't said hardly two words to each other, but Dean either didn't care or was too practiced with giving random lifts to people to be bothered.

By the time Cas realized they had gone way past his apartment, he was too caught up in the moment to speak up about it. At some point he vaguely understood that Dean probably had no intention of taking him back to his apartment in the first place. His heart jumped in his chest and his breath caught at the implications. He licked his lips nervously and let his fingers skim under Dean's jacket. He felt Dean chuckle more than he heard it, and Cas stalled his movements, shocked when Dean leaned into the touch. Cas felt the firm muscle under his palm and tried to look at anything around them to keep himself from blushing. He'd never touched another person like that – not like this.

Not with the butterflies swelling so much in his stomach he thought they'd burst out of his mouth and fly away.

He watched the buildings streak past. If people followed them with their eyes it was only for a moment before they kept walking or driving. In a random burst of anxiety, Cas worried that someone would recognize them only to calm himself with the understanding that it was dark and they were probably going too fast anyway – besides, all the people who knew him were back at Delta House.

Here he was, with Dean Winchester, who didn't know him at all. Who, last he had seen, had been acting extremely interested in Lisa Braeden, but was now taking him somewhere on the back of his motorcycle.

A second later, he felt them slow down, coasting to a stop beside a lit diner that he had been to maybe once before with a few friends when they had ventured this far into the city.

Cas didn't understand.

He had thought ...he blushed and Dean cut the engine, turning around, eyebrows raised.

"I don't know about you, but I could go for a milkshake," Dean said, grinning, and Cas tried to swallow the lump in his throat again.

"P-pardon?" he replied, and Dean smiled wider, wilder, if that was possible.

"A milkshake? You know what that is, right?" Dean laughed at him, green eyes searching his face. Cas felt his face heat up even more as "I'm sorry, I don't really have any money..." Cas stammered and Dean waved him off, shoving his keys into his pockets.

"Good thing I plan on paying." Dean sighed, holding an arm out at the curb. "After you."

Cas reluctantly climbed off of the bike, trying not to squeeze too hard when he used Dean's shoulder for balance. He stood a foot or so from him watching as Dean stood, humming to himself. He oozed confidence, and Cas had to try his best not to just check him out every time he got the chance.

Dean just smirked, pulling a cigarette from a pack stowed in his jacket, the matches balanced in the other hand. He lit up and took a pull, offering it to Cas as they stood right outside the diner, the lights from inside casting shadows on the street.

"You smoke?"

"Not really," Cas replied. Dean shrugged and surged ahead, still humming to himself, singing a little under his breath, Cas following behind him, the bell above the diner door jingling as they entered.

"Ellen!" Dean called, and a woman turned behind the counter, smiling at him.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" she said, pouring coffee into the mug of the man hunched over the sports section of that day's paper. Cas fidgeted with his sweater as Ellen's eyes slid over him and then back to Dean, questioning.

"The usual?" she asked, but her voice held a tone that Cas knew was asking more than that.

Dean smiled at her, not bothered in the least, and then looked at Cas, waving him forward.

"Two please," he responded, and then he indicated for Cas to follow him to a booth towards the back, Dean sliding in on one side and Cas sliding in on the other.

"Jo working tonight?" Dean said to Ellen, leaning back, tapping his smoke out in an ashtray by the window. Cas watched him, astounded that Dean hadn't even asked for his name but was buying him a 'usual'.

"No, she's off. I'll have that right out for you boys..." Ellen trailed off, jotting something down and going through to the kitchen to put their order in. Dean smiled and brought his cigarette back up to his mouth, finally turning his eyes to Cas.

Cas took a breath and twisted his hands together on his lap.

"You'll like this place. Food's great," Dean started, blowing smoke out the side of his mouth. Cas nodded.

"I've been here before," he replied shortly, suddenly irritated with how presumptuous the whole thing was. He just wanted a ride home, and now he was out of his comfort zone and the idiot smiling at him was to blame.

"Have you?" Dean laughed. "Well, then you know."

"I guess."

Dean looked at him with hooded, lazy regard, eyes smoothing over Cas' face and then down, to where the table cut his torso off. Cas cleared his throat and Dean flicked his eyes back up to him.

"You know about me?" Dean said all at once, his smirk back, careless and curious. He pulled on his cigarette and Cas shifted a little, glancing out the window.

"Not much, really."

"*That's* surprising," Dean exclaimed, a little more animated. "Most people know all about me. Especially if they're at a Delta party. But you don't look like the usual. You must live in the library."

"I'm studying to become a Doctor," Cas interjected and Dean grinned, bared his teeth, almost like he was impressed or something.

There was a pause and Cas counted the grains of salt spilled on the table, distracting himself from Dean's eyes, until Dean leaned forward, palming his chin.

"So, you queer?"

Cas' face shot up and he inhaled sharply, staring at Dean who was smiling softly at him. Cas glanced away, his cheeks no doubt stained with red.

"So what if I am?" he whispered, and he couldn't believe he'd actually *said* it out loud. To Dean Winchester of all people. Fuck he was stupid. There was no reason for him to admit that, but – Dean didn't look offended. He didn't even look excited about it. It was as if he'd asked what classes Cas was taking or what records he listened to. Fuck, he was stupid.

Dean nodded and shrugged. "I figured. Last time someone looked at me like you did at Lisa's, I got laid." Cas' eyes widened. "I don't even know you!" he hissed, "I just was trying to walk home, and you picked me up and – !"

"Now I'm buying you a milkshake," Dean finished for him. "And fries too." He tapped his cigarette out. "Pretty good for a first date, if you ask me."

"Wha- First date?" Cas choked out, turning to look at Dean with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open.

Dean only grinned at him, shrugging again "First date."

He said it so matter-of-factly, like this is the only reason why he offered Cas a ride- just so that he could take him to this diner and buy him some french fries and a milkshake, and then claim it as their first date. They didn't even know each other. Cas only knew about Dean from what Hester had told him back at the party, and Dean hadn't even asked for his name yet.

"You don't even know my name."

"Then tell me."

Castiel narrowed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, but Dean didn't falter at all. He just sat there, watching Castiel. The way Dean was staring at him made him nervous and his voice faltered as he spoke.

"C-Castiel."

"Castiel," Dean repeated, easily rolling his name off of his tongue, and the way that he said it sent chills down Castiel's spine. It made his cheeks grow red and butterflies flutter around in his stomach.

"So is this why you picked me up? To bring me to a diner to get a milkshake and some fries?"

"Basically." Dean leaned back in his seat too, and he just looked so nonchalant, like he didn't have a care in the world. He didn't seem to care about being out in public with Cas, buying him food and claiming this to be their 'first date' out loud. "I saw you at the party and you looked, well, interesting. But then you left before I could talk to you. I was going to let you go, but, I figured, 'Hey, why not?' You only live once, right?"

"You weren't even planning on taking me home, were you?"

"Not yet."

Castiel laughed softly, shaking his head as he turned back to look outside of the window. The street lights were barely illuminating the sidewalk, and a car passed by.

"That's not how you ask to take someone out."

"What?" And this time, Dean faltered.

"It's better to ask politely. Not offer them a ride a home, and then just *not* take them home."

"Well, I am actually planning to take you home afterward, if that makes anything better."

"I don't think that counts."

Dean didn't say anything for a few moments, and Castiel turned to look at him again, smiling softly when he saw that Dean had his mouth slightly agape, as if he didn't even know what to say.

"But, y'know, this is kinda nice. I was pretty hungry anyway." Castiel shrugged and Dean straightened up, grinning the way he had been before, bordering on feral.

Castiel pushed his glasses up with his finger and tapped his nails on the formica, a tense silence falling over them.

"So, tell me Castiel, what's your story?" Dean asked after a moment, jamming the remainder of his cigarette into the ashtray, one arm thrown over the back of the booth. He tilted his head at Castiel, inclining him to speak. Castiel stopped drumming on the table top and tried to think of something to say. He wasn't really the kind of person with a story – he was just going to school. He was going to become a doctor. He lived alone in a shitty apartment and pretended to touch girls at parties.

This was probably the most interesting thing that had ever happened to him, so he supposed he

might as well tell the truth.

"I'm sitting at a booth with you, and this is the first time that has ever happened," he began, noting the way Dean's eyebrows shot up. "Ever."

Dean huffed and squinted at him.

"Don't tell me this is your first *date* ever."

Castiel stared at Dean despite the flush rising up his collar. Dean's eyes widened.

"You're kidding. Face like yours?"

Castiel remained silent and Dean covered his mouth with his hand, chuckling and looking at the counter for a few seconds.

"Well, damn," he said into his palm, looking back at Castiel, his smile peeking out between his fingers. "Guess that makes me kind of special, huh."

Castiel rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

"Just because it's my first 'date' doesn't mean I'm an idiot. I could have had my first date with anybody," he growled and Dean leaned forward, elbows on the table, slowly entering Castiel's orbit.

"Oh, I'm sure you were pick of the litter with all the girls. You've got that blue blood look. Too bad you weren't interested..."

Castiel opened his mouth, but just as he was about to retort, a milkshake and a plate of fries were set down on the table.

"Behave yourself. And sit up!" Ellen said, slapping Dean lightly on the shoulder before she smiled at Castiel. "Don't worry, hon, he's all bark no bite."

For a moment Castiel was stunned at having been interrupted, but soon relief washed over him because he really was not in the mood for arguing at the moment. Especially with Dean Winchester, who was already starting to get under his skin. He quietly thanked Ellen, pulling his milkshake closer and staring down at the tabletop, because what if she had heard what they were talking about? She seemed down to earth enough, so maybe she wouldn't care?

But he'd been wrong about that sort of thing before.

"I mean it, Dean," Ellen warned, placing her hands on her hips and staring down at Dean as he pulled his milkshake toward him, staring up at Ellen with a sort of sheepish grin. "If I see you causing any trouble, I'm not letting you in here anymore."

"Okay, okay," Dean grumbled, pushing his straw around in his milkshake, taking a sip from it. "I'll behave myself."

"You better." She turned to Castiel and smiled at him, and he smiled nervously back before she turned around and walked through the doors back into the kitchen.

Castiel turned his attention back to Dean, only to find that Dean was staring directly at him, his eyes falling to rest on his lips, which were casually poised over his straw. Castiel jerked back, and Dean laughed.

"Oh, don't mind me, just enjoy your milkshake."

Dean pulled a fry from the plate and pushed it between his lips, chewing it slowly, his eyes never leaving Castiel. And Castiel awkwardly put his lips around his straw, looking anywhere but Dean. The sight had to have been hilarious, but really, he didn't give a damn.

"So," Dean started, pushing another fry into his mouth. "Have you lived in California your whole life, or did you just move here for school?"

"Why are you talking with food in your mouth?"

"What?"

"It's disgusting."

Castiel looked up at him, pushing his glasses up, and Dean swallowed, staring down at him.

"Happy? And are you going to answer my question?"

"Yes... And I've lived here my entire life." He moved the straw around in his glass, pushing the whipped cream further down into the milkshake, mixing it up. "I'm planning on leaving when I graduate, though."

"Oh, where to?"

"The east coast, maybe. I don't know. New York's always seemed interesting."

"New York? Pretty expensive up there, and it snows a lot, I heard."

"It snows here, too."

And Dean blushed, actually blushed, and Cas couldn't help but laugh.

"Yeah- Well, whatever."

Castiel picked up a fry and chewed at it, humming softly. "So, what are you planning on doing?"

Dean sipped at his milkshake, pushing it away afterward.

"Nothing, really. Well, hoping to go pro with the whole racing thing. I am pretty good at it, after all."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And I'm really wanting to buy a better place when I save up enough money. That is, after I send my brother to school. He's been going on and on about wanting to become a lawyer."

Castiel found himself perceiving Dean with a soft sense of surprise. He didn't think that Dean Winchester was that kind of person – Hester had mentioned him taking care of his brother, but sending said brother to law school?

That was a commitment.

"What's your brother like?" Cas continued, still twirling the fry in his fingers, watching Dean, before taking another bite.

"Sammy?" Dean said, and his eyes lit from the inside out at the name. "He's a good kid. Real

good kid. Smart.” He trailed off, taking a fry and dipping it into his milkshake, considering the combination before eating it in one go. “...Well, you know, smarter than me, but that ain’t so hard.”

He shook his sleeve out and took his fries two at a time from that point on, always swiping a bit of milkshake onto them. Cas snorted at the action and let himself have another sip of his own drink.

“What about you?” Dean continued between helpings. “You got family?”

Cas pecked at his plate nervously before sighing at the question; he flicked a grain of salt off of the table while he went about forming a decent answer to the query.

“Not exactly,” he began, reaching to pull a napkin out of the dispenser and wipe his hands with it. He heard the sound of Dean eating, and the buzz of the light overhead and the metallic clank of someone putting quarters into the jukebox at the back of the restaurant.

The melancholy sound of a man’s voice on the radio, speaking in the night time slowness about the war slowly faded out. The needle scratched on the record and some old Julie London song came on, filling the diner with a sweeping, sad, sound.

“I mean, I do,” Cas spoke, trying to explain but failing at it, “but we don’t talk.”

“Cause you like men?” Dean said seriously, the tone of his voice countered by him biting off the cherry on his milkshake. Cas, without thinking, put his own on a napkin and slid it across to him, watching as he bit that too, laying the stems side by side.

“Yes.” His voice was quieter than it had been. He stared at the stems and, subsequently, Dean’s fingers where they rested nearby, noticing the calluses he had and the slightly more tanned areas of skin caused by his gloves.

Dean lit another cigarette and drew on it, the smoke floating across the table when Cas waved it away with the back of his hand. Dean didn’t respond, and Cas didn’t continue, and Cas was glad for the cleansing silence.

“You done?” Dean mumbled around his smoke, gesturing at Cas’ half-finished food. Castiel smiled, shaking off the dull sense of hurt from thoughts of his family, focusing instead on Dean. His heart thudded a little with that spark of attraction and his mouth felt too dry and there was that strange left over taste of sugar on his teeth.

“Are you bored with me?” he teased, unable to keep the slight tremble from his voice, watching Dean pull out his wallet and leave a few bills tucked under a plate.

Dean smirked, but remained silent, standing up, Cas followed the movement, his knee knocking awkwardly on the edge of the table. Ellen wasn’t at the counter – some other waitress was, and Dean didn’t bother saying goodbye to her and made his way out of the diner instead, the bell jangling. He was being so quiet, and it made Castiel uneasy – had he done something wrong?

He probably shouldn’t have mentioned his family like that. Dean’s own dad was some kind of deadbeat, right? Maybe he should have been more sensitive. Lied or something. Cas felt the chilly, damp air hit him and his stomach flipped.

That had been his first date and judging by his host’s silence it had gone just swimmingly.

Cas stopped walking when Dean didn’t immediately go to his motorcycle. Maybe the date wasn’t over. He froze. The implication rose up around him like the smoke pillowing from Dean’s cigarette. His shoes crunched on the concrete as he toed at it and he swallowed thickly. Dean

pushed one of his hands into his pockets, gazing at him, his face illuminated by the diner's neon sign.

"You sure you don't want a smoke? I have plenty." Dean broke the quiet and Cas shook his head.

"No."

Dean grinned at him, the end of his cigarette glowing dull red. "If you really want to know why I brought you here it's because I wanted to see what you'd do."

Cas blushed, hoping the shadow of the diner covered it.

"What was I going to do?" Cas responded. "It's not like you did anything unsavory. You took me to a diner."

Dean tilted his head back, laughing, and he dropped his smoke, stubbing it out with the toe of his boot. "Unsavory." His eyebrows rose. "Did you think I was going to be unsavory?" Cas didn't say anything immediately, blush darkening, and Dean laughed again, harder this time. Cas was feeling panicky and cornered by the sound of it and his chest was tight from the embarrassment, his face hot.

"You thought I was going to take you home with me or something, didn't you – oh, I can see it, I bet you did. Oh, I'm sorry baby. Not tonight," he cackled, utterly amused, it seemed, by Cas' ignorance.

"I didn't *ask* you for a ride," Cas grit out. "You asked me, you jackass!"

He watched for some sign of remorse but Dean just laughed harder, and Castiel was not going to be made a fool of by someone who barely knew him. He shook out his fists and pulled out his own wallet, picking out a bill and crumpling it furiously. He walked forward and shoved it at Dean's chest. "Here's for gas, and for a shitty milkshake. Hope you're proud of yourself. You *really* know how to treat someone."

Dean seemed to scramble for a moment, his laughter cut off and replaced by a sharp, "Hey!" as he attempted to grab the money, almost dropping it as Cas turned and started walking the other direction.

Idiot. He was a fucking *idiot*. And Dean Winchester was an even bigger idiot. He'd just wasted time he could have spent sleeping; he'd been up all week studying and this was going to be his night for a break, not a night to get patronized by some pro motorcycle wannabe wearing tight jeans and some kind of beautiful smile.

He was smarter than that, and Dean Winchester was trouble, and the attraction he felt was just a side effect of his distrust, he was sure. His heart was skipping beats because Dean was an asshole, not because he was someone worth getting on the back of a motorcycle for.

"Hey!" Dean called, and Cas heard the thump of his boots as he ran up the sidewalk, trying to catch up, cursing under his breath as he backtracked. The engine of the motorcycle ripped through the dark, but Cas kept walking, even as he heard Dean slide out onto the empty street, speeding up and walking his bike alongside the curb, keeping one eye on oncoming traffic, the other on Cas.

Cas stopped and stared at him.

"You're on the wrong side of the road!" Cas shouted, crossing his arms, and Dean stalled, staring at him, still keeping a watch for cars. "You're going to get yourself killed!"

“Yeah, well, I wanted to explain!” Dean called back. “Besides, I probably deserve to get hit,” he continued, relaxing when he saw the streets were still clear, “because I know I’m a dick, ok? I shouldn’t have said that. But you’re cute, and I don’t know...” He trailed off and looked shyly down the street. Cas swallowed, arms tightening over his chest. “You don’t know what?”

“It’s been a while, ok?” He glanced back at Cas. “It’s been a while since I’ve been interested in someone and you’re just – you’re really cute. You’re really cute and when you’re all worked up you’re even more cute, and I don’t know, it’s just been a while.”

He shrugged pathetically, and then put his hand on his head, petting his hair nervously, still looking down at his speedometer.

Cas took a deep breath and fidgeted. “You were rude.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

Cas squinted, and he could tell that Dean was being sincere; his eyes said it. He deflated a little, scuffing his shoe on the sidewalk.

“I know I fucked up, but can I ask you something?” Dean said, leaning back on his bike, and when Cas looked up again, Dean was back to smiling, though it wasn’t nearly as confident.

“Sure,” Cas conceded with hesitation.

“C’mere.”

Cas took a few steps forward.

“I don’t bite, come closer,” Dean laughed, and Cas worried the inside of his cheek, moving up alongside the rumbling motorcycle. “I wanna make it up to you,” Dean continued in a rough whisper once Cas was near enough, placing his hand on Cas’ waist. Tingles slithered over Cas’ skin at the proximity, from the base of his skull to the weak spot at the back of his knees.

“You wanna,” Cas exhaled, trying to remember what he was going to say - but the words got lost as his eyes roamed over Dean’s chest and down towards his pelvis. His body felt strange and cottony with that frightening thrill again. Dean didn’t waste time with explanations, his curious fingers doing most of the talking as they played with the buttons of Cas’ sweater, walking up his stomach that jumped under the touch. Dean’s eyes followed his fingers all the way to Cas’ neck where he tugged at the collar of his undershirt.

“You ever kissed a boy before?”

Cas stopped breathing, staring at Dean’s face for an immeasurable moment. He saw the question swimming in front of him, and he had figured this was where this was going, but just like every time before it didn’t hit him till it was staring him down. His first kiss – god, he’d been oblivious to it until the other boy’s mouth had been on his. He nodded once, and the gravity of the question, the growl of Dean’s voice, seemed to roll over him in a delayed wave. His eyes went heavenward and Dean tugged at his tie, pulling him closer, down towards his mouth.

“It’s been a while,” he stuttered, attempting to be funny and mimic Dean’s excuse from earlier. God, it had been – not since high school; his thoughts started to scatter, his eyes still on the sky above them until a hand tilted his chin down. “Relax. It’s just like riding a bike,” Dean hushed, kissing the corner of his mouth, and Cas exhaled sharply again, attempting to let the tension in his shoulders go.

"Just-" Cas breathed, and Dean pulled away enough to look at his face, his eyes unnaturally bright

in the dark.

“You don’t -?”

“No!” Cas blurted, a little too loudly, “I mean – *yes*, I mean...”

Dean stared at him questioningly.

“I do, I do, *I do*,” he shook his head, Dean was so attractive it was really unfair, “Just, not here, anybody...anybody could see.” Dean looked past him at the alley between buildings and after a moment of consideration nodded.

“Move,” he said gently, and Cas stepped back, watching as Dean maneuvered his bike over the curb, pulling into the dark space. He cut the engine and it purred and popped for a moment before going silent and Cas heard him step off of the bike, his shadow a darker outline against the shadows of the dim corridor. He raised his hand and beckoned Cas over. Cas looked up and down the street and crossed the short distance towards Dean. His breathing picked up as he got closer and Dean smiled at him reassuringly.

"I'm rusty," Cas laughed nervously, once they were close again, and he could feel heat creeping up his neck. He couldn't see Dean's reaction because he was currently brushing the very top of his throat with his mouth, and Cas felt his the butterflies beat their wings at the walls of his stomach. Dean continued his way up, pressing his lips to the corner of his mouth again. He must have made a face because Dean was laughing against his cheek, and walked him backwards until Cas' back pressed up against the wall of the alley. He gasped and Dean put his hands on his waist, rubbing circles with his thumbs through his sweater, Cas' fingers pulling at his jacket, eyes squeezing shut.

"Relax," Dean repeated, a rush of breath on his skin, and Cas shuddered; his fingers tightened on Dean's jacket, the leather soft and pliant beneath his fingers, obviously well worn. "Go with the flow," Dean continued, the words ending in a chuckle. Cas tried to do as he was told. He loosened his hold and melted against the wall, and as he acclimated his smile surfaced, Dean pressing in closer, the heat rolling off his body making up for the April chill.

He gave a short nod, and then Dean's lips were over his, and Castiel's hands involuntarily tightened on Dean's sleeves before he remembered to loosen them. His fingers fluttered for a moment before coming to rest on Dean's hips, sliding beneath the hem of his shirt. Dean made a soft noise, a sort of groan, and Castiel slipped his fingers into his belt loops, tugging him closer. Dean moved so easily; in a blink they were flush.

And it was sort of weird at first, because Castiel didn't remember what he was supposed to be doing, but the way that he could feel Dean smiling against his lips made his legs feel weak, and the way that he could feel Dean's hips against his own made his head swim. Dean laughed softly and pulled away, fingers searching beneath Cas' sweater and then un-tucking his shirt until they were sliding on skin, leaving hot trails where they skated.

"It's alright, just- we'll take it slow, okay?"

Cas nodded and Dean grinned, hands finding a firmer grip beneath his shirt and resting on his hips, the cool air against his skin making Cas shudder slightly. When Dean moved in to kiss him harder, Cas moved with him, leaning forward the slightest bit and capturing Dean's lips with his own. It spurred Dean on, hands moving and gliding over his sides and lower back, and Cas slid his fingers through Dean's hair, gasping, giving Dean the chance to lick into his mouth. His glasses smushed against his face, angling awkwardly across his eyes, but Cas couldn't find it in him to care.

Their tongues tangled and Cas let his hands rest on the back of Dean's neck, holding him close, Dean pushing his hands farther up Cas' shirt, ghosting over the skin of his stomach, fingers bumping over his ribs, pulling a shudder out of him. Cas moaned when Dean withdrew one of his hands only to pull on his hair, tugging in just the right way that had Cas pressing against him, chin angling so they slotted together more fully. His shoulders were biting into the brick, his nails scraping at the short hairs at the base of Dean's skull. Something was lit under him, he could feel it – a sudden, devouring, need to be closer. He panted against Dean's mouth, but Dean only allowed him a second before he was pulled back into the slick slide of his tongue, their breaths passing into one another, their hands gripping hard at each other. It went on and on, until finally Cas realized they had stopped and he was staring at Dean and Dean was grinning, obviously pleased.

"So much for going slow," Dean laughed, his voice deep and hoarse, and Cas could feel his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment.

"Well," Cas coughed lightly. "I may not have been on a date...but I guess I have more experience in that department."

He slid his palms down Dean's chest; fingers curling around the front of his leather jacket, glancing up through his lashes.

"You're good though," he nearly purred, leaning in just a hair, considering what it would mean to kiss him again, "very good."

"Well, 'm glad that I could appease you."

"Me too."

Cas let go of Dean's jacket, but before he could move to do it himself, Dean had already adjusted his frames, straightening his glasses on his face.. He let his hands linger on the sides of Cas' face, gazing at him adoringly, making Cas' stomach squirm.

"So, are you going to take me home now?"

"Hm, I dunno. Maybe we could go back to my place."

"I just met you, Dean. Don't be an ass about this."

"Okay, okay," Dean laughed and pulled away, moving toward his motorcycle while Cas straightened himself out. He ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it back down, and smoothed his hands over the front of his sweater, attempting to make himself at least a little presentable just in case they ran into someone he knew.

Dean started up his motorcycle, and Cas moved over to climb onto the back of it, wrapping his arms around his waist and holding tight when Dean pushed off. His arms tightened when they went over the curb, and he swore that he could hear Dean laughing over the roar of the engine.

Lights streamed past quickly, Dean obviously ignoring the speed limit, but the ride was smooth and exhilarating, and Cas leaned back slightly to actually enjoy the ride. They drove for a ways before Dean spoke up, and Cas almost had to struggle to hear him over the engine.

"So where do you live?"

"What?"

"Where do you live?"

Cas glanced around, trying to focus on a street sign before they passed it before his attention was caught by the liquor store that marked a block from his apartment. Its neon sign flickered up ahead, about two streets away and Cas put his hand on Dean's shoulder to get his attention as they approached.

"Make right on 10<sup>th</sup>," Cas directed, and Dean nodded, drifting into the other lane, cutting around the corner in an effortless turn. Cas watched for his building, pointing down the block at the bleak, grey, building on the corner.

"That one," he instructed, "way down there where that truck is parked."

Dean slowed, pulling towards the curb. He turned towards the building once they'd stopped, looking up, and Cas watched him, fixated on his profile.

"Which one?"

Cas glanced upwards and chuckled, not bothering to remove his hand from Dean's waist just yet.

"You can't see it from the street. I have a very nice view of an empty lot," he explained. "Very exclusive."

"Ahhh," Dean exhaled, sweeping his eyes back down to Cas'. "Well, let's walk around. Show me."

Cas stared at him intently.

"Why?" he answered cautiously, trying to gauge Dean's interest. He pulled his hand off Dean's hip and scratched an invisible itch on his knee, blunt nails scraping on the fabric of his pants. Dean scoffed loudly and elbowed him, physically insisting he get off the motorcycle, which Cas did, still unsure when Dean followed, tucking his keys back in his jacket.

Dean nodded at the spot where the sidewalk curved around the block.

"Go on. Show me."

Cas put his hands on his hips, blinking at Dean.

"You are stupidly bossy, did you know that?" he started, shaking his head as he gave Dean a once over.

Dean stared at him, his head going forward expectantly, holding an arm out towards the other side of the building. He waved his arm.

"After you?"

Cas rolled his eyes and started walking, shoving into Dean's shoulder as he went by him.

"If you are doing this so you have a discreet place to kill me, I'll never forgive you," he grumbled, listening to the scrape of Dean's shoes as he followed.

They walked in silence, and then the field appeared, stereotypically urban with its discarded tires and half-down chain link fence that rattled as Cas stepped over it and into the shin-high grass.

"Be careful, there could be all sorts of fun things," Cas said conversationally over the sound of crickets. "Broken glass, old nails, rabid dogs lying in wait."

“Wait, there are dogs?” Dean exclaimed, and there was a crunch as he stopped and Cas turned over his shoulder. Dean had his hands out of his pockets and held up in defense, “I don’t do dogs.”

Cas shook his head briefly.

“I was joking,” he began, waving him on until they’d gotten to the point where Cas could show off his so luxurious apartment. He gestured to the top left corner, jolting as Dean pressed right up behind him, dropping his mouth to his ear and then his neck, any notion of personal space neglected.

“I’m showing you,” Cas yelped. “Stop, stop, what if someone sees?” he hissed, conscious of the windows right there. Anyone could look down and see, but oh, that was part of the thrill, wasn’t it? Dean pulling his collar aside to run his lips against the skin there and the risk of someone opening the window and seeing, and Cas had to open his mouth again. “Dean,” he rushed, and Dean laughed darkly, lifting his head to follow Cas’ hand.

“Sorry,” came the breathy reply. “Got distracted.”

Cas cleared his throat and pointed at the window.

“That one, fourth floor,” he muttered and Dean made some low noise of approval.

“Fire escape,” he breathed. “That’s good. I can do a fire escape.”

“What do you even mean?” Cas retorted, trying to worm out of his grip, but Dean held him and he gave up and gave in to the lazy kisses right below his ear. His hand found Dean’s on his torso and he covered it, Dean sighing into his neck.

“When can I see you again?” Dean whispered, and Cas opened his eyes, not realizing that he’d closed them. Dean’s hand slid up his side and then back down, Dean bending over his shoulder, pressing his face against Cas’. “I wanna take you home - come home with me, please.”

“I can’t,” Cas interrupted sharply. “Not tonight. I’m tired and if we stay out here someone will see us and call the police.”

“Let ‘em,” came the reply, stirring something in Cas’ insides, and Dean’s hand went up and down again and Cas tilted his head, nosing at Dean’s cheek, “Let me take you home. I’ll make it so good. I’ll make it so good you’ll forget all about being tired.”

“I barely know you,” Cas hushed. “I’m no good at casual sex.”

He laughed it self-deprecatingly but Dean didn’t seem to care. Dean was too busy ducking his head, playing with the edge of Cas’ sweater.

“Well, then when can I see you again?” Dean repeated, bashful, and Cas cocked his head in curiosity.

“Why do you want to see me again?” Cas marveled, and Dean pulled back, staring at him in confusion. Cas turned and broke free from his arms, “Why would you want to see me again?”

Dean ran a hand over his mouth and glanced at the grass.

“I know I’m not perfect,” he shrugged, “I know I’m far from it, but,” Cas watched him swallow – Dean Winchester was being *shy* – and then meet Cas’ eyes with complete sincerity, “I’ll be good to you. Give me a chance. I’ll be really good to you. I *want* to be good to you.”

“But *why*?” Cas stressed, and Dean’s eyes darkened.

“I don’t know *why*,” he bit, “but it seems worth it.”

Cas’ mouth fell open.

“You don’t know anything about me,” he sighed rubbing his eyes, “you just met me, I could be everything you hate.”

“Bullshit.”

Cas risked a look and he took a deep breath, the grass shivering as Dean walked towards him, taking his face in his hands.

“Bullshit.”

“You don’t know that,” Cas continued shaking his head, pulling at Dean’s wrists. “This is stupid. You just met me. I just met you. We made out. So wh-.”

“*So* maybe I’m crazy about you,” Dean insisted. “God, if you weren’t so stubborn I’d change your mind.”

“This isn’t about sleeping with you,” Cas grumbled, and Dean breathed a laugh, pushing their foreheads together.

“Listen to me,” Dean whispered, “I don’t know what it is about you but I’m already going nuts. I can feel it. I could do so good by you, baby - give me the chance to do good by you.”

“You’ll hate me,” Cas interrupted, and Dean shook his head.

“I could never.”

“You will. I’m stubborn and cold and I get irritated –!”

Dean kissed him, hard. You never fucking shut up.”

“See?” Cas whispered, and Dean kissed him again, stealing all the breath out of him.

“When can I see you?”

“Friday,” Cas conceded. “You can see me Friday. That’s one day to wait.”

“What kind of music do you like?” Dean asked, melting against him, “Tell me everything; tell me everything about you.”

Cas pulled back, his arms around Dean’s neck. He brushed the hair out of Dean’s face with the flat of his hand.

“I like Elvis,” he grinned, and he felt crazy and reckless as he did so. Dean dipped down and kissed him as gently as Cas had ever been kissed in his life, and Cas curled towards him.

“Elvis,” he repeated. “I can dig Elvis.”

Cas swore as the kiss deepened, the grass rustling with a cold breeze, Cas only finding a reason to stop when light broke the dark from someone’s window.

“You’ve gotta go,” Cas muttered against Dean’s persistent mouth and frantic hands, his lips

tingling and feeling too-warm. "You can't, you have to go." His voice felt slow and syrupy, and Dean resisted when he tried to push away, but he released him, finally. Cas stood breathing heavily, Dean leaning in to touch his lips one last time, incapable of denying himself.

"Friday," he said, and Cas nodded, and then he was watching Dean's back as he left. His mind was blank for a blessed moment, Dean disappearing around the corner. He remained still until the roar of the engine faded down the street, Cas following, staggering up the stairs to the fourth floor.

He paused right outside his door and leaned his head against it, forehead pressed to the wood. The hinges let out a slight, rusted, squeak.

Friday.

He pulled his keys out of his pocket and crammed the right one into the lock, fighting against it for a moment, having to force it open when the hinges refused to budge; it creaked as he pushed it open, and he locked it behind him once he was across the threshold. The cool air nipped at his skin, and he shivered slightly, immediately moving over to the thermostat in the shirt hallway, tapping at it.

It wasn't working, as usual.

Cas sighed and moved around his small apartment, turning lights on and straightening things out before moving into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets. He pulled a mug out and a bag of tea, setting a pot of water onto the stove to boil after struggling to light a match with his cold fingers. The warmth from the fire was enough to keep him in place in front of the stove, grumbling to himself about speaking to the landlord to get the thermostat fixed because he was not going to go another night having to bundle himself up in blankets just so he could sleep comfortably. He longed for the balm of summer.

Once the water began to boil, he turned the fire off and carefully - very, very carefully - poured the water into his mug, setting it into the sink when it was empty. Someday he'd buy a kettle, but he'd never had the time to make much tea lately with having to study for finals, or the money to splurge on something like a kettle. But now he's done, and maybe he could scrape up a little to get a used one. He made his way into the living room, setting his mug down onto the coffee table, and moved to the turn table on the far wall. Rubbing his lip he flipped through his collection of vinyl's until he found the one he was looking for.

He smiled down at the record and set it up, gently placing the needle onto it before turning away and walking to the couch, picking his mug up off of the coffee table along the way. He grabbed the blanket from the back of the couch as he sat down on it, pulling it around himself as he settled in. The gentle sounds of Elvis' voice filled the room, and Cas hummed softly as he pulled at the string on the teabag in his mug, moving it around before blowing at the hot liquid, taking a small sip to test the temperature.

It wasn't long before he finished the tea, his body warm and content as he set it back down on the coffee table and settled against the couch, closing his eyes and enjoying the music as it played throughout the room. His thoughts drifted though. For a moment he swore that he could feel hands on him, and he jerked slightly, opening his eyes, but soon he settled back down. His mind wandered to the previous events of the night, meeting Dean, Dean taking him to the diner, and everything afterward. Dean's hands on his body, his lips on his own, and it was thrilling at the time; it had his pulse quickening, his breathing speeding up, and he wanted it again.

He woke up the next morning with his face pressed into the cushion of his couch, his neck stiff and sore from sleeping in one position for too long. He groaned and rubbed at his face with the back of his hand, stretching his legs out on the couch and wincing when his joints protested. There

was a soft sort of hum coming from the speakers of the turntable, the record spinning and the needle back in its resting position.

With another groan he pushed himself off of the couch and wrapped his blanket around himself, the hard wood of the floor cold against his feet. He soldiered on to the turntable to turn it off; with a flick of a switch, it was silenced. He absently scratched at his stomach, yawning, as he made his way into the kitchen, passing the thermostat on the way to give it a couple of taps; nothing happened.

He opened the fridge but then he froze, remember the events of the previous night. It was a little fuzzy at first, his mind sluggish from sleep, but the images surfaced. The diner, a motorcycle, and Dean Winchester; Dean Winchester's hands, and his mouth, the half-moon of his smile in the dark, the spark of his eyes caught against the end of his cigarette. Cas pressed his fingers to his lips, and he could feel heat crawling up his neck at the thought of Dean kissing him. He hadn't kissed anyone since high school, and the first guy he kissed since was someone that he hardly even knew.

"Dammit," he hissed, closing the fridge, trudging back to the couch in the cold of his apartment, keeping the blanket tight around him as he flopped down onto the hand-me-down sofa, lying across it and pressing his face into the cushion once more, huffing. Dean wanted to see him again, and Cas had promised him Friday, which was growing closer every second. Tomorrow. Cas made some embarrassing sound, pulling the blanket over his head.

He was an idiot.

He shouldn't have agreed to it, but he'd been so caught up in the urgent tone of Dean's voice at the time and the way his body seemed to bend effortlessly under his hands. Cas couldn't have said no to him. Cas rolled over and rubbed his face. He needed to shower. He'd spilled something on his sweater – it smelled like booze – and he was in dire need of shave.

Maybe Dean was just being impulsive. Maybe he'd forget about it and not show up.

Something snagged at his heart when he thought of that; he didn't want Dean to forget about him. It didn't seem fair that Dean might get to brush him aside and Cas would remember him for the rest of his natural life.

He hadn't been kissed like *that* in a long, long, time; maybe ever.

He hoisted himself off of the couch. There was no sense in acting like anything was out of the ordinary. The most he could do was go about his day and then deal with whatever Dean decided to do.

He glanced at the clock on his night table, picking it up to check the time without his glasses. Quarter past ten. He hadn't slept too late. He sighed and set it back down and unbuttoned his sweater, pulling the shade down on his window as he did. He had to wait by the shower for at least five minutes for the shrieking pipes to warm up, and even then it was lukewarm by the time he actually got in. He cursed, yanking the curtain behind him, and soaped up as fast as he could, letting the water hit his head and the back of his neck. As he acclimated he started to sing a little, working the soap into his hair, blinking it out of his eyes as he did.

He stopped, hesitating for a moment, tilting his head.

"What?" he said, yanking the curtain aside, turning the water down to hear better. The sound came again and, confused, Cas quickly rinsed and grabbed a towel, struggling to dry himself off as someone pounded on the door.

“*Hold on!*” he called, attempting to find his glasses in the mess of his apartment, pulling his clothes on at the same time. His shirt was wet and clung to him and he had to seriously work to get into his pants, shimmying into them, yanking his shirt down, not bothering with the button or fly. The persistent knocking kept coming and Cas finally found his glasses where they were stuck between the couch cushions and shoved them onto his face as he went to the door, hoping they weren’t too smudged up from his fingers. After nearly knocking the mug off his end table as he ran past it, he undid the deadbolt and heaved it open.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, and then he cut off, his whole face suddenly lost to confusion. “Excuse me?”

Dean Winchester grinned back, stepping forward, forcing himself into the apartment.

“I know you said Friday,” he began, closing the door behind him. Cas glanced over Dean’s shoulder at the door, and then let his eyes return to Dean’s face. He was still grinning, hands shoved in his pockets, rocking on his heels almost boyishly, “but I couldn’t wait.”

Cas opened his mouth, trying to find an appropriate response, and a trickle of water slithered down his temple and landed in his collar.

“You decided,” he kept his voice even despite his shock, “to just come today. Because you couldn’t *wait*.”

Dean nodded and then frowned, leaning forward to pinch a strand of Cas’ hair between his fingers.

“Why are you wet?” he asked, wiping the water on his jeans. Cas sighed and adjusted his glasses more comfortably.

“I was just getting in the shower when you started knocking,” Cas explained, and Dean smirked.

“Well, don’t mind me if you’d like to get back to it,” he joked, but Cas could see the lingering seriousness under his words. He blushed and rolled his eyes.

“No thank you.”

Dean walked past him, looking around Cas’ dingy flat, his face approving. He went to the turntable and looked at the record, and then to the cupboards, sifting through them, and then, Cas following his every move, he peeked into the bedroom before coming back out and going back to the turntable. Cas’ mind was wrought with things he meant to say to break the silence, but Dean didn’t seem bothered by the quiet. He merely seemed curious, taking in everything that Cas apparently had to offer. He clicked on the light in the kitchen and then clicked it off again, smiling and wheeling on Cas with a smooth turn of his body.

“Nice place,” he commented and Cas narrowed his gaze suspiciously.

“It does the job. The thermostat doesn’t work though,” he added, gesturing to the little dial on the wall.

Dean laughed, sidling over and tapping at the little metal fixture.

“I’ll fix it for you.”

Cas snorted and Dean lifted his head.

“What? You think I can’t?”

“I think you’re bold,” Cas scoffed, “just showing up without asking – didn’t even call...”

Cas trailed off, Dean advancing on him, putting his hands on Cas’ hips. He lifted his shirt a little and Cas flushed scarlet when Dean saw his pants were undone. He raised his eyes to Cas’ and moved his eyebrows suggestively.

“...I didn’t have time to do it up properly,” Cas tried to cover, but Dean’s deft fingers were already wiggling the zipper up and buttoning them for him. He smoothed his hand over Cas’ lower abdomen and then Cas’ head was tilting back as Dean pressed their mouths together. He sighed happily and Cas’ fingers fluttered around his forearms, the leather familiar but still such a new sensation.

“I don’t have your number,” Dean said, pulling back, his smile crooked and carefree. His hands wandered around Cas’ waist, dipping down over the top of his ass and Cas sucked in a sharp breath. “Besides, I figured I’d be a nice surprise. I couldn’t sleep all night.” His words were muffled as he pulled them closer, rocking slightly, his mouth ghosting over Cas’ neck. “You had me up all night, you know.”

Cas shifted, his body giving in, moving to give Dean more access. His breath panted against Dean’s shoulder and he moved his hands from Dean’s forearms to his back, lost in the sensation of Dean’s arms around him.

“You’re crazy,” he marveled. “I’m not anybody special, and, even if I were, what makes you think you can just come around here whenever you –ah-” Dean bit gently at his lip and Cas clutched him, head swimming.

“Cas, I’m mad about you,” Dean whispered, and he kissed the skin he’d nipped at, soothing it. Cas felt a little more coherent and wiggled away.

“That’s the first time you’ve called me that,” he said, and Dean blinked at him before his face split into another sunny grin.

“Huh,” he laughed, and Cas put some distance between them, scratching his arm nervously. Dean registered his change in mood and jumped a little, going back to the turntable. He played around with it and then put it on, Elvis swelling back into the apartment.

He bobbed his head experimentally and Cas coughed a laugh as he tried to get into it.

“He’s not for everybody,” Cas explained, pointing at the boxes full of records he had shoved up against the opposite wall.

“There’s more if you would rather listen to them.” Dean shook his head, suddenly determined, “no, you like Elvis, and I can dig it.” He wandered to the boxes anyway, dropping down to the rug to sift through them, shaking his head at Cas’ selections, no doubt. He probably listened to harder stuff.

Cas came behind him and leaned over his back, peering down at the boxes, his arm winding around Dean’s shoulder. He flipped through a few shyly and Dean looked up at him, tugging him down to sit beside him. Shoulder to shoulder they sat, Elvis bleeding into every crevice of the apartment.

Cas realized with wonder that he wasn’t cold and when he glanced at Dean’s profile he couldn’t help but smile softly at how calm Dean’s face was, how simple it seemed to sit on the floor and flip through records.

Dean caught him staring and stopped, his hands still resting on the edge of some album, his eyes wide and beautiful. Beautiful-the word came so easily to his mind.

“You were up all night?” he said softly and Dean’s eyes changed in a way that made Cas feel almost too-warm, like the emotion they conveyed radiated straight into his bones. Dean’s mouth hinted a smile, but it was like he was too serious to let it come all the way through.

“Yeah,” Dean replied, shrugging, looking away, playing with the corner of a cover. “Sounds really stupid.”

A worry appeared between Dean’s eyes and he shook his head a little, laughing it off. Cas didn’t think it sounded stupid. He heard Elvis, and he stared at Dean, and it was so strange, the strangest feeling he’d ever had. Butterflies, but something more solid than that, something beating and persistent, the same kind of terrifying feeling he’d at the party, the first time he’d seen Dean.

Dean looked back at him, concerned.

“I’m sorry I didn’t wait till Friday, and I’m sorry if I’m...I just, I saw you, and you know...,” He paused, and Cas nodded.

“I saw you,” Cas continued, smiling a little, understanding, and he reached up a hand and touched Dean’s cheek, moving his hands over the skin there, and Dean moved just so, pushing into his palm. There was so much more, wasn’t there? There was so much to this, but it all made so much sense that Dean was there. That he was listening to Elvis, like his whole life he had just been waiting for this small moment.

Dean touched the inside of his wrist, staring at Cas’ neck.

“I saw you, and I knew I would never really say goodnight to you,” he finished on a murmur. “Not really. It just didn’t seem right to say goodbye to you, or goodnight...”

Cas leaned and pushed them together, cutting Dean’s words off. It felt easy this time, like he’d been kissing Dean for a long time, and maybe it was because of last night, but Cas was beginning to think it wasn’t that entirely; maybe it had never been about that. That first dizzy moment he’d laid eyes on him, the way his body fit against Dean’s, like the effortless lean of Dean’s motorcycle. Thick and sweet, like milkshakes, like Dean’s smile, so much better in the daylight. Dean forgot about the records, and Cas helped him out of his jacket, shoving it behind them, Dean easing his back to the floor, unwilling to separate their mouths for long. Cas spread himself over him, and it was oddly peaceful. Dean’s hands were slow, and their mouths were slower, searching, timid sometimes, but thorough. Cas framed Dean’s face, running his thumbs down his jaw, over his cheekbones.

Elvis played.

Dean laughed, a small, tripping sound, and Cas looked down at him, his hair still damp and he touched Dean’s lips, his collar bone, his brow, Dean looking up at him with something akin to adoration. They fit seamlessly.

“Where have you been?” Dean said after a moment, and Cas laughed.

“Right here,” he answered and Dean shook his head.

“Don’t go, then,” he whispered, seriously, and Cas smiled reassuringly.

“Doesn’t seem right to say goodbye, does it?”

Dean pulled him down, closer, wrapped his arms around him, buried himself in his mouth, and Cas supposed that was his reply.

It was almost surprising how well they actually fit together, how their bodies seemed to slide together and lock into place like puzzle pieces; fitting together to make a whole. How Cas' fingers seemed to fit so well when they curved around the nape of Dean's neck; their lips slotting together, working together, and the thought alone was enough to make Cas' head swim. Dean's hands moved over his back, resting just above his ass, and Cas pulled back, just enough to where their lips were barely touching.

Dean's hands bundled the hem of his shirt, pushing it up, fingers pressing against his skin, and his touch felt searing hot, the sensation prickling just beneath Cas' skin. He breathed out, and Dean inhaled, and Cas smiled; he could feel the returning smile on Dean's lips.

"What is it about you?" Cas watched as Dean's eyes opened, staring back at him lazily. "I just met you, and already, I just- I don't know."

"I don't know either." Dean moved one his hands to slide his fingers through Cas' damp hair, pushing it back from his eyes. "But I can't get enough of you."

Cas laughed and pressed his face into Dean's neck. "I don't understand why. I'm just average; I'm nothing special."

"Would you stop saying that?" Dean grunted as Cas pushed himself up, knees on either side of Dean's body, straddling him.

Cas rolled his eyes and pressed his palms flat against Dean's chest, fingers tugging at his shirt just slightly, occupying his hands. "I'm not. I'm dull, and boring, and- Look at you!"

"What about me?"

"You're gorgeous! You're attractive, and handsome, and you have a motorcycle, and you make all the girls swoon."

Dean's hands moved to rest on Cas' hips, fingers slipping beneath his shirt to push it up.

"And you're beautiful."

Cas' breath caught in his throat, and he could feel his cheeks heating up. He turned away, pulling one of his hands away to wrap his fingers around one of Dean's wrist, stopping him from pulling his shirt over his head.

"I'm not. I'm boring."

"And stupid, obviously."

"I'm not stupid!" Cas shot back, turning to face Dean again, and Dean was laughing beneath him, breaking free from Cas' grasp. He trailed his fingers over Cas' chest, moving up until he held his cheek in his hand, thumb skimming over his lip.

"Hmm, maybe not." Dean grinned and pushed his hand completely beneath Cas' shirt, fingers pressing into his skin, and Cas hummed softly, closing his eyes.

He wasn't used to all of this attention, having hands all over his body, \, and if this is what Dean wanted to do with him every time they saw each other, then he was more than on board with Dean showing up at his apartment at random intervals.

They stayed like that for a moment, until Dean trailed his fingers over Cas' side, ghosting over his skin. Cas laughed and leaned forward, grasping at Dean's hand beneath his shirt and pulling it away. Dean grunted and slid his other hand beneath Cas' shirt, tickling over his skin, and Cas laughed again, pressing his face into Dean's neck.

"Dean, please-"

Dean just pulled his hand away from Cas' grasp and pushed it beneath his shirt again, both hands working at his sides, and Cas wasn't able to stop himself from laughing.

"Your sides are ticklish, hmm?" Dean purred, and Cas shook his head. But Dean grinned and continued to tickle Cas until he was just a laughing and giggling mess over him, panting against his skin and struggling to breathe. He laughed and curled his fingers around Cas' hips, pushing and moving until Cas was on the floor and Dean was over him. Knees bracketing his body and hands on either side of his head, Dean smiled down at Cas, and Cas frowned, glasses crooked on his face.

"I hate you."

"No, you don't." Dean balanced on one hand, adjusting Cas' glasses with gentle fingers before pushing his hair from his face.

"Fine, I don't. But you're rude, I hope you know that."

Dean laughed and shook his, and Cas rolled his eyes, pressing his hands against his chest, but Dean wouldn't budge.

The music stopped playing and the silence was almost deafening, save for the steady crackled of the speakers. Cas tilts his head back, looking at the turntable for a moment before turning his attention back to Dean.

"Get off. I wanna listen to something else."

"So demanding." Dean moved to get off of Cas, stopping for a moment to wink. "I like it."

Cas squirmed out from beneath Dean, pushing himself off of the ground so he could stand and brush off his clothes. Dean sat on the ground, watching him as he moved to the turntable to flip the record over, carefully placing the needle onto it. The apartment filled with the sound of Elvis again, and Cas hummed to himself, turning around to look at Dean. Dean smiled up at him, sitting on the floor Indian-style, hands in his lap; he looked so innocent sitting there, like he hadn't even been tormenting Cas by tickling him just minutes prior.

"Are you hungry?"

"I could go for some food."

"Well, I hope you're not looking forward to anything amazing." He thought for a moment. "I could make macaroni and cheese."

"Macaroni and cheese is good."

Cas could feel Dean watching him as he went to his cabinets, poking around. His heart dropped when he realized all he had left was a lone container of noodles and some bread and a few cans of tuna. He pulled the spaghetti out, listening to the dry rattle they made as they tumbled in their box when he tossed them on the counter. He turned next to his icebox, not surprised when it was pathetically empty.

He eyed the milk and his half a stick of butter, sighing.

“I’m sorry, but, we’re all out of the macaroni,” he apologized in his most stately voice, hoping that if he acted like a pretentious waiter Dean would at least get a kick out of it and forgive him for being dirt poor. Dean glanced up at the sound of Cas talking and grinned.

“Oh, well, do you have any other specials this evening?” he played along, and Cas cleared his throat, straightening his shirt where it had been rucked up by wandering hands.

“We have the sea bass on a bed of rice and steamed vegetables, the petite filet with garlic mashed potatoes – red skin – and also stale spaghetti with butter, and our own special ingredient.”

Dean nodded, considering his choices, even going so far as to rub his chin thoughtfully.

“What’s the secret ingredient?” he questioned, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“Salt, sir,” Cas responded without pause, tilting his chin up haughtily.

“Salt?” Dean asked with mock excitement. “I love salt.”

“Shall I put you down for noodles then?”

“Please,” Dean replied, cocking his head, his boyish smile growing even wider. Cas held his pose and nodded sharply, making Dean laugh and shake his head in some disbelieving way. He turned back to the stove, lighting the burner, pleased with how easily he could light the match with Dean watching his back. Moments went by, and Cas heard the distant rustle of Dean standing and the soft sound of his boots coming across the floor until he was beside him, staring at the water with a sort of detached interest.

“Watched pots won’t boil,” Cas scolded, but Dean just shrugged, chuckling, and leaned against the counter, watching Cas instead.

“If I watch you will you boil?” he teased, making Cas roll his eyes as he measured out the spaghetti, trying to gauge if he could scrimp on his own serving to save some for later.

“You wish it was that easy,” Cas shot back, and Dean’s eyes widened and he broke into a full-body laugh, his head tipping back, back arching. Cas smiled at him, glancing at the pot to see if the water had begun to bubble yet – it hadn’t.

“Oh, really now?” Dean laughed, wiping the corner of his eye as if there were some tear there. It was Cas’ turn to shrug, listening to Dean’s wrist pop as he shook it out. Dean looked around the apartment, back to leaning on the cabinets. “Do your friends know how funny you are? Or am I just the lucky one?”

Cas scoffed, taking a knife out to cut the butter into more manageable chunks.

“Well,” he began, thinking about it, his brow worrying as he cut, “I don’t know if they think I’m *that* funny...but I hold my own.”

Dean made some approving noise, fiddling with a fork Cas had left on the counter. Cas heard the record stop and didn’t pause as he pushed the butter aside, dumping the noodles into the pot.

“Go put on the one with him in the hula shirt,” Cas asked, and Dean gave him a questioning look. Cas flushed, pushing his glasses up. “Just go do it.” “A hula shirt?”

“Well, you’re certainly not busy,” Cas snapped, and Dean’s mouth quirked. Cas exhaled and stepped back, handing a wooden spoon to Dean. “Fine, you get to cook and *I’ll* go change the record –!” He stopped as Dean grabbed his wrists, holding him firmly.

“How many times do I gotta tell you to relax?” Dean said, breathing a laugh, pushing the spoon back into his hand. “I’ll put your damn record on.”

Cas watched him go over to the boxes, crouching down to flip through them. His shirt rode up quite a bit, showing a strip of smooth skin just above his jeans and Cas caught himself staring and turned back to throwing the meager meal together.

“Hula shirt, right?” Dean called, and Cas nodded before remembering Dean couldn’t see him with his back turned.

“Blue something…” he said absently, breaking up the noodles so they wouldn’t clump.

“Blue Hawaii?”

“Yeah.”

Dean got up and changed the records out, tapping his foot on the floor impatiently as he did. He moved a lot, Cas had noticed. Maybe it was because of his racing, his occupation thriving on speed and movement; maybe it was just him. Cas staggered at the thought that he might be around Dean enough to find something like that out.

The songs started up and Cas smiled in appreciation, turning the burner off. He carefully walked the pan to the sink, using the lid to sift out as much water as he could, a risky business but he didn’t have a sieve.

Dean wandered back over at some point, lurking just out of his view, like he wanted to help but didn’t know how to ask. Cas shook his head; this kid was a mystery.

He put as much butter in as he could get away with and a healthy helping of salt, churning it together before he shoveled it into the only two bowls he possessed, putting the fork Dean had been toying with in one and his last clean one in the other.

Dean watched him turn, holding the steaming food and immediately looked for a place to sit, to which Cas gestured to a tiny little space beside the radiator.

“Table,” he directed, and Dean went, clearing the books and newspapers off of the second chair, sinking into it.

“These all for school?” Dean asked, flipping through one of the brick-like tomes. Cas nodded, wincing from the heat of the bowls and shaking his hands out once he put them down, and sliding Dean’s towards his side of the table.

“Most of them, yes,” Cas answered after seating himself, looking down to see he’d forgotten napkins – like he had any. He sighed and picked up his fork, turning over the spaghetti to let it cool. Dean hadn’t touched his, still looking at the book, fingers trailing over the spine and gold embossed title. “Some of them are just the ones my brothers didn’t want that I took with me and then a few more were my Father’s from when he was in school.”

“Your old man a doctor?” Dean continued, stopping on some anatomical diagram, his eyes dancing over it. Cas could see over the table that it was a cross-section of lungs.

“Biologist,” Castiel said curtly, raising the food up, wet steam wafting in his face. “He worked for

a time and then he taught at the University, but he retired before I came here.”

Dean nodded along, like he understood the words he was reading, thumbing to another page.

“What’s ‘pulmonary edema’?”

Cas leaned forward, letting his fork rest back inside the bowl – the pasta was still too hot to eat anyway.

“It means fluid, but I can’t remember if it’s inside or out…” he searched the page as much as he could, and Dean held it up to him, letting him get closer. He tilted the book in his direction, “… inside. Yes. It’s fluid in the lung.”

Dean turned the book around and stared at it for a long time.

“Huh,” he said finally, putting the book down at his feet with the others, trading it for his fork. Cas watched him blow on his food before shoving it unceremoniously into his mouth, not even wincing at the temperature. Cas, impressed, took a hesitant bite of his own.

“Not bad,” Dean said, having made sure he’d chewed and swallowed, offering an eager smile and Cas shrugged. It was about as bland as he’d expected, but it was better than rice. He’d been eating rice for days. Dean stared at him for a while, still eating, and Cas glanced up at him shyly every once in a while, only to watch Dean’s fork slow and his smile grow.

“You have brothers?”

Cas nodded, sucking a noodle up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and sitting back.

“And a baby sister – well. She’s seventeen, which is only two and a half years younger than me,” he couldn’t help but smile when he thought of her. “Her name’s Rachel.”

Dean moved his leg under the table, but hung to his every word.

“She a good kid?”

Castiel laughed, the fond look still on his face.

“Very good,” he replied, twirling his fork absently. “She’s the only girl. We had an older sister, but she died when she was still an infant. But Rachel is a good girl. She’s spoiled though – what with three doting older brothers.”

“Three?” Dean asked, blinking.

“Well, counting me. Michael and Gabriel are my older brothers,” he said. “I didn’t dote very much. I mostly irritated her.”

Dean laughed at that, taking another healthy bite.

“There’s bread too if you want,” Cas added, gesturing behind Dean at the kitchen, but Dean shook his head, insisting he was fine with what he had.

“When’s the last time you talked to them?”

Castiel paused his eating and pushed the remainder of his food around.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” he said quietly, but his voice quickly took on a more intense quality – more strung out – as he continued, “really, I don’t. My brothers made it very clear that

they weren't thrilled with my choices, alright? They sent me to school and that was the end of it."

Dean stared at him. He could tell he was lying.

"I wasn't trying to upset you," Dean's voice was gruff, almost perplexed, "so don't give me that look, like I was trying to compare myself to you." His stare briefly melted into something harder. "I know what you must think about me. They all run their mouths at those parties and they think they have dirt on everybody, but they really don't." He tossed his fork aside; like he was done with the idea of it, and Cas was surprised when he didn't flinch like he usually would.

"My dad found out I was a fag, but honestly it didn't make any difference; he was drunk at the time, so I doubt he even remembers it happening. He'd heard it from some asshole running his mouth at the liquor store said he saw me sucking some guy's dick outside a theater like I'm some kind of idiot on top of being queer. I was more pissed that Sammy found out from him because he was being so goddamn loud."

Cas narrowed his eyes in confusion.

"How did the guy at the liquor store know you were queer then?" he asked, trying to follow. Dean shrugged.

"He had it the wrong way – some guy was sucking *my* dick."

Cas felt his face crumple into some indiscernible emotion, and the longer he looked at Dean the more ridiculous the statement sounded and the more he thought of Dean's matter-of-fact tone the more hysterical it seemed to be.

He laughed, and the laughter grew and grew until Dean was laughing with him and Cas was gasping for air, tears clouding his vision. He rubbed his eyes under his glasses, curling forward, trying to catch his breath.

"Jesus Christ," he wheezed, his laughter stuttering along with Dean's, the two of them red faced and panting. Dean ran his hand over his mouth shaking his head.

"It was something'."

"Well, what happened?" Cas probed, curiosity piqued. Dean sighed, picking up a cooling noodle and then dropping it back in his bowl.

"Well, my old man laid me out, but I broke the guy at the liquor store's nose and he hasn't said much – man's got too much shit on his record to press charges." Dean pursed his lips, the subject old news to him and Cas marveled.

"See, this is why I don't get it. You have this colorful past full of getting your dick sucked in alleys and riding motorcycles and getting into fights, but you see *me* at a party and somehow decide I'm the one worth going after,"

"You talk like you're disappointed!" Dean grinned, all devil-may-care, his eyes sparkling, "I gave you a prime night on the town."

Cas let his chin rest in his hand, elbow on the table.

"You could have any girl at that party. You could have had *Lisa*, but you decide to follow me down the street to take me to a diner and then ravage me outside of it – but that's not the part I don't get. I don't get that you're here. That you're here to hear me talk about my boring, middle class, childhood – well, I guess I should say I don't believe it."

“Your bullshit is what’s boring,” Dean said simply. “I’ve already told you how I feel about you. It’s not that complicated. Haven’t you ever heard of love at first sight?” he finished, giving Cas an imploring look.

Cas sighed. “I didn’t think you were going to reciprocate, that’s all,” he explained, pushing his bowl away. Dean folded his arms on the table and rested his cheek on them, looking up at Cas through his lashes. Cas reached one hand out and combed his fingers through Dean’s hair, pulling it away from his face, looking at the spread of freckles he hadn’t been able to see in the dark last night.

“Well, I’m reciprocating,” Dean said, smiling lazily up at him, like a sated dog.

"I guess you are." Cas smiled, smoothing his thumb over Dean's forehead and down the bridge of his nose, cheekbone, tracing over the his freckles. Dean hummed softly, closing his eyes, and Cas carded his fingers through Dean's hair before stiffening. He looked at the turntable past Dean in the living room, and then looking back down at Dean to see him staring up at him.

"What were you staring at?"

"Oh, uh, the turntable." He paused for a moment, continuing to comb his fingers through Dean's hair. "This is my favorite song."

Dean lifted his head slightly as if to hear the song better, and he nodded to himself before laying his head back down on his arms, and Cas closed his eyes, listening to the song. He slipped his hand out of Dean's hair, trailing his fingers over his arm as he pulled his hand away, but Dean stopped him, fingers gently curling around his wrist, and Cas opened his eyes, staring down at him.

"So this is your favorite song?"

Cas nodded, and Dean made a sort of approving noise, smiling.

"I've heard it on the radio before."

"That's not really surprising."

Dean snorted and sat up straight, still holding Cas' wrist. He pulled Cas' hand toward himself, and Cas stretched his fingers out, fingertips brushing against Dean's chin as Dean pulled him closer.

"So why is it your favorite song?"

Cas could feel the stubble on Dean's chin as he grazed his fingers over his skin, and the feeling of it made goose bumps stand on his arms. Dean grinned his wolfish grin.

"I just - I like songs about love," he breathed a laugh, like it was the dumbest answer he could give. But really, songs about love were his favorite because they had just so much meaning behind them, and that's just the only way that he knew how to explain.

"I guess that's a good enough answer," Dean smiled and pulled Cas closer by his wrist, fingers moving to hold his hand as he pressed his lips to his palm, still smiling. He gently kissed along Cas' palm, eyes watching him the entire time, and Cas swallowed thickly, fingers twitching.

"Dean-"

"*But I can't help falling in love with you,*" he sang softly, almost a whisper, and Cas could feel his cheeks going red; he felt almost giddy.

"You baffle me, Dean Winchester."

Dean paused, eyes focusing on Cas. "Why?"

"Because... You just have this tough exterior, and you have a motorcycle, and you get into fights, but you're really just sweet, and kind, and-"

"Hey, don't get all sappy on me."

"What I'm trying to say is that you're different."

Cas pulled his hand away to push Dean's hair out of his face, and Dean captured his wrist, standing and leaning over the table to capture Cas' lips with his own. Cas smiled against Dean's lips, slipping his hand through his hair with his free hand.

"Different, huh?" Dean spoke as he pulled away.

"Different."

## Chapter 2

It was all so painless, falling in love with Dean.

There was something so mindlessly ordinary about it, like Dean was just another fixture, just another glass in his cupboard that he had begun using. He wasn't there, and then the next day he was, and Cas couldn't remember the hours before him. Before his hands or his mouth or his eyes, before these things slid over his body and touched him and adored him. Dean would often stop and stare at him, his eyes wide and wondering, as if he was just seeing Cas for the first time all over again, like he was suddenly rediscovering him, and his face would melt into something so glad. Dean never stopped asking Cas where he had been before they met. What corner of the world he had been hiding in for so long, and Cas would always find it easier to kiss him than to say. The truth was Cas could never answer because he'd forgotten it; there was no real before Dean. Whatever time it was held no meaning anymore and his brain had discarded it.

It was the heat of summer now; Cas slept on the mattress with the sheets tangled at his feet – the April party was a distant memory. A twinkling light in a window. Every day since was as blinding and brilliant as the sun and as the heat set in, so did Dean. His skin was sticky with kisses, and the little bruises under his collar starting to become a pain to cover up. Every time he adjusted his shirts in class he felt the whisper of Dean's hands on his sides and had to shift, glancing around. He was baffled that no one had approached him about Dean; there were times he considered himself so transparent he was certain everyone must have known about the bed he'd been in the night before, had known about the things he'd been saying, the confessions he'd made and the laughter he'd coaxed out of Dean's mouth. Why else would anyone smile that much for no reason? Especially then.

The war loomed over all of them. It stood like a guillotine, the blade swinging on a tired rope, waiting to fall on any of them at any time. Cas had managed to keep it arm's length with school, but the threat of Dean being drafted clouded his mind on lonely nights when Dean was on the graveyard shift. Dean was desperate to get Sam into law school, and if he wasn't racing he was working, bartending at the icehouse off the interstate, sometimes waiting or bussing tables for extra tips if the man who owned it let him. If he wasn't working Cas would be lucky enough to have him in his bed. Cas would sit at his cramped desk, trying to ignore the traffic outside long enough to learn about the nervous or circulatory system, the radio playing. Sometimes he'd scan the obituaries but there hadn't been anyone he'd recognized for a long while. Boys were still dying, but at least he didn't know them. He papered his mind with Dean instead, losing himself in waiting for him to show up next, for his phone to ring and for it to be Dean on the other end.

Often he felt cruel for being in school – for being able to avoid conscription – but Dean's face was fiercely proud when he told him about his tests or papers, and he always managed to be flexible around exams and deadlines. He put Cas first.

Nobody had ever done that for him before.

*“You're smart,” he'd say. “You're so smart, Cas. It's better you're here. You're gonna learn how to save people's lives, you know? Same way Sammy is gonna learn how to defend them. I'd die if they took you over there and fucked you up.”*

For all Cas loved him, the reality was difficult to manage. They met during the day if they could help it to not attract suspicion, and if Cas could he'd take the bus to Dean's apartment and stay the night. Dean lived on the top floor of his building, and no one gave a shit about what happened on the top floor, or so he said. Cas had a growing suspicion he paid off his landlord to not ask questions. Cas didn't want to think about it the same way he didn't want to think of what would

happen if they were caught. He just tried to believe Dean when he said they'd do it their way and fuck the rest. Cas had never been braver. He dared his brothers to show up and say something about it, dared to see what they would say about Dean.

He'd tear them a new one this time.

But all these things, at the moment, didn't matter. It was August, and, for the first summer of his life, he was in love.

He twitched in his sleep, shifting so his arm wasn't caught under his chest, his feet stirring the nest of blankets at the foot of the bed. A siren wailed, muffling the careful clanks on the fire escape and he stirred slightly. There was a slight groan of the window casement as someone slid it up and Cas moved again, sighing.

"Dean," he rumbled, his voice thick with sleep, and there was the snap of Dean pushing the window back down, walking across the room, stopping halfway to slip his boots off and kick them under Cas' nightstand. Cas groaned, the mattress moaning with him when Dean sat down on the edge of the bed, rubbing his shoulder.

"You awake?" he whispered, and Cas shook his head.

"No, I'm asleep," he breathed, turning towards Dean's touch, rubbing his face with one sleepy hand and cracking his eyes. Dean smiled at him through the dark, stroking his damp forehead as the electric fan oscillated, ruffling his humidity-limp hair.

"You look awake to me..." Dean continued, and his voice was low and calm, but Cas could hear the excitement simmering underneath. He was in one of those moods, it seemed.

"Someone is going to hear you one of these days. Or think you're trying," he paused, kissing Dean back, "to burgle me."

Dean smiled against his mouth and pulled away, the mattress squeaking as he stood and clumsily stripped his clothes, lowering himself back onto the bed, crouched over Cas, holding him in with his legs on either side of his hips. He ran his hands appreciatively over Cas' stomach, snapping the elastic on his underwear with a small pop.

Cas laughed, trying to roll his face away, but his hands were already wandering over Dean's shoulders as Dean leaned in, trying to kiss him.

"What time is it?" he asked as Dean brushed his mouth over Cas' neck.

"Three," Dean answered, and Cas shook his head, trying to move Dean away with his shoulder.

"Dean, stop, I wanna sleep," he whined, giving up so quickly he wondered why he even attempted.

"It's Thursday- you don't have class on Fridays," Dean whispered, sealing their mouths together again. Cas kissed him back lazily, still waking up, his fingers skimming over Dean's back.

"Did you miss me?" Cas continued, and Dean kissed his chin, looking into his sleepy eyes.

"Is the day long?" came the reply and Cas smiled, framing Dean's face with his hands, combing upwards through his hair and watching it fall back into place. Dean ducked his head, and Cas opened his mouth, tongue slicking against the wet heat of Dean's. Dean pulled back and Cas followed, his head lifting off the pillow, but Dean was too quick and had begun to work his way down Cas' neck, towards his bare chest.

“God, I missed you,” Dean said against the hollow of his throat and Cas ‘*mm*’ed in agreement, fingers still tangled in Dean’s hair and sliding to the nape of his neck. “All shift I couldn’t stop thinkin’ about getting back here. Fuckin’ going crazy all week...”

Dean’s hand slithered under his waistband and curled around his dick, squeezing it gently, and Cas’ eyes fluttered shut.

“Dean,” Cas mumbled and Dean nipped at the place where his neck met his shoulder before soothing it with his tongue. Had it only been a week? It’d felt like months. He’d only gotten a few hushed ‘*I love you*’s into the payphone receivers at the bar; the rest of the time, Dean had been training for the tournament coming up in two weeks and Cas had been cramming for his summer midterms.

“Crazy, Cas,” he repeated, and Cas nodded, lost in the heat and the loose stroke of Dean’s hand. He could feel Dean outlined against his thigh, starting to get hot and hard, and he let his hand drift across Dean’s chest and over his abdomen, mirroring his actions. Dean hissed as Cas touched his cock, the back of his hand stretching the front of Dean’s boxers. Cas smiled, tugging the clothes down and away, Dean shifting to help him, and then Cas lifted himself up so Dean could pull his own off.

Dean settled onto him, rolling his hips, rutting against Cas’ skin, their dicks dragging together in a slow motion that made Cas’ fingers curl into his pillowcase. He moved sleepily with Dean, meeting the slow fuck of his hand when Dean’s fingers closed around both of them, stroking almost lazily while they rocked together.

Dean smoothed his hand over Cas’ chest, and Cas found his own hand covering it, their fingers tangling, and Cas felt the way Dean slightly shifted his weight into Cas’ palm, his other slicking precome over them, making every cant of Dean’s hips a smooth stroke against Cas’ cock.

The bed creaked and Cas whimpered, his body feeling tight and warm. The thought of coming with Dean made him sigh and gasp.

“Kiss me...” he mouthed and Dean bent, obliging him.

Cas rolled his hips forward, fucking himself into Dean's hand and against him, gasping again. Dean took the moment to pull away, mouthing along Cas' jawline with just a hint of teeth, and Cas wrapped his fingers around the nape of Dean's neck, fingers curling in the fine hairs there.

"*Dean*," he whined, and Dean hushed him, brushing his lips over his cheek as he rocked his hips down against him.

"Shh, it's okay, baby. I got you."

Cas nodded, fingers slipping through Dean's hair as they rocked against each other, Dean dragging his hand over them slowly, agonizingly slow, and it was almost unbearable. Cas tugged at Dean's hair, and Dean pulled back, fingers squeezing around their dicks, causing Cas to gasp.

"Gonna make it good," Dean kissed the corner of Cas' mouth, and Cas' hips jerked forward. "So good," he smiled, panting softly against Cas' skin.

Dean loosened his grip on them, stroking in a slow, steady rhythm ] against each other. Cas whimpered, his body felt as tight as a coil, and he moved his hand to grip at Dean's shoulder, fingers pressing into muscle. Cas turned his head away as Dean nosed behind his ear before pulling back, only to continue along his jaw and.

"Look at me, wanna see you" - and Cas turned his face to look at Dean, his cheeks flushed and body hot, and Dean pressed his hips down, fingers squeezing gently; then Cas was coming, mouth falling open in a gasp. He squeezed his eyes shut, back arching off of the bed, nails biting into Dean's shoulder, and Dean stroked him through his orgasm, hushing him and kissing along his neck.

Moments later, Dean was coming, pressing his face into the crook of Cas' neck with a grunt, hips stilling. His breath was hot against Cas' neck, but Cas didn't have the energy to complain; instead, he wound his arm around Dean's shoulders and pressed his face into his hair.

"I love you."

He could feel Dean smile against his neck, lips grazing over his skin, and a breath of laughter as Dean nuzzled the side of his neck.

"I love you too," he mumbled softly, rolling off Cas to lay beside him.

They were sticky, the come on their stomachs quickly drying, the heat and the sweat on their skin uncomfortable, but Cas didn't want to move. Instead, he rolled onto his side, dragging his lips over Dean's shoulder. Dean hummed softly, and Cas watched as he closed his eyes, hand drifting to card fingers through his hair.

"Can we stay here forever?"

"Forever's a long time, Dean."

Dean shifted, turned slightly, and looked down at Cas; palm cupping his cheek, thumb swiping over his bottom lip.

"Yeah, well-"

"-And it's the middle of summer and it's hot and sticky, and gross."

"Cas, you're thinking about this too much."

Cas rolled his eyes and pressed closer to Dean.

"It's a long time."

"Well, yeah, but..." Dean faltered, and there was a moment of silence between them, Dean's hand moving to card through Cas' hair again. "I just wanna stay here, with you, forever."

"Not here. Somewhere nicer since this place is a dump."

Dean smiled and Cas laughed softly.

"Your place, maybe. It's definitely nicer."

"Or our own place. A house."

Cas stared up at Dean, and Dean moved again, leaned forward, and pressed his lips to Cas' forehead. He shifted onto his side, curling an arm around his shoulders to pull him against his chest.

"One with a yard, a nice yard, and a fence."

Cas wrapped an arm around Dean's waist, tucking his head beneath his chin. He smiled and

laughed softly, just the thought alone making him giddy. He was in love with Dean Winchester, and here they were, in bed together, talking about getting a house together; talking about their future.

"Can we get a dog?"

Dean sighed softly, arm tightening around Cas.

" No dogs."

"Why?"

"Cause' I *said* so."

Cas didn't know at what point he drifted back to sleep, but the next time he opened his eyes Dean was at the edge of the bed, putting his boots on. Cas blinked blearily at him and put his hand out to touch his back, Dean leaning back to kiss him quickly.

"Go back to sleep," he whispered, the sun just beginning to creep in through the window. Cas groaned tiredly and Dean chuckled, kissing his bare shoulder when he rolled towards him, hand still playing absently with the edge of Dean's shirt.

"Have a good day," Cas mumbled and Dean tucked another kiss into his hairline. He stamped his boot lightly, situating his heel in it.

"I'll come back on Saturday," he hushed and Cas nodded against his pillow, exhaling.

"Train hard," Cas said softly and Dean stroked his hair and the side of his face, watching him fall back asleep.

"I love you," he murmured, and Cas nodded again, already floating back into a dream.

"You too," he yawned, turning his face into the mattress, pulling the sheets and blankets up around him.

It was around five o'clock that it happened, when Cas was forced to remember that Dean's love didn't really make him invincible. The world beyond Cas' bed was treacherous and scared of them; the most Cas could have done was anticipate it, but he was blinded by adoration.

Cas was surprised to see Hester when she knocked on the door, her blond hair held back by a stiff white band, her shoes bright and glossy black, her white hands gripping her pocket book like it would be stolen. She smiled nervously at him and Castiel had to suppress his initial questions.

*What are you doing here, mainly.* He hadn't really ever had Hester over. It never seemed right making her come to his apartment when she was so hopelessly under the impression they could be *something*.

"Hester?" he smiled, opening the door wider and letting her in. Her heels made a dull sound on the floor. Cas saw her look around, worrying her lip with her teeth, eyes flickering over the second hand furniture and sparse kitchen counters. Cas clicked the latch on the door and turned to her, catching her attention.

"Can I get you anything?" he insisted, watching her with concern.

She laughed forcedly, a hand coming up to cover her mouth like she was embarrassed. She shook her head, her face retaining a grave quality. Cas' stomach clenched in uncertainty. He took a step

closer and she stiffened.

“Hester, what are you doing here?” he tried to smile, but she wouldn’t meet his eyes for long; her gaze kept darting around, or to the floor.

“Must be cramped,” she said softly, after a moment, and Cas stared at her. “What with *Dean* here.”

“Dean?” Cas replied, too quickly, his voice breathy, the word flat and shapeless. Not like she had said it. She’d said it like it was something awful dead under a sink, like she’d stained her dress just by saying it. Hester’s face hardened into something painful and frightened. Her eyes glowed as two accusing stars on her milky, painted skin.

“You can’t lie about it, you know!” she cried, face flushing with emotion, and Cas was astounded at how beautiful she looked with passion staining her cheeks red. It was all he had the sense to think as she clutched her pocket book and drew her shoulders up, the same way cats seem to bristle when vexed. Cas didn’t know what to say in a way of response. What was there to say?

“Hester, what have you done?” He found the words tumbling out of him, found his fists balling at his sides, his whole body puffed up in a sudden flood of fear. “Tell me!” he demanded, voice not rising beyond a sharp hiss. She recoiled, like he had struck her, wobbling on her thin heel.

“The right thing!” she sobbed, the tears pouring out without any kind of warning, and Cas didn’t shake. He didn’t tremble. He faced her, mind blank, and her mascara ran as she teetered, covering her mouth again. “I saw you!” her voice slithered against him, dangerous and low. The word tilted on its axis, Cas’ mouth unbearably dry.

He met her furious eyes and she took a rattling breath.

“You and *him*. What you were doing with *him*, touching him...” she trailed off, “as if no one could have seen you, as if no one would be watching, but -!” She cut her words purposefully, lips pressed in a shivering line, “I was always watching you, and I saw what you were doing, and it’s wrong...”

Cas shook his head, “Hester,” he began, voice shockingly gentle for the rage he felt.

Where? Where had she seen them? In the back of the thrift stores? Behind the racks? In the shadows of buildings at parties, their touching desperate and heavy and drunk? Where? Where had she seen them? He couldn’t think of a place, but would it really be so difficult? How often did he find his hand wandering towards Dean’s, how many times had he kissed him without even realizing he’d done it?

“No!” she cried, jolting his thoughts, “No! You listen to me! He’s sin, Castiel! He’s sin! I told you he was sin! But it’s alright, because I’m going to save you, I’m going to get you away from him!”

He didn’t exactly understand what she was doing until she grabbed his hands, her purse falling to the floor, the lipstick rolling across and bumping into the leg of his kitchen table. He stared at it, the little black cylinder clicking against the wood.

“I’ve saved you, I’ve freed you, don’t you see? You’ll leave him now – you’ll have to leave him, and it’ll be alright,” she babbled, and Cas shook his head, eyes frozen to her lipstick.

“No,” he persisted, “no!” and he shoved her off. She fell, knees hitting the floor, skirt rucked up around her thighs. She screamed at him and he stumbled back, a pot clanging to the floor where his hand knocked blindingly into the counter. He didn’t know what she had said. It had sounded

like the shriek of a blue jay as it knocks eggs from another bird's nest. Bitter and venomous and jealous.

"It's already done!" she shouted at him, and Cas shook his head.

"What did you do? What did you do?"

Hester smiled at him, triumphant and picked up her purse. She stood, leaning into the couch, straightening her frock, adjusting herself before she unclasped the top of her purse and withdrew a pale pink slip.

Cas couldn't place it, but he was all too familiar with the sickening feeling it gave him. The knife of her betrayal twisted further into his back. He began to panic, his heart jumping and slamming against his ribcage with every step she took towards him. Her face spoke of forgiveness for his violence, but he wasn't sorry. He took the paper and unfolded it, staring down at the black print.

"I told your landlord the truth. I know you might be angry now but, Cas, this is for the better. This way you can get back on the right path. You can let go of this. You're young. You still have time," she said soothingly, stroking the back of his hand. "I'm only trying to help you, don't you understand?"

She shook her head pityingly.

"Cas, the world is cruel to homosexuals, and it's to teach them. There is something wrong with it, and it's sick, but you know, darling, I think you can get past it. I really do, I really truly do, and I think people do it all the time." She traced her fingers over his skin. He stared at the page. "I don't like to use the language, but, darling-" She kept calling him that. He wanted to hit her.

"Darling, your landlord was so appalled, you should have heard going on and on about how they couldn't rent to *cocksuckers*. Having faggots in your building is unsanitary, too. Sounds so crass just to evict someone, but think if he had found out himself? Wouldn't that have been just terrible?"

She whispered the word *cocksucker* like it offended her; of all the horrible, low, things she had done, that was the one that offended her. Of all the pain she had just caused, the walls she had just brought down around him, that was the one that made her delicate, snowy, little soul uncomfortable.

"Just terrible," she chanted. "It would have been just awful, but now you don't have to tell. You can just move on."

"You bitch," he said simply. "Have you lost your mind?" He lifted his eyes to her and she let her hand grip his tightly. He couldn't twist out of her grip and her face shone with divine resolution, with purpose, with *saving* him. This wasn't going to happen. He wasn't going to let this happen again.

"I'm doing what should be done," she replied, her voice syrupy.

"You think you've done enough," he continued. "You've done enough, but you'll never finish it. You'll never make me stop loving him."

She shook her head.

"I'll never stop loving him. I picked him over you. I picked him over you and your stupid, stuck-up, ridiculous friends. I chose him and you've tried to get back at me, but you haven't at all, because you won't make me stop. Throw me on the street, and I'll still let him *fuck* me."

“*Stop!*” she yelled, slapping him. “How can you say that?! *How can you say that!* You shameless, lost, child!”

He laughed at her, clutching his face. “Get the fuck out of my apartment.”

“It’s not going to be yours for much longer,” she beat back. “You have two days to get out and don’t think I won’t tell everyone. They’ll shut their doors on you. They’ll tell the papers about your precious *faggot*, and then you’ll see – you’ll see the doors shut for him, and you’ll come crawling back to me.”

Cas grabbed her and she yelped, squirming. He held her to him, teeth bared, transformed into something dangerous and fierce.

“If you tell anyone – *anyone* – about Dean, I will kill you.”

She stared into his eyes and muffled a scream, her body convulsing under his grip. He shook her; if he had claws, he would have killed her then.

“See if I don’t, Hester. See if I don’t make you pay for hurting him. See if I let you walk away if you touch him. It will be the last thing I do if you track one step of mud on his name.”

She wrenched herself free, panting, her staggering legs almost giving out.

“You have two days to move out,” she gasped, attempting to compose herself “a-and when you come to your senses...when you figure it all out-” She was crying again. “You’ll thank me! You’ll thank me for rescuing you from that sinful man! You will and I’ll forgive you!”

“*Get out!*” Cas roared, and she slammed the door behind her.

Cas cried out, clutching his head, the paper balling against his skull in his hand. He slid down, beside the fallen pot, and when he lifted his head, sobbing brokenly into his knees, he saw she had not picked up her lipstick. He stood, wiping his face, and went to it, grabbing it and holding it in his hand. She was supposed to have been his friend. They had been friends, hadn’t they? Good friends – and maybe she still thought that they were, because of how desperate she seemed to educate him, but that was clearly over. He thought of his threats – she could easily report him, but he knew that wasn’t in her nature. He threw the tube of lipstick into the bin and put his face in his hands.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered to no one, and when he closed his eyes he didn’t see Hester’s face, but his sister’s.

He began crying all over again.

Two days. He had two days to pack up all of his belongings and to find somewhere else to live. He didn’t think it was enough time, but he could make it happen, right? He rubbed at his eyes with the backs of his hands, leaning back and peering around the room. The furniture was old, but was still useful, so maybe he could sell it to get a new place.

He felt sore sick, so he wandered into his bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, the pink slip of paper still wadded in his hand.

He forced himself up after a while, tossing the balled up piece of paper onto his nightstand as he moved over to his closet, rifling through the bottom of it to pull out the suitcase that had been there since he moved into the apartment.

There weren't a lot of clothes to put into it - paying for school meant that he didn't have a lot of money to spend on clothes - so that was the easiest part of packing everything up. He pulled out a pair of jeans and a few shirts before clicking the latches on the case, pushing it against the door of his closet and heading to the bathroom.

The hot water against his skin was a relief, but it wasn't enough to wash away his worries. He still didn't know where he was going to stay; he didn't know many people, and his family wouldn't speak to him anymore, and he didn't want to ask Dean if he could move in with him. Well, he wanted to move in with Dean- he wanted that more than anything right now- but what if Dean wasn't ready for that?

He pressed his forehead against the cold tile of the shower wall, the hot water beating down on his back. He didn't know that he had started crying again until he couldn't catch his breath. Without any warning he cut the shower off and stumbled out, throwing clothes on. He pulled the phone onto his lap and sat on the bed, trying to remember the number for the bar, dialing it with shaking hands. He wiped the wet hair off of his forehead, listening to it ring.

“Mick’s icehouse.”

Cas couldn’t make his mouth work.

“Hello? Listen – if it’s you punks calling again...”

“Dean,” Cas whispered, cupping his hand around the receiver. “D-dean, it’s me...”

There was a rest and he heard the muffled sound of Dean adjusting the phone against his ear.

“Is anything wrong?” Dean’s voice was even and soft. Professional.

Cas shut his eyes and shook his head.

“Is anything *wrong*?” Dean repeated, stressing the word, and Cas swallowed.

“Can you come get me?” he gripped the phone tightly, bent over his own lap. “Come get me, let’s go somewhere. Let’s leave. Let’s leave right now.”

“Baby, what’s the matter?” Dean whispered. “I’m working. What are you talking about?”

“Leave work,” Cas’ voice was trembling. “Leave. Let’s just go, Dean. Let’s go get a house in the country. We’ll go there. No one will bother us there.”

“I can’t – what has gotten into you? I can’t talk right now, I have to work, are you ok? Are you hurt?”

“Dean, please!” Cas cried. “Forget work, forget all of it, let’s just go away. Let’s go far away, alright?” He bit his thumb to keep himself from sobbing. “We’re just going to get hurt here. I figured it out. We’re just going to get hurt here; there’s nothing for us here.”

“What the hell happened?” Dean barked, and Cas shook his head, his face feeling swollen and hot.

“My landlord knows about us.”

Dean was silent.

“How?”

Cas didn't want to say. He didn't want Dean to go after Hester or yell at her. Enough had been done. There wasn't any point.

"I don't know," he lied. "I don't know. He just knows about us."

"Well, fuck your landlord," Dean hissed. "What the fuck does he want to do about it? Call the cops? He can fucking talk to me about it if it's going to be a problem – Chris, give me two fucking seconds, alright? My kid brother got his finger smashed in a door and he's at the emergency room. Go take care of somebody, Jesus Christ, this kid is useless..."

Cas shook his head again and looked at the ceiling.

"He evicted me."

"What?"

Cas swallowed and took a deep breath.

"He evicted me. He...he gave me the slip this afternoon. He said he can't rent to cocksuckers."

"Are you fucking kidding me? That piece of shit evicted you?" Dean's voice could have corroded metal and Cas was suddenly aware of his shirt sticking to him and how wet his hair still was; the heat coming in through the window was heavy and damp too. He felt like he had a fever. "I'll go down there and change his mind," Dean growled.

"That won't help and you know it," Cas snapped before his shoulders gave in under the weight and slumped. "I'll just have to find somewhere else."

"You're gonna move in with me," Dean said so fast Cas thought he'd imagined it.

"Dean, I'm not asking for that."

"Well fuck you, and fuck your landlord, because you're moving in with me. I have to get back or Chris is going to cry about it...kid wouldn't know how to mix a drink if it bit him in the ass. I'll call you after."

The line went dead and Cas eased the phone down from his ear. He would have smiled; it was so typically Dean. All immediate action and no time for thinking about things – thinking things through. He could tell Dean was angry, and he knew it wasn't at him, but he felt terrible. This was not how things were supposed to go. They were supposed to ease into this part, to do it right. Make sure it was going to work out.

Hester had jammed things with her selfishness, but Cas thought back on his own words and knew she hadn't really won. She hadn't really accomplished anything. He loved Dean. Nothing was ever going to change that. Maybe this was the right thing; maybe this was how it was supposed to go. The universe forcing Cas in the right direction – he could be so doubtful and indecisive sometimes.

Cas hung the phone up and set it on the floor beside his bed.. He ran a hand through his hair, droplets of water falling onto his face. He wiped them away, watching as a few chased each other down his hand before disappearing.

He fell back and pulled the covers over himself, burying his face into the pillow;his shoulders shook and he wanted to scream, but he wouldn't. He cried about his brothers and about Rachel. He hadn't spoken to her for almost two years – Michael had made it so painfully clear he wasn't allowed to. He hadn't even gotten to say goodbye to her properly. They'd sent her to Oregon to

be with their aunt for the summer and she wasn't home when Cas had moved for school. He hadn't dared to call or send a letter. That last hellish year of high school and the summer leading up to college had taken his childhood. His family had been determined to make a stranger out of him.

He still had the scar hidden above his hairline where Michael had lost his temper.. Gabriel had patched him up himself, refusing to take him to the hospital, even when Rachel screamed and begged him to, blood getting all over the white upholstery of their living room couch.

*He needs stitches! He needs stitches, Gabe get your hands off of him, get daddy! Get daddy to help him, Jesus, he's bleeding everywhere, can't you see?!*

Their housekeeper had dragged her from the room when she'd started trying to shove Gabriel aside. They'd heard the maid making her step over the broken vase and the books scattered onto the floor where Cas had slammed into the shelving and then her screaming and sobbing up the stairs. It'd barely covered the argument happening behind the study doors: the roar of Michael and harsh bark of their father.

Gabriel's silence was deafening. He always was silent – maybe that's where Cas had learned it from. But that night, Cas was “disturbed” and disrupted dinner.

*Quit looking at the fucking book! Put that down! You're getting blood all over the rug!*

He could still hear Gabriel's voice as he yanked a book from the ruined shelf out of his hands and threw it to the floor, pushing Cas to the couch and forcing him to hold a rag to his head.

His father had nearly thrown Michael out of the house that night. They were people, not animals. Michael's retort had been that Cas let other men fuck him like one so he should be treated as such. He was unnatural. An abomination. No better than the dogs that rutted each other in the empty lot behind the drug store.

His father had told him quietly and with a great deal of civility that he'd gotten him a place at the university that night as he held his head and stared vaguely at the carpet.

*It would be better for all of us if you left. Rachel can't grow up around that sort of thing.*

That sort of thing. Like being gay was a hobby.

When he'd first come to school he was a sleepwalker. He felt every day he should confess his sins and go back. Beg for forgiveness. Then he'd started living on his own, and walking on his own. He'd found the apartment in an ad and had been the owner the next day. He'd signed his name on the lease and gotten a job in the library to pay the electric bill. No one knew what he was. No one asked. No one made him feel small. His neighbors were unobtrusive and polite despite the dilapidated building. They smiled at him. They chatted with him in the hall while they waited for the elevator. He'd bought things. Records. A lamp. His alarm clock. The bed and kitchen table were his brothers, the whine of his radiator the off-key singing of Rachel in the afternoons when it was too hot to socialize and she stayed upstairs curling and teasing her hair. He held his new forks and saw Gabe's model planes; the potted plant on the window sill was as revered as Mike's signed baseballs. He bought slippers and sometimes if he came in late they looked like his dad's. The things he'd loved and cherished became his again.

His things. Things that Michael couldn't hold over his head or take away.

It was the first thing that had ever truly been his own, and now it was going to be gone. Someone else was going to take it from him.

Exhausted, he let himself fall asleep alone in bed with the lingering hope that it was all a dream. He would wake up and the nightmare would be over.

The shrill ring of the phone was too loud to ignore, and Cas started awake, untangling himself from the covers to reach over the side of the bed, picking up the receiver and holding it up to his ear.

"Hello?" His voice was thick with sleep, and he rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Hey, Cas. I said I'd call back." There was a smile in Dean's voice, and Cas pulled the phone onto the bed and rested it on his chest.

"Dean-"

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm heading over to your place when I get off."

"Dean, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because what if he sees you?"

"Who?" Dean sounded angry now, and Cas wanted to reach into the phone and soothe him. He wanted to hold him and kiss him and tell him not to be angry because this wasn't Dean's fault, he doesn't *need* to be angry. "Your landlord? I don't care if he fucking sees us."

Cas sighed, listening to the crackle as Dean moved around and the dull murmur of people talking in the background.

"Cas, I'm serious about you moving in with me."

"Can we talk about this later? Please?"

There was a stretch of silence between them before Dean sighed, exasperated.

"You're being stubborn about this; it's bullshit," Dean continued, and Cas put the phone on the bed, rolling onto his side, fingers of his free hand splaying over the sheets, smoothing it down.

"What if this happens again, Dean? We'll both be out of luck."

"Everyone else in this goddamn world gets to live with the person they love, I don't know why we can't," Dean said harshly, and Cas rolled his eyes.

"This isn't a competition, Dean! This isn't something we can win just by practicing! We have to think about this! We've rushed into everything else and it's catching up with us..."

"What the hell does that mean?" Dean said softly, and Cas caught himself, face flushing.

"You know I don't mean it like that," he whispered. "You know I don't so don't make it out like I'm regretting it. It's just facts. We rushed into this. We really did, Dean, and now we have to accommodate; the rest of the world isn't about to keep rushing with us."

"It's not going to be a problem. I live on the top floor and no one will hear us," Cas blushed at Dean's implications, but didn't say anything as he continued, "I'll pay off my landlord if he starts anything; I'll just do that."

"Dean, all I'm saying is we should be careful."

“We’re being careful. If you live with me we can keep an eye on each other. I know what they do to people like us. This way I’ll know where you are. You’ll know where I am. Think about how nice it’ll be to come home and find you in my bed? Huh?” Dean’s voice was suspiciously low and Cas squirmed.

“Don’t talk like that,” he hushed. “Dean, not right now.”

“My place is bigger. The heating works. The hot water stays on for longer than two seconds, the electricity doesn’t go out as soon as it gets windy. My *bed* is bigger.”

“Dean,” Cas groaned, shaking his head. “You’re not hearing me.”

“I’m ignoring you. You’re going to talk yourself out of it, so I have to talk you in. I was going to ask you soon anyway. I hated you living in that closet.”

“Yes, but it was *my* closet, Dean.”

Dean was quiet for a second and then huffed.

“You better be up when I come over.”

“I slept all afternoon, so I will,” Cas answered with an empty sigh.

"I'll see you in about half an hour."

The line went dead and Cas hung the phone up, setting it back onto the floor..

He hummed to himself, fingers pressing into the pillow as he pulled his legs up to his chest, reveling in the silence of the room. He tried to ignore what had happened between him and Hester; he tried to think about Dean, Dean's eyes, Dean's smile, Dean on his motorcycle looking so perfectly at ease with everything.. He wanted to think about Dean and nothing else.

The sound of his bedroom window rattling drew him out of his thoughts, and he rolled over in bed, watching Dean's silhouette move outside his window before he pulled it open. Dean stepped into the bedroom with a smile on his face, closing the window behind him before walking across the room, kneeling at the side of the bed. Cas leaned into the touch when Dean palmed his cheek, slipping his fingers through his hair.

"I missed you," Cas whispered, all traces of his temper erased.

"Yeah, I missed you too," Dean leaned forward and pressed his lips to his forehead, and Cas reached out to close his fingers around the nape of Dean’s neck, eyes shut, exhaling in relief. "So, you're gonna move in with me, right?"

Cas could feel Dean's lips curl into a smile against his forehead, and he pulled back slightly to lookup. He was almost grinning, and Cas could tell that he was excited about Cas saying yes, because Cas really wanted to say yes, but he just *couldn't*.

"Dean-"

"Look, you’re going to be a doctor, this is logical. This makes sense. You need a place to stay, and you're paying for school basically out of pocket," Dean stood and pulled his boots off, crawling into bed with Cas afterward, Cas moving under the arm Dean held up, pressing into him. "And I can take care of you. I *want* to take care of you."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"Then don't. Just - just let me do this, Cas. Just let me do this for you."

Cas opened his mouth, but Dean silenced him.

"Don't think about it," he said sternly, and Cas sagged, Dean's thumb tracing over his swollen face. "I'm gonna make you so happy," he whispered, like he was merely thinking out loud. Cas kissed him again. He knew he would; there wasn't any question.

Dean frowned at the damp pillow, squinting at him. "And quit going to bed with your head wet. You'll catch pneumonia like that!" he laughed, and Cas laughed too, even though it wasn't funny, really. His chest felt less tight, at least. "We'll move your things tomorrow. I'll borrow Bobby's truck," Dean continued, and Cas nodded along, not really listening.

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The next day they did it. It didn't take long; Cas didn't have much and they left the furniture there. His landlord appeared and Dean answered the door when he did – Dean was calm and Cas swallowed thickly.

"You understand why I can't. You two..." the landlord said blandly, attempting to be apologetic.

"I don't really give a rat's ass what you think," Dean explained, and Cas told him he did understand once Dean had left.

"You know, they say you can see a doctor about it," the man said as Cas placed his key into a small yellow envelope. The man's watery gray eyes met his and his fishy lips spread into an even line. "Get rid of the urges or whatever it is. It doesn't have to be like that, son. You can come round to it. That's what that friend of yours said when she told me. It's always a shame when people are sick, and this don't have to be no different."

Cas didn't find any reason to respond and the landlord narrowed his eyes, reaching to shake his hand. Cas didn't care. He shook it, but the grip was powerful and almost hurt.

"Sickness is a sickness; it'll kill you if you aren't careful," the landlord said lowly, Cas glaring at him.

"Thank you, but I'm afraid I have to go now," Cas insisted, gritting his teeth.

He shoved past the man, holding his box of records. Dean waited for him at the curb, taking the box from him, the weight out of his tired arms. Dean closed the back of the truck and gave him a sympathetic look. Cas touched his hand, squeezing it.

"Let's go home," he said quietly, and Dean grinned.

"That's more like it," he laughed, walking around to step into the cab, Cas following. He shook his head, turning his back on the building, a strange feeling settling in his stomach. Maybe he was just nervous, but he couldn't shake the feeling they weren't home. Not really. Not yet.

They hauled the boxes into Dean's apartment building, and no one stopped them to question them, or gave them any weird looks as they made their way into the elevator, taking it to the top floor. Cas shifted the box in his arms, leaning closer to Dean, their elbows brushing. And Dean looked down at Cas, and Cas smiled up at him, leaning up to gently kiss him before the elevator doors opened up at the top floor.

Dean's apartment was at the end of the wall, and there weren't many rooms on the top floor, which was actually great. It just meant less people for them to have to deal with. Dean set his box down to dig through his pockets for his keys, unlocking the door and pushing it open. When Cas walked across the threshold, everything felt different.

He had been to Dean's apartment plenty of times before, so he was familiar with it, but now, it felt like he was walking into it for the first time. It felt new and unfamiliar, because not only was it Dean's, it was his; this was going to be his new home.

He heard Dean pick up the box from outside, and Cas sat his box by the doorway before Dean set his down beside it.

"Welcome home," Dean grinned and curled an arm around Cas' waist, pulling him against his side. Cas smiled and pressed his face into the side of his neck, wrapping an arm around his middle.

"We still have a couple of more boxes."

"Yeah, all of your damn records. How many do you even own?"

"At least over a hundred. I lost count." Cas smiled sheepishly and Dean pressed a kiss into his hair before pulling away.

"Well, come on, let's get all your stuff inside."

They hauled the rest of Cas' belongings into the house, and Cas went about making room in Dean's closet for his clothes because Dean had said that he "wasn't going to let him live out of a bag. His closet was big enough to fit all of their clothes." He shoved all of Dean's clothes to one side of the closet, digging out some stray hangers to hang his shirts on the other side. He didn't have as many clothes as Dean, so it was easier to fit everything in together.

By the time he had finished that, he wandered into the living room to find Dean sitting on the floor, boxes of Cas' records around him; all of them open. Dean grunted and grumbled to himself, mumbling to himself about *something* and he stilled when Cas moved to stand beside him, looking down at the floor. He was fiddling with Cas' turntable.

Cas laughed softly and sat on the floor beside him, reaching out to gently brush Dean's fingers out of the way, fixing the turntable and turning it on.

"I wanted to get some music playing before you came out, but I couldn't figure out this damn thing."

"Well, aren't you a romantic," Cas teased, and Dean shut him up with a brush of lips, fingers curling and tangling in his hair. Cas pulled back and moved to one of the open boxes closet to him, pulling a record out. He flipped it over in his hands, going over the songs on the back before pulling it out of the sleeve and setting it down on the turntable.

The music started and Cas set the cover down, moving back over to sit beside Dean, who immediately wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him against his side, pressing a kiss to his temple. Cas squirmed and pushed back against him, laughing softly when Dean's lips trailed down the side of his face and over his cheek and his jaw, eventually making his way to his mouth.

"It's fine," Dean insisted and Cas tried to smile. Dean rubbed his arm with the flat of his hand, squeezing gently. "Hey."

Cas met his eyes, knowing he wasn't very convincing by the worry that appeared on Dean's

brow.

“I’m serious. It’s going to be fine,” Dean soothed, kissing him again. “You trust me, don’t you?”

Cas nodded, pulling off his glasses and fiddling with them nervously. Dean pulled them out of his hands and set them up on the table with the record, taking Cas’ face in his hands.

“Look at me.”

Cas did, swallowing as Dean’s thumbs stroked over his cheeks.

“This is going to be really good, ok? I know it’s been hard, but you’re going to keep acing at school, and I’m going to win this tournament and things are just going to keep getting better. This is a good start, you know? You’re here, and this will be home for us.”

Cas reached up and touched Dean’s hand, fingers closing around his wrist. He took a small breath, tongue skirting over his teeth before he met Dean’s eyes again.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” he began, whispering, “I just feel like something’s going to happen to you, and I feel like it’s going to be my fault. What if someone hurts you? What if... what if somebody hurts you Dean, and it’s because of me and being with you, or your career -”

“No one is going to take me away from you,” Dean said fiercely, and Cas stared at him, stunned by the intensity of his voice. After a quiet moment his eyes softened. “Why should I be afraid of anything? I belong to you,” he continued, touching Cas’ chin.

“Okay,” Cas replied, and he leaned forward, kissing Dean again. Dean’s hands shifted, brushing back his hair. Dean pulled away, and Cas bent his head into the crook of Dean’s neck. Dean scratched his back lightly, and Cas closed his eyes, listening to the record. Dean shifted a little and Cas grumbled, but Dean was insisting.

“Come on,” Dean laughed, standing and Cas gave him a confused look when Dean offered him his hand. He slid his fingers into Dean’s and Dean hauled him up, pulling them against each other. Cas laughed.

“Dancing, really?” he said incredulously as Dean started swaying, melting into a slow twist, holding Cas’ hands.

*“I’m gonna stick like glue, stick because I’m stuck on you,”* Dean sang, ignoring him and Cas shook his head at it, trying to pull away.

“Oh, come on!” Dean grinned, tightening his hands on Cas’ wrists, “Come on, you love Elvis! You’re so hot for him, Cas, and you can’t even deny it!” He tugged at Cas’ arms, pulling them around his waist insistently.

Cas blushed, and ducked his head, going along with it; Dean’s hands wandering over his hips and ass and up to his back, pulling them in. Cas’ fingers trailed over his arms, the white t-shirt hugging his torso, touching the cigarettes rolled into his sleeve with a smile.

“I wish I could take you dancing,” Cas whispered in his ear. “Show you off.” He kissed Dean’s neck, slipping his hands into his back pockets.

“Mmm,” Dean hummed, still rocking with him. “you know, what I’m wondering is, who’s better in bed you think? Me or Elvis Presley?”

Cas rolled his eyes.

“Easy,” he said, brushing his mouth over Dean’s just barely. “Elvis Presley.”

Dean stilled for a second and then resumed his swaying, walking forward and back with Cas in time to the music. “Well, you might be biased.”

“Maybe,” Cas mumbled, Dean’s tongue keeping his own busy. “He *was* my first fantasy...it’s all very nostalgic.”

Dean chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest, radiating through Cas’ sweater and shirt, vibrating his ribs.

“You’re puttin’ me on. Really?” he asked and Cas flushed, but felt himself shrugging.

“He’s a celebrity. Rachel adored him. I did too.” He knew his voice had hitched a little when he said his sister’s name, but Dean appeared to be bent on distracting him.

“Did you beat off listening to him or something?”

Cas felt the blush as low as his chest.

“Jesus, Dean, really...” he said, trying to keep the rasp from his voice. Were they seriously going to talk about this? *Now?*

*At least he’s got your mind off of it...* Cas thought, but not entirely. The sinking feeling was still there, just muted and pushed back. Dean demanded his attention, kneading his sides, un-tucking his shirt to tap his fingers against his hip bones.

“You ever see him live?”

“No, never got the-” Dean kissed his chin. “-chance. Dean, are you jealous or something?”

“Why would I be jealous?” Dean mused, pulling Cas toward the hallway before pushing him up against the wall. “He can’t touch you like I can.” Dean pinned him with his hips and Cas sucked air through his teeth, kissing him, hot and open, pulling at Dean’s hair.

He could feel Dean’s fingers undoing the buttons on his sweater and pushing it off and Cas let his mind go blank; he helped, shimmying out of his undershirt, before pawing at Dean’s jeans.

“You first,” Dean said, brushing his hands aside, and Cas fumbled with his belt, undoing the buttons and stepping out of his pants, kicking them aside. Dean lifted his arms, rolling his own t-shirt up and casting it off, his bare skin hot against Cas’ as he rocked him back into the wall, the hard lines of their bodies seared together.

Cas needed this; he needed the zero to sixty of Dean, the drag of denim against his crotch when Dean dropped to his knees, tongue trailing over his stomach, making him drop his head back against the wall.

“Bet you like watching him up there on stage, dancing and moving, huh?” Dean mumbled, moving forward, dragging his lips along the inside of Castiel’s thigh, biting at the soft skin before laving his tongue over it.

Cas whined softly, fingers grasping at Dean’s hair, tugging and pulling, Dean’s stubble raking against the sensitive skin. He shook his head, playing the innocent-not Cas, not sweet little Cas. Oh, no.

“Dean, please,” he said breathily, but the harsh grip of his hand in Dean’s hair said differently.

“Gets you all hot and bothered, don’t it?” Dean mouthed at his dick through his briefs and Cas bit his lip, hips shifting forward into the damp heat. God, if Dean’d just blow him already, but he teased instead, cupping Cas suggestively through the thin cotton with one hand as he pulled himself up, meeting his mouth.

Dean wasn’t gentle about it; he refused to baby him. Cas kept reminding himself that it was safe, that no one could hear them in the hall. This was safe. Their bodies were safe here. Dean’s tongue petted wetly at his, mouth slanted like he meant to get as much of Cas as he could. Cas gasped, matching him, feeling Dean’s hand drag slowly over the growing bulge in his underwear. His voice broke, but Dean wouldn’t budge, wouldn’t let him move his head, keeping him pinned there as he devoured him in the most graceless way Cas could ever imagine someone kissing another person. He turned him inside out, sucking and biting at his swollen lips. It was filthy and wonderful, the dirty sounds making Cas’ hands bold as they bit into Dean’s ass. His lungs burned.

Dean replaced his hand with his knee, grinding it slow against Cas’ cock, making him shift and rut without a shred of dignity into Dean’s leg.

“You’d make him queer,” Dean growled. “With an ass like yours, you’d make him queer.”

Cas yanked Dean’s hips in, eager to use him, to get off on the rough denim against his thighs. His foot brushed against the fabric of his neglected pants as he opened his legs wider, Dean guiding the slow roll of his hips as he fucked himself.

“Make me come,” he chanted, head lolling back and Dean latched onto his neck. Cas hissed, squeezing Dean’s waist. “Dean, fuck me good, make me come, baby, please.”

“You want me to fuck you?” Dean whispered. “Want me to fuck you so good? Fuck my boy till he forgets all about Elvis?”

Cas moaned, long and loud. He felt hot, and mad, and manic. Fuck Hester, fuck his landlord, his brothers—he wanted to ride Dean’s dick, he wanted to come on it, he wanted to scream as Dean laid into him. He wanted it fast and rough and hard, and he wanted Dean. He wanted Dean to fuck the pain out of him, make him forget all of it, because only Dean could.

“Fuck your boy,” he repeated, and Dean pushed him down to his knees, Cas at eye level as he undid his pants and freed his cock. He jacked himself a few times, grunting, and Cas looked up at him, eyes glazed, drifting forward, mouth closing over the tip.

“Get it wet,” Dean rasped. “Nice and wet for me.”

Cas took as much as he could, licking all over, his mind devoid of any thought except the task Dean had given him. Dean pushed him away after a few minutes and Cas stood, turning to the wall while Dean slid his underwear down, keeping him steady as he stepped out of it. He spread his legs wide, eager, but to his surprise, Dean didn’t line up his dick but hooked two fingers into Cas’ slack mouth.

“Suck ‘em,” he whispered, and Cas obliged, coating them, dipping his tongue in between, circling his hips mindlessly as he did so, brushing Dean’s cock with the motion. Dean’s chest hitched where it touched Cas’ back, and he pulled his fingers away from his mouth with a wet sound, Cas pressing his cheek to the wall.

“Breathe,” he encouraged, kissing his shoulder, teasing over his hole before pushing in without any more warning. He fucked his hole a few times and then added the other, and Cas opened his mouth wider, panting, Dean’s other hand stroking softly at his hip and down towards his cock.

“No,” he whimpered, and Dean slid his hand back up to grab at his thigh. “No, not yet.”

Dean chuckled and worked his fingers, stretching and scissoring, kissing the back of his neck and down his spine. Cas could feel the sweat bead and roll off of him, every brush of Dean’s jeans against the back of his legs sending him on pins and needles.

“God, just *fuck* me,” he demanded, and the next thing he knew, the blunt head of Dean’s cock was sliding past his rim. He tried to keep himself from writhing as Dean split him wide, fat and hot, every little scrape at his insides causing a sharp burn.

“Fuck, you’re tight tonight,” Dean moaned, curling over him, and Cas fucked himself back, taking the pain with every movement, working with it. Dean’s hands bumped over his chest and slid down, planting on his hips as Dean jerked forward into him, the metal fixtures on his belt buckle rattling. Cas gasped and ground back, nails scraping at the wall. He panted and moaned, caught in a fever as Dean fucked him harder and harder, making him lift up on the balls of his feet and curl his toes. He arched, trying to get the angle right so Dean hit that spot that went straight to his dick.

“Fuck me,” he said over and over. “Make me come on your cock, oh god, I wanna come.”

Dean thrust into him, and Cas met him on every stroke, the hall filled with the sound of their bodies coming together and Cas moaning, almost crying along with it. It was so good, Dean’s dick was so good, and he fisted his own cock, hand working faster and faster in time with Dean.

“Shit,” Dean grunted, watching him, bending to press an open-mouthed kiss to his neck. “Mother fuck, Cas.”

“So good,” he slurred, “So good, oh *fuck*, you’re so good.” His voice was pinched and tight, and he knew he wasn’t going to last longer. He sobbed, biting his other hand, and Dean kissed his back, mouthing along his shoulder, hands barely even working as Cas rode his cock.

“You gonna come baby? You gonna come on my cock?”

Cas nodded, and Dean took him deep, grinding into that one spot .

“Oh, fuck, I’m coming,” he cried, and he pushed away from the wall with one hand. “I’m coming, I’m coming, oh god-” His voice was strung out to a whine, and he jerked forward as Dean kept fucking into him, . Through the haze, he felt Dean slip from him and then there was come cooling on his back. He panted, his knees shaking, his head bowed forward, his hand still mindlessly jacking his dick, squeezing the last of the come from the tip. Sweat rolled off his temple and he let out a harsh breath, falling into the wall.

“Jesus,” Dean whimpered, “Holy fucking Jesus.” He stooped, and picked up his t-shirt, kissing Cas’ shoulder as he mopped the jizz from his back, kissing the knob of his spine and his shoulder blade as well.

Cas flexed his fingers, pushing his palm to the wall, eyes squeezed shut, breathing through the high.

“You were on tonight,” Dean said sleepily, almost laughing. “Babe, I thought you’d lost your mind.”

“That was the point,” he mumbled, suddenly aware of how stiff he was. He gently straightened himself, wobbling from the vertigo as he heard Dean tucking himself up, not bothering to zip up his fly.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked, picking up Cas’ clothes and tossing them on the couch for

later. Cas pulled his briefs up and turned, tugging Dean's shirt out of his hands to wipe at his chest and the wall.

He shrugged, not looking at Dean's face. His arms felt loose and rubbery.

"I don't know," he answered. "I don't know. I just didn't want to think for a while."

"Don't be like this," Dean insisted, and when Cas didn't turn to him, he put his hands on his shoulders, "Hey, look at me."

Cas looked at him and Dean kissed him softly, but Cas didn't kiss back. "Don't be like that," he whispered, and Cas broke away, stumbling slightly as he went to the bedroom, getting under the sheets. Dean followed him and Cas felt bad, watching him go to the window and light a cigarette, staring down at the traffic.

"Dean," he sighed, and Dean turned, the smoke trailing out of his mouth. The sun was a soft purple above the building beside them, outlining him in gold. Cas tried to smile, holding out his arms, "Come here," he whispered, and Dean stubbed out the cigarette stubbornly.

"I don't feel like it," he said, sounding hurt, and Cas felt his face crumple.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again, his chest constricting. "Dean, I'm sorry," the tear cut down his face before he could stop it and Dean came to him, lowering himself onto the bed, pulling him into his arms.

"Shh," he murmured, rubbing his back, "It's alright."

Cas gasped into his chest, rubbing at his eyes.

"You've been working yourself up too much, with school and this apartment bullshit, and that stunt in the hall. You're strung too tight, baby."

He sniffed, breathing harshly, nodding his head. "I didn't get to say goodbye to my sister," he sobbed, and Dean held him tighter, rocking him.

"Let me fix it," Dean hushed into his hair. "I'll fix it."

Cas knew he couldn't, but he wanted to believe it. He calmed himself and pawed at his eyes, shaking his head, pulling away. Dean watched him cautiously, hand trailing down to his neck.

"I love you," Dean told him, and Cas nodded silently, touching Dean's leg.

"I know," he replied, voice wet, and Dean nudged him till he was lying down and his broad, warm body had settled around him.

"I'll fix it, Cas," Dean murmured, kissing his neck, and as Cas closed his eyes, he wasn't exactly sure what Dean meant. He wanted to tell him it was okay. It was okay if he couldn't fix it. That didn't matter; that wasn't why he loved him.

He fell asleep instead, Dean's hand over his chest, reminding him to breathe.

## Chapter 3

**June, 1966**

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There was something missing when Cas woke up, the warmth beside him gone, the bed cool beneath his touch. Music was pouring down the hallway into the open door of the bedroom, and Cas sleepily rubbed at his eyes, sitting up in bed and slipping his fingers through his hair with a yawn. Dean wasn't in bed with him, but he was still in the apartment. For a moment Cas thought it was Saturday and Dean had gone out to the track for the practice runs, but it was Sunday.

Faintly, he could hear Dean singing, a little louder than the music, and way off-key. Cas laughed to himself and hauled his stiff body out of bed, stretching his arms above his head and twisting his back, working out the stiffness of his joints and muscles. He opened the closet door and dug through the clothes hanging, coming back with a sweater and pulling it over his head; it nearly swallowed him whole, and he realized that it was one of Dean's. He hadn't even known that Dean owned a sweater. Hehe thought the only thing he owned that was any protection from the cold was his leather jacket.

He wandered out of the room and into the kitchen where Dean was, hovering over the stove, moving something around in a pan with a spatula. And then the smell hit Cas, and he moved over to where Dean was, arms snaking around his waist as he rested his head onto his shoulder. Dean jumped slightly, and he stopped singing, the music more clear without Dean's voice rising above it.

"Did I wake you up?" Dean said as he pulled the bacon out of the pan and set it onto the waiting plate beside the stove, turning the burner off and turning around in Cas' arms.

Cas hummed softly and shook his head, pressing his face into the crook of Dean's neck. Dean laughed softly and brought his arms up, holding Cas against his chest.

"You've got a big day today," Cas mumbled against Dean's neck, lips brushing against his skin.

"You're gonna go, right?"

"Of course," Cas laughed softly, pulling back to look up at Dean. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Now, what's for breakfast?"

They ate at the table, Dean sitting across from Cas, shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth, and Cas looked on with a fond smile on his face. It had been about two weeks since he had moved in with Dean, and they had fallen into a routine with each other so easily. When Cas had classes, he woke up before Dean, showered and got ready, and kissed him before he headed out. On his days off, Dean woke up before Cas, letting him sleep in, and Dean normally cooked breakfast for the two of them.

And when Dean worked, Cas would stay up to wait for him to get home, busying himself with his homework or studying, and when Dean would get home, they'd have dinner together with a record playing in the background. It was a good routine. It worked.

Cas stretched his leg forward, the top of his foot grazing over Dean's leg, and Dean looked up at him, grinning.

"You're gonna do great today," Cas smiled as he picked up a piece of bacon to chew on.

"Thanks, babe," Dean laughed softly, finishing off his scrambled eggs. "But I always do great, don't I?"

"Don't be so smug."

He finished off his bacon and pushed his plate towards Dean, not too fond of eggs himself. Dean gave him a questioning look, but Cas shrugged.

"You're gonna need it so you can blow all those other guys away."

"Don't like my cooking?"

Dean pulled the plate toward himself and began to eat the eggs, and Cas rolled his eyes, pushing away from the table and moving to the other side. He leaned over Dean and wrapped his arms around his neck, sleeves hanging over his hands past his fingers, and he pressed a kiss to Dean's cheek.

"Don't be ridiculous, I love your cooking."

Dean made an approving sound when Cas kissed his cheek again, and then he pulled away, heading toward the living room. He rifled through his records, which were now stacked against the wall beside the turntable, and pulled one out, replacing the one currently playing. Dean wandered into the living not long after, his sweats hanging low on his hips, and Cas took a moment to let his eyes rake over him.

"Enjoying the view?"

"Mm, I sure am," Cas hummed when Dean slipped his arms around his waist, pulling him against his chest as his fingers slipped beneath the hem of the sweater, dancing over his stomach. He grinned when Dean kissed along the side of his neck, hands trailing higher, warm against his skin.

"Gonna win this race for you, baby."

Cas squirmed in Dean's hold, turning around and planting his palms flat against his chest, looking up at him. Dean frowned, but Cas quickly kissed it into a smile.

"You need to get ready." Dean leaned in to kiss him again, and slid his hand up, fingers curling around the nape of his neck, slipping through the fine hairs at the base. "I'm serious," Cas said when he pulled away. "Go shower and get ready."

Dean groaned, untangling himself from Cas.

"You're just gonna nag me all day, aren't you?"

"I will if you don't get ready." Cas folded his arms and Dean threw his hands up in surrender, walking toward their bedroom. He didn't relax until he heard the shower come on, and he moved across the room to gather up one of his books; he flopped onto the couch, pulling his sleeves back and opening to where he had marked it.

He rubbed his forehead tiredly, closing his eyes every so often to rethink what he was reading, trying to get the words to stick. He was so lost in thinking about cell respiration he didn't hear Dean open the bedroom door, hot, humid, air coming out with him. Cas scratched absently at his hair, reciting something under his breath, the bureau drawers rattling in the other room and the closet door squeaking open as Dean rifled for his gear.

“You seen my gloves?” he called and Cas didn’t look up from the page. There was more rummaging and Cas inclined his head to the side, his reaction delayed, opening his mouth to say something that he couldn’t figure to say, eyes still tracing words, mind still slipping it away for later.

“Babe,” Dean said appearing out of nowhere, his t-shirt clinging to his chest, his jeans still undone. He leaned against the doorframe, watching Cas before shaking his head and going to put his arm over the back of the couch, placing his hand over the text.

“What?” Cas said, breaking out of his daze, looking up.

“Have you seen my gloves?” Dean asked, eyebrows lifted. Cas wracked his brain, tapping at the book’s binding.

“Did you check on the table? No, wait, check the nightstand drawer. Sometimes I throw them in there.”

Dean pinched his cheek, laughing, and ambled back into the bedroom, humming to himself as he rifled through the drawer.

“Found ‘em!”

“Ok!” Cas replied, going back to his book, but he couldn’t focus like before, too busy listening to the sound of Dean taking his speed suit out, laying it on the bed. He smiled, playing with the corner of the page he was looking at. What the hell. He threw the book down and climbed off the couch, coming into the bedroom just as Dean had worked the zipper of the suit over his belly button, the sleeves hanging and dangling around his hips.

“You’re supposed to be studying,” he commented, shimmying an arm into it, the stitching accentuating the soft curve of his bicep and the broad sweep of his shoulders. Cas shrugged, wandering further into the room, coming to wiggle the zipper up Dean’s torso for him, leaving the snap at the collar undone. That wouldn’t get closed up till he was on the track. He ran his hands over Dean’s chest, loving the feel of the leather. His gloves were still on the bed and Cas picked them up, helping Dean work them over his fingers.

“This is more important,” Cas said after a while, rubbing Dean’s sides, kissing his chin and then finding his mouth, Dean’s hands settling on his waist. “You’re going to do amazing today.”

“Bring it home, right?” Dean laughed, and Cas touched the spot he’d just kissed with his thumb. Dean smiled, the pre-race gleam already gathering in his eyes. “I’m going to win the money and we’ll take a vacation. For like three days or something.”

“Three days?” Cas marveled, , “You spoil me.”

“Yes, and we’re going to actually leave the house. I have something planned.” Dean shrugged, playing it off. Cas fell in love with his shy smile and the way he fidgeted with the hem on Cas’ sweater, staring at it, “Is this mine?” he asked and Cas touched his gloved hands.

“I’m so proud of you,” Cas mumbled, smiling, still staring at their hands, “I really am. Whether you win or not.”

“Winning *is* nice, though,” Dean responded, ducking his head, nosing at Cas’ cheek. Cas had to laugh.

“Winning is very nice.”

“Does it impress you?”

“Hmm, not so much as how hard you work for it.”

“But the race is fun to watch, isn’t it? When I smoke ‘em?” Dean teased and Cas conceded it was.

It was wonderful watching Dean on the track. He was so sure of himself there. Nobody could touch him, and he was good at it – it was undisputable. Cas remembered the first time he had seen all the trophies in the shelf of Dean’s bedroom. He hadn’t ever really understood how good Dean was ‘til he saw them. They were all first or second place. The medals were no different.

“Please be careful, though,” Cas insisted and Dean rolled his eyes at that.

“How many have I told you – I know what I’m doing. There is literally no chance of anything bad happening.” He put his hands on Cas’ shoulders and Cas rolled them off, giving him a stare.

“I’m serious. You and I both know you let it go on the track and you can be aggressive and sometimes you take risks,” Cas trailed off, Dean shaking his head, having heard it all before.

“You know what would really help? If you came down and kissed me right before – everyone would be so stunned I’d get a ten second head start. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about anybody sneaking up on me.”

“You don’t need any kind of head start,” Cas replied, jabbing his sides. “That’s not the point, and you know it. Just be careful. Winning isn’t everything – and I’d prefer you in one piece, even if it meant they turned the gas off.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Dean offered, rubbing Cas’ arms with the flats of his hand. “I’m serious, ok? It’s not going to happen because I’m going to bag it and you can quit worrying so much.”

“You’re lucky you’re pretty, Dean Winchester,” Cas grumped, and Dean laughed, draping his arms over Cas, staring down at him.

“It’d be nice you know. I see all of them with their girlfriends before,” he purred into Cas’ ear.

“Don’t talk like that,” Cas whispered, suddenly sad. Dean kissed him, and he tasted like tobacco and mint toothpaste, and Cas melted into him, arms winding around his back.

“I should talk like that more often,” Dean hushed into his mouth and Cas growled, playfully nipping at his lip.

“For luck,” he laughed, slapping Dean’s ass, and Dean stared at him for a long moment before taking his face in his hands and kissing him till he couldn’t breathe.

“God I’m crazy about you,” he muttered, almost to himself, kissing him in a way that smushed their noses together. “I’m so crazy for you.”

“Go on,” Cas ordered, clearing his throat, shoving him off. He picked up his bag off the bed and shoved it at him. “You’re going to miss registration, and then what am I going to do?”

Dean grinned, letting Cas push him to the door. Cas was halfway to closing it when he turned and stuck his hand in, making Cas pull up with a yelp.

“Dean I almost broke your fingers!” he cried, and Dean opened the door with his shoulder, sticking his head in.

“I love you,” he smiled. “We should go out after!”

“I love you too – and win first. We’ll talk about celebrating later,” Cas sighed, giving up one more kiss that turned into two before Dean finally let himself be shoved out the door. He was going to give him a heart attack one of these days.

Sam picked him up an hour later in Jess’s Ford, Cas sliding into the backseat, stretching his legs out. They chose a good spot, parking the car on slight rise along one of the curves, spreading a blanket on the hood. Sam lifted Jess onto it and she tucked her feet up, smiling in excitement while she adjusted the scarf around her head, fiddling with the little rose pin keeping it in place. Cas came and climbed up beside her, bringing the bag of oranges she had thrown in the backseat with him. Sam leaned against the side of the car, bending to whisper into Jess’s ear, and she covered her mouth at his words, stifling some kind of shocked giggle.

“Sammy, don’t talk like that!” she laughed, elbowing him, Sam kissing her cheek and then straightened to bounce on the balls of his feet. Cas was so glad Sam was there; he was terribly smart and was attending Stanford on a scholarship with the hopes that he could get into the law program within the year. Whether he knew about the money Dean had saved or not, Cas didn’t know, but he did know that it meant the world to Dean to have his baby brother rooting him on.

“Sam says Dean’s going to work them today – give them a real good run for the first half, let them get confident, and then pull it in big at the end,” Jess said conversationally, peeling an orange with one pretty fingernail.

Cas nodded.

“He likes to give us a show,” Sam injected, and Jess rolled her eyes and winked at Cas. Cas blushed – Jessica was too pretty to be throwing winks around, it seemed. She melted his heart with just a bat of her eyelashes.

“You’d want a show too if you were as good as he is. He must get bored just getting straight wins. You have to do something to keep yourself entertained!”

“He’s reckless,” Cas said bitterly, crossing his arms nervously. “He plays too close to the quick and he’s going to do something stupid one day.”

Jessica cleaned off a slice of orange and nibbled on it, nodding. “You know, I said the same thing to Sam the other day, but you talk sense into him, don’t you? He always listens to you!”

Cas shrugged, pulling his glasses off to clean them and then replace them on his face, pushing his dark hair out of his eyes. “I might as well be teaching poetry to fish,” he laughed, and Jessica giggled, putting the rest of the orange into her mouth, turning to Sam to look at the program. Another race was taking place on the track and Cas listened to the crowd cheering, as someone won. Cas shook his hands out with anxious energy. It was almost time for Dean’s race.

“You want the binoculars?” Jess said with a smile, holding them out. Cas took them with thanks and peered across to the starting line, scanning for Dean. He smiled.

“54!” he said happily, and Jessica clapped her hands, tilting her head to look for the number. Dean walked his bike to the starting line and then slung his leg over it, crouched low in the seat. His body was nearly horizontal, the flat plane of his spine parallel with the sleek line of the bike. With his helmet on, Cas couldn’t see his face, but he could see the flex of his fingers, the subtle shift of his shoulders as he readied himself. There was a pause – Cas smiled.

“Win it for your boy,” Cas whispered, and the next thing he knew, the engines roared and the

cluster drifted forward. Dean did work them – he played around for the first half, but 72 was aggressive and Dean was not to be trifled with. Cas hissed as they sped around the corner, swearing that Dean’s leg nearly grazed the pavement the turn was so close. He passed the binoculars to Sam who followed him around the track.

“Sure lead!” Sam said brightly, and Cas leaned forward, watching as they came up around the bend closest to their parked car. The three of them held their breath and yelled as Dean went past, baiting the rider beside him, neck and neck.

“Give ‘em hell!” Sam yelled, and Jess fanned herself.

“Too much excitement!” she laughed, and Cas grinned. It felt like it had just started, but the race was over quickly.

Cas threw up his hands, Jessica whooping while Sam pumped a fist, Dean sliding over the finish line like he owned the track, leading so easily it was almost criminal. He really did bully them in the first half before stealing it in the final leg. Cas looked away as Jess and Sam shared a kiss, Sam brimming with pride. He took up the neglected binoculars again, easily finding Dean’s number.

Bobby was down in the pit, and he took his hat off, waved it and then replaced it, hustling to Dean. Cas’ eyes followed Dean’s every movement as he parked his bike, shaking his head out as he pulled his helmet off and tucked it in the crook of his arm. He accepted the flask that Bobby offered him, leaning back to take a good pull of it. Bobby ruffled his hair as he passed it back and then pulled him in, head locking his neck to hug him, and Cas knew Dean was forcing himself to be humble, pushing the older man off with a silent laugh.

Cas flushed and Sam shoved him.

“Well, we should probably go congratulate him!” Sam exclaimed, lifting Jessica off the hood. She squealed, waving the program, talking about other races, but Cas knew they’d pale in comparison to watching Dean race. Sam set her back on the ground like she weighed nothing, Cas jumping off as well, folding up the blanket, Jess scattering the orange peels into the grass. They piled back into the car and followed the others around to the front of the track, parking in the grass nearer to the pit. Dean had wheeled his motorcycle off to the side and was talking to Bobby as they all approached, his hair slicked from the helmet and his eyes bright and shining. They hung back while a reporter snapped his picture with the trophy and did a quick interview, Dean turning over his shoulder to wink at them when Bobby answered more specific questions.

“He’ll make the front page of the AFM newsletter, no doubt,” Cas joked, and Sam snorted, eager to go towards Dean, his arm slung around Jess’s waist.

“You’re terrible,” Jess laughed, and Cas smiled, watching Dean gesture at something on his bike, talking about the make. He looked so lean in his leathers and Cas licked his lips unconsciously. Dean was always in a good mood after a big win.

As soon as the reporter was gone, Sam strode forward, taking Dean by the arms and shaking him lightly, a grin on his face.

“You were mint!” He smiled. “absolutely mint!” Dean shrugged, pulling him into his arms again.

“I’m glad you could make it,” he muttered into Sam’s ear, and Sam held him back, Dean clapping his shoulder and then releasing him, Sam launching into the list of questions he had saved up.

Jess stayed back, leaning against Cas in Sam’s absence, the backs of their hands brushing,

watching Dean show off his bike and his gear, grinning toothily at Sam as his younger brother bent forward, inspecting everything. Cas smiled down at Jess as she smiled up at him. She was beautiful, the sun making her hair a bright gold color. She was perfect for Sam.

Jess cleared her throat when Sam and Dean began bickering over something, and they both stopped, straightening up.

"Jess!" Dean said sweetly and she came forward and threw her arms around his neck.

"You were the finest one out there," she teased and Dean laughed nervously as she stepped back, adjusting her purse in her hand with a sigh, addressing the group.

"Well, Sam promised me dinner, and I'm going to hold him to his word. So, Cas, if you want, we can drop you off at home before?"

"Oh," Cas looked between Jess and Dean, and Dean shrugged a shoulder before wiggling away from Sam when Sam began to jab at his side, laughing.

"Or Dean can take Cas. I mean, they're both going to the same place," Sam interjected, moving to stand beside Jess, curling his arm around her waist. "Plus, it'll be one less place to stop off before dinner – that way we can get back to campus earlier."

"Great idea, Sammy! You two go have dinner, have fun! And be safe. Call when you get back, alright?" Dean grinned again, and Cas could tell that it was from nerves. Dean really didn't know how to act with Cas around his brother and his girlfriend, and to tell the truth, Cas didn't know either. He was sure that Sam and Jess knew about the two of them, but neither of them had said a word about it.

Sometimes Dean would tell Cas that he wanted to tell Sam - tell about how much he loved Cas - but he just didn't know how, and Cas didn't know how to help him. Sam knew that Dean wasn't straight, but he'd never outright asked about it. Cas could only try to reassure Dean that his brother seemed to love him no matter what. Sam didn't seem like he was going to quit talking to either of them anytime soon, which relieved Dean temporarily, but he was antsy around them nonetheless.

"Well, we'd better get going if we're going to get into the restaurant," Jess smiled, pulling away from Sam to wrap her arms around Cas suddenly. After a moment Cas hugged her back, his face brushing against her curly hair. He squeezed her tight, and when she pulled away, he felt a sort of longing; it reminded him of his sister, and he wanted to wrap his arms around her again and just hold her. "It was nice seeing you, Cas," she whispered in his ear, leaning back to take his hand in both of hers. "You should definitely hang out with us one day. We should all get together and go somewhere. Go see a movie or something!"

"Maybe one day, Jess," Sam jumped in, slugging Dean in the shoulder before Dean pulled him into another hug, purposefully squeezing the life out of him. Sam squirmed in his hold, but eventually brought his arms up, patting Dean's back. "Congratulations on the win, Dean. We'll see you guys around!" He waved as Jess pulled herself away from Cas, taking Sam's hand and walking back to their car.

Men were filing out of the track one at a time with their bikes, and Cas could see Bobby heading their way. He moved to stand beside Dean, filling the gap, automatically leaning toward him until their arms were barely touching. If Bobby noticed when he approached them, he didn't say anything. Instead, he handed over the money that Dean had made, and then Dean handed it over to Cas.

"Put that in your pocket."

Cas nodded and took the cash from Dean and slipped it away.

"That was a great race, boy," Bobby was smiling, and he turned to Cas. "You should be proud of him, Cas."

"Oh, I am." Cas' cheeks flushed and he toed at the ground, smiling.

"Well, I oughta head home. I'll see you at the garage tomorrow, kid." Bobby nodded towards Cas, "Cas." and Cas said his brief goodbye watching him walk away.

He let his eyes wander to Dean's face, trying his best to keep his tone neutral. "Good run," he started and Dean nodded, looking past Cas' shoulder at the other competitors. He nodded again, glancing at Cas through his lashes.

"Yeah – too easy though. Coulda used a challenge. That'll be next week during trials. Boyd is in town and he owes me a rematch," Dean said, pulling his gloves off, flexing his fingers. Cas longed to reach out and run his hands through Dean's helmet hair, but he had to refrain for the moment.

Dean kept staring at him and Cas swallowed.

"What?" he said in a low voice, and Dean edged closer.

"I wish I could kiss you right now." He bent his head right against Cas' ear, and Cas' cheeks went red.

"Don't say that."

"Why not?"

Cas sighed and pulled away from Dean, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"What if someone hears?"

"Then let them hear."

Cas rolled his eyes, but all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around Dean's middle and bury his face into the crook of his neck and just tell him how much he loved him. Not everyone had left the track yet, so instead he just reached out to him, fingers trailing over the leather covering his arm.

"I'm proud of you."

Dean smiled and caught Cas' fingers as they passed his hand, turning his body to block the view so that no one could see. And they stood there for a few minutes, just barely holding hands, but it was enough for them.

"Come on," Dean continued, tugging on Cas a little, and Cas followed, only a step behind till he caught up and walked beside him. Dean led him all the way back to the storage building on the side of the track, and once he knew no one was back there, pulled Cas around, pushing him up against the grey cement. There was a roar of motorcycles as the next race started, the crowd cheering, unaware of them.

Cas sank into the kiss, hands rubbing Dean's arms up to his shoulders and then to his chest, fingers slipping to the zipper of Dean's speed suit, pulling it down to reveal the plain t-shirt under it Dean shrugged out of the sleeves, still kissing him, his pelvis keeping Cas pinned to the wall.

“You like watching your boy?” Dean rasped, dragging his hands down Cas’ torso, nipping at Cas’ neck. Cas’ nails bit at the small of Dean’s back as he pushed his hips up to meet Dean’s, sighing against Dean’s hair, leaning back to give him more access to his skin.

“Watching me win – so I can bring it home and take care of you...” Dean drawled, his thumbs pressing into Cas’ hips, rocking with him. “Take such good care of you. Take such good care of my baby,” he continued, sliding their mouths together, swallowing up the moan Cas emitted, hands dropping to his ass, pulling him in as close as he could get.

Dean leaned his cheek against Cas’, both of them panting as they rutted against each other, Cas kissing along his jaw and biting at his shoulder.

“Dean, we shouldn’t – wait...wait...not o-on my clothes, and someone could see,” Cas groaned, and Dean considered this for a moment, but his hands were already fumbling with Cas’ belt, getting his dick out.

“Just get off, baby, you worry too much.” He smiled into the corner of Cas’ mouth, jerking him fast and hard, but kissing him gently, the other hand reaching in his pocket to pull out the rag he always kept there. “I’ve got you.”

Cas’ breath hitched at the words and he dug his hands into Dean’s shoulders, looking into Dean’s eyes with a glazed expression. Dean stared back at him for a while, and then looked down to see Cas’ stomach heave as he finally came, Dean catching it with the rag, Cas gasping as the cloth brushed against the sensitive head of his cock.

“Oh,” Cas breathed, reeling as he came down. “Jesus, Dean,” he whispered, his legs shaking while Dean tucked him back up and kissed him. Cas palmed Dean’s hard-on through his suit and Dean moaned, leaning into him, rocking his hips into Cas’ palm.

“You’re hopeless,” Cas murmured, Dean gasping again as he applied more pressure. “So impatient when you win...” he said hotly against the shell of Dean’s ear. “...I should probably reward you.”

Cas slid down the wall, dropping to his knees, not even caring if his slacks got dirty. Dean made him reckless and stupid and wild. He looked up at Dean as he licked a stripe up to the tip of his dick, now free and so close to coming. He wasn’t going to last, but Cas didn’t mind. Dean had taken care of him, and now it was his turn. Dean’s fingers fisted into his hair and smoothed it away from his forehead as he worked him with long, graceful, sucks, pausing every so often to toy with the head, tonguing at his slit.

“- shit,” Dean choked, bracing himself on the wall as Cas swallowed a few moments later, wiping his mouth and then putting Dean away, zipping the zipper up to his navel as he stood. Dean smiled at him, dopey and sated.

“Good?” Cas asked, and Dean leaned in and kissed him. He hummed against Cas’ lips as Cas zipped him up the rest of the way, adjusting his collar.

“Is there a sequel?”

“When we get home,” Cas admonished, pecking him. “After you’ve gotten that wonderful money and we’ve paid our utilities and eaten and done all that.”

“Awww, we have to eat first?”

“Then wait thirty minutes. Don’t want you cramping,” Cas squeezed Dean’s ass, laughing while Dean pushed him against the wall again, getting lost in his mouth. He pulled away and kissed

Cas' cheek.

“Thirty minutes,” he sighed, straightening Cas' shirt. Cas lifted his hand and kissed Dean's palm.

“I think we could get away with fifteen,” he muttered, watching Dean chuckle. The sun framed him, and he glowed from the inside, arm on either side of Cas' body, like a house around him. He dipped his head and kissed him, and Cas brushed their noses together. He didn't need to tell Dean that when he looked up at him again he filed the image somewhere in his mind. It would have a lovely label, like all the rest, tucked up for a rainy day.

*The one where Dean stands with the sun behind him, looking at me like we've known each other for sixty years.*

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Cas found them in a box in the back of Dean's closet while looking for light bulbs.

Two garters, a nightie and a pair of virginal white lace panties.

Cas dug briefly through the box and frowned at the underwear.

“Dean?”

“Hmm,” Dean said around his cigarette, cleaning motorcycle parts, newspapers spread over the kitchen table to protect it, his booted feet propped up on the window sill, fingers covered in motor grease.

Cas brought the box in and set it down in his lap.

“What are these?”

Dean glanced in the box and smiled, pulling the knickers out. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“Ah, my souvenir box.”

“Souvenir box?”

“Well, sometimes chicks forget their things on the way out the door,” Dean amended, smirking, blowing smoke out the side of his mouth. Cas scowled and snatched the box away, Dean laughing as he resumed his his task.

“Jealous is a good color on you!” Dean commented as Cas shoved the box back up on the top shelf.

“So you just kept their underwear?” Cas snapped and Dean threw his head back and laughed.

“Yes, I kept their underwear! It doesn't mean anything! I haven't even looked at it since I put it up there, which was probably, what? A year ago? Longer?” He held up some kind of rod and inspected it, and then went back to rubbing at the metal. “It's not like anyone's gonna wear it anyway! I'm not one of those pervs that just gets off on the lace. Gotta be a hot body in it, babe.”

Cas shook his head and kept looking for light bulbs.

“You not gonna talk to me?”

“I think you’re ridiculous,” Cas concluded, his face feeling hot for some reason. “Nobody I know keeps *other* people’s underwear around after they’ve left. It’s creepy.”

Dean rolled his eyes and stubbed his cigarette out into his empty coffee mug.

“You’ll forget it soon enough. Why don’t you just drop them off at the Salvation Army? They’d be pleased to have them” he said, scratching at his stomach through his grubby white shirt.

The problem was that Cas couldn’t stop thinking about them.

It was hot, and Cas laid next to Dean with the sound of traffic bleeding through the open window screen, and all he could think about was the box. Dean said something in his sleep and Cas tried to close his eyes, but all he could think about was the stupid box filled with frilly underwear. His face heated up and his whole skin itched a little as he thought about it and what Dean had said.

Hot bodies, huh.

That’s how Cas ended up staring at the underwear again, only this time Dean was gone. Cas sat on the floor with the box and stared at it. He didn’t know why it offended him so much. It was like Dean said, it was just a box of underwear. It didn’t mean anything – only it did. Girls before *him* had worn them and then left them behind and Dean had kept them like some kind of weird trophies.

“Or he just kept them because he may have thought they’d come back,” Cas said out loud, holding up the nightgown. It was a short, pale blue, thing with an embellished neckline and lace hem at the bottom, but otherwise sheer. He’d seen nightgowns like that before in catalogues his sister used to thumb through, and he knew it was a rather expensive one. He stared at the garters and the panties too.

They were clean, and Cas ran his thumb over the high-waist lace frills, the texture foreign, his eyes combing over the intricate design. There was a delicate little bow centered right over the crotch. There were three stockings in the box as well that he hadn’t seen at first – two matched and one didn’t. Cas stared at it all and bit his lip. He turned back to the nightgown.

He ran his hand over the silky material and put his hand inside of it, looking at his fingers beneath the light blue mesh – just see through enough to be visible, but just chaste enough to leave the details to the imagination.

Dean had probably expected, at some point, for the girls to come back and claim their garments. He was, at heart, sweet. Even if they were one-night-stands, as Cas suspected they were, Dean was good enough to have them laundered. Cas could see Dean at the Laundromat four blocks over, with his shirts and oil stained jeans and a silk nightie, probably smirking at the old men who ogled it.

It wasn’t so much the girls that bothered him. It was just that Dean had enjoyed himself because someone was wearing them. Someone else. It could have been the president in frilly knickers and Cas still would have been jealous because Dean had probably been sufficiently turned on. Cas swallowed and stared at his hand in the nightgown before stretching it out in front of him.

It looked...

Cas felt crazy.

It looked like it would *fit*. All of it looked like it would probably fit. He lacked the swelling curves of most girls, so there was probably more give in the garments than their fragile forms insinuated.

Cas glanced at his watch.

Five thirty.

Dean's shift didn't end until seven.

Cas looked at the box and smirked.

"A hot body, huh," he whispered to no one, feeling a sudden something tingle down his spine, "We'll see about that."

Three hours later, Dean was home and after some coaxing had disappeared behind the bathroom door. Cas heard the scream of the pipes as he started the shower and immediately began stripping his clothes, hastily putting his plan into motion. First the garter, sitting on his waist, and then the stockings, slowly unrolling them the way he had watched his mother do them when he was little before clipping them into the hold ups dangling against his thighs. Then the panties, tucking everything into them and kicking his pants under the bed, finally taking a moment to stop and just stare down at his silk-clad legs. Now that he was finished, he put his hands self-consciously over his bare chest and then teased at the edges of the garter belt and the panties, making certain that the lines were as straight as he could. Then he slipped the night gown over his head, the material slithering down over his skin, making goose bumps erupt over his arms.

He heard the tap squeak off and the sound of the curtain being pulled aside as Dean stepped out, coughing lightly, and Cas froze.

He felt suddenly nervous, but he knew that he trusted Dean. He just didn't know if he trusted him not to laugh. He slowly backed out of the bedroom into the kitchen, where he ran and closed all the drapes and flicked off the light. He heard the bathroom door open and Dean came out, singing something under his breath.

"Cas, you wanna listen to something?" Dean called, and Cas felt like his voice was lost for a moment as he wracked his brain, trying to sound normal. He heard Dean pull out the box and flip through the vinyls. "Elvis?" He heard the smile in Dean's voice as he said that and Cas blushed crimson, standing just inside the dark of the kitchen.

"Put on that new American Breed," Cas said, finally, and Dean started flipping faster.

"Oh, I liked this one. Heard it today on the radio," Dean said, ignorant to Cas' strange behavior completely. Cas felt his heart thrumming as he took a step forward. "What are you doing in there?" Dean added after a few seconds, busy with setting up the record.

"Oh, getting some water," Cas replied, the words coming out in a rush as he crossed the small living space and stepped into the dim bedroom, Dean's back to him. Dean set up the record and then fiddled with the window, putting it up. Cas stood behind him, watching the flex of his shoulders as he struck a match and lit up a cigarette, leaning over the sill to watch the traffic below. It was a hot night and Cas chewed his lip again as he took off his glasses and then set them down on the dresser to his right.

"Dean," he said breathily and Dean perked up and turned around.

"We should-" Dean's sentence dropped off, his eyes slowly widening as he stared at him. Cas watched his cigarette dangle off of his bottom lip until Dean hastily pulled it out of his mouth and ground it carelessly into the ashtray beside the record player, his eyes snapping back to Cas, the disbelief in them easily read. Cas walked carefully forward, the lace hem brushing just above the tops of his stockings. He slowly picked up Dean's hands and pressed them to his sides, the

material of the nightie bunching as Dean's fingers clamped down on his waist, fingers bumping along the edges of the garter beneath them.

Dean just gazed blankly at him, his eyes running up and down before becoming glued to the slivers of skin shifting just below the surface of the nightgown. Cas leaned in and slithered his hands up Dean's naked chest and over his neck, pulling his head gently back to stretch the skin.

"You said something," he whispered on the hot, velvety warmth, still damp from the shower, "about it not meaning anything unless someone's wearing them."

He watched Dean's throat hitch with a breath and Cas kissed him there, the music picking up and flooding into the room.

*Everybody tells me I'm wrong, to want you so badly...*

"Oh, Jesus," Dean exhaled as he pulled Cas' hips flush with his own. "Jesus...Jesus..."

Cas kissed up his jaw and then finally slid their mouths together, Dean moaning low and long, his fingers tightening and relaxing, starting to rub up and down Cas' sides.

"Fuuuck..." was the next thing that Dean said, but that was because Cas was dropping to his knees and yanking Dean's boxers aside. He didn't waste time getting Dean's half-hard dick in his mouth, looking up, as he slid it slowly in and out, his hand coming up to work the base. Dean met his eyes and Cas arched his back, sticking his ass out. He shifted his hips so that the night gown slid down into the dip of his spine, exposing the panties and the belt and the stockings properly.

Dean's elbow, which was now supporting him, shifted and knocked the record player and the track skipped and then resumed as Cas worked his cock in earnest, still watching Dean's face.

"Oh, baby, so good," Dean sighed after a minute. "Christ, Cas, you..." He stopped talking and made a choked sound as Cas closed his eyes and took as much as he could, holding for a second and then pulling back, panting and swallowing to regain control of his throat. Still couldn't do it as well as he wanted, but Dean wasn't complaining.

Dean watched his head bob up and down a few times, and Cas felt almost drunk on the smell of dick and soap and the music playing in the background. He moaned, spreading his knees on the carpet, his own cock starting to strain at the panties, rocking a little in a slow fuck of the air.

"J-Jesus," Dean whimpered. "Jesus what's gotten into you – oh fuckkkk baby, right there, oh baby, right there."

Cas toyed with the end of Dean's dick, licking at the sensitive underside with the flat of his tongue, letting it sit there, hot and heavy, and then slid down again. Dean brought his hand to the back of Cas' head and Cas gasped in surprise, clawing at Dean's bare foot with blunt nails while Dean's fingers raked through his hair. Deans hips canted upwards and Cas kissed and nipped at the sharp V of his bones for a moment before looking back up at him.

"Oh, Jesus," Dean hissed, cracking his eyes to look down. "Oh, Jesus, look at you," his hand still on Cas' head. Cas imagined he was a sight – his lips tingled and his tongue felt huge as he licked around his mouth and breathed, pulling Dean's boxers all the way down, Dean stepping out of them. He felt boneless as Dean reached down and hauled him up, Cas rolling his head back in a dizzy motion when he felt the front of the panties, now damp, grind against Dean's torso.

"What do you want?" Dean said, suddenly aggressive. "Tell me what you want. I'll give it to you." He met Cas' neck with his teeth and pulled the hem of the night gown up, scratching at his

sides and back. Cas didn't respond and Dean growled as he ran his hands over Cas' back. He shoved him backwards and Cas felt the familiar bite of the mattress into the back of his knees, but Dean swiveled so he was the one sitting, Cas in front of him.

Dean's hands slid all over Cas' lower body, cupping his ass through the material of the underwear, fingers teasing and tugging at the edges, skating just underneath the nightgown, eating up all the skin with their touch, and then back to his ass, squeezing and running over the fabric over and over.

He couldn't seem to stop as he pressed his cheek to Cas' covered chest.

"So sexy...so sexy," Dean babbled, and Cas kept his hands braced on Dean's shoulders until Dean palmed his dick and Cas leaned down to kiss him. There was nothing gentle about it at first, but soon they slowed and Cas was mindlessly rocking into the tight curl of Dean's fist. He lost track of it all until Dean started pulling the nightgown up more and more with his unoccupied fingers, hooking them into the front of the garter to tug Cas onto the bed.

On his back, Cas moaned at the loss of contact, his cock slapping at the garter belt, the panties pulled halfway down his shaft, elastic straining. He felt so hot all over, the feeling of the silk stockings dragging on the rumpled covers driving him nearly mad.

"Touch me," he breathed, dragging Dean's hands toward his body, somewhere, anywhere. He really didn't care where they landed at this point.

Cas got an eyeful as Dean descended on him, using his teeth to snap the edge of the panties, lips brushing his heated skin, but not enough. Dean's hands on his thighs were the only thing keeping him from jackknifing off the bed completely as Cas gasped. Dean rolled the panties down and Cas shimmied his hips, helping him, until they were flung gracelessly somewhere behind them, discarded.

Finally free, Cas groaned as Dean slid his hands up and down his legs – each time he ascended up his thigh he would travel past his cock to the garter, to his hips, and then trail back down, over and over, the pads of his fingers tracing over the seams against his legs.

He finally thumbed over the deep V of his inner thighs, and Cas nearly yelled at the feeling of Dean dropping his own hips to rut against the top of one stocking.

Dean rocked himself up towards Cas' face, crushing their lips together, hands abandoning his lower half in favor of his nipples, scrunching the fabric of the nightgown up to rake over them.

Cas made some ragged noise and Dean hooked his hands back under his knees and pushed them open. Cas' head swam.

"I'm gonna make you say *fuck* till you're blue in the face," Dean said, searing another kiss over Cas' mouth. "Gonna make you say *fuck* till you don't know what else to say..."

Cas nodded stupidly, moaning.

Dean stood up, the mattress whining with the loss of his weight, and dug down in the nightstand for the slick. Cas' body bounced slightly when Dean crashed back to the bed, digging into the container, swiping the grease out before reaching down between Cas' legs.

"Wider..." Dean grunted and Cas pulled his legs even farther apart, showing himself off. Dean looked down at him and finally, *finally* -

"Oh, fuck!" Cas cried out, arching. "Right there."

“I know, baby,” Dean growled, smiling, bending to kiss his stomach as he worked his fingers – oh, God, there was another, but Cas was fine. He could take it. “I know.”

“Gonna take me...so good,” Dean said, and Cas heard the tell-tale sound of him greasing his cock with one hand, a wet, hot, hot noise. Cas let his legs go and pinned Dean’s body to his, smoothing the stockings over his back and hips, Dean shuddering at the feel.

*Bend me, shape me, anyway you want me, long as you love me, it’s alright -*

“Get to it,” he bit and Dean slid his fingers away, and the blunt head of his cock replaced them.

However long it actually took was lost to Cas, but it felt agonizingly slow as Dean sank into him, everything sensitive in the sticky heat of the evening. The sun was descending further behind the skyline, painting the sky a deep wine purple that trailed into the apartment’s bedroom, dragging its fingers over their bodies in stripes of shadow.

Cas felt every nudge as Dean shifted, fucking into him with a shallow movement.

“Like you *mean it*,” he gasped, and Dean complied, and Cas heard the delicious sound of the headboard as it cracked against the wall. Dean laid into him, Cas’ ankles jostling apart, his legs falling open, but then, without warning, Dean suddenly stalled.

The noise it wrenched out of Cas clashed with the record still playing, and as he clenched around Dean’s cock, trying to cope with the feeling of that deep, aching, fullness, Dean took a moment to pin Cas’ arms on either side of his head.

“No,” he said to Cas, rocking in another one of those short strokes that made Cas writhe.

“*Dean.*”

Dean bent his head low, still barely moving, tracing his hand over the back of Cas’ silk-clad leg. He snapped the top and Cas panted against his mouth as Dean kissed him chastely.

“What if I married you like this? Fuck the rings...all laid out for me...”

Cas moaned and shifted again, fucking himself down onto Dean’s cock.

“...like some June bride...”

“Fucking *move*,” Cas moaned again, surging forward to kiss him. Every tiny movement reminded him of that igniting fullness, Dean’s dick throbbing against the inside of him. “Gonna lose my mind...if you – !”

He yelped as Dean slid out of him and hovered at his rim, testing him, his grip on his wrists so tight his hands were beginning to tingle.

“Who would marry you with a mouth like that? Nobody,” Dean said and he kissed his cheek, the corner of his mouth, slamming his hips back into him. Cas’ fingers opened and closed over the empty air. “Fuckin’ nobody, Cas.”

“You’ve ruined me,” Cas gasped. “They all know it – you’ve ruined me...”

“I love you,” Dean cut him off, his voice coarse with arousal; hushed it right against his ear, and Cas could feel their heartbeats, and every edge of his cock where it was again, and he was so painfully still, and he felt his knees jumping off the bed, toes flexing in the tight sheath of the

stockings, trying to handle it. "I'd marry you...I would..." His hips ground down, circling.

"Then marry me," Cas said, not even sure of what he was saying. "Marry me right now."

Whatever control it was taking Dean to not move dissolved. Cas' voice unhitched from the back of his throat and he groaned as he took Dean over and over in smooth thrusts that brought their hips together in perfect collisions.

"Say it, Cas," Dean panted, kissing his neck. "Cas, please," he nearly whimpered and Cas felt his mouth ghosting over his and his hands were suddenly free. They gravitated to Dean's face, holding him there as he brushed against that one place that made every movement after become tinted with the white glow of Christmas lights.

"Fuck, or I love you?" he asked, kissing him fiercely, tugging on Dean's lip, watching it go pink when he released it before licking into his mouth again. He tangled his tongue over Dean's, at the inside of his mouth, the scrape of his teeth and the hot heat of his tongue as it met his again.

"Either," Dean groaned, pulling away. "Shit, baby."

"I love you," Cas repeated, and Dean let out another rough, low sound. "Dean, ah, touch me-" Cas hissed, his toes curling.

His hands slid around to his back, scratching at Dean's shoulders as Dean dragged his own fingers down his chest to his neglected dick. He seized it and in five quick slides, Cas was digging his nails in, coming against the bunched fabric of the night gown.

"Fuck!" He clamped down hard, everything seizing up, and then he was boneless, Dean thrusting once into him and then sucking in a sharp breath, and two – three – shallow kicks of his hips. Cas felt the warmth spread into him and his chest heaved as he leaned his head back against the blanket and breathed. Dean waited a moment and then slipped out with a wet sound and Cas shivered at the feeling of emptiness. He didn't like it and immediately grabbed Dean and pulled his weight down, one hand tangled into his hair the other rubbing over his back and the dip of his spine, the soft swell at the beginning of his ass, and then back again.

"Shh," Dean whispered, sitting up. He kissed him gently. "Honey, shh."

Cas didn't realize he was talking until Dean kissed him again.

"I know...I know, I love you too." He kissed Cas' chin, his neck again, the skin so hot against his mouth, as he slowly undid the top buttons of the night gown and tugged upwards. Cas lifted his arms and let him slide it off as Dean worked his way down, undoing the garter clasps. He kissed Cas' thigh as he unhooked the stockings, rolling them down each leg and throwing them on the floor. Once Cas was bare he laid back down, pulling him into his arms, their skin cooling as night started to really set in.

A car honked down on the street and Dean pressed his cheek against Cas' hair.

"If I left, would you keep my things?" Cas asked after a moment, moving so he could look at Dean properly. Dean stroked his fingers over Cas' shoulder, looking out the window instead of him.

"Dean?" he probed, touching his hip.

"Yeah." Dean breathed, closing his eyes. "But you wouldn't go," he added, "so I wouldn't have to."

“Married people don’t leave each other,” Cas whispered, his own eyes drifting shut and then opening again. He didn’t want to fall asleep just yet.

“That’s true,” Dean said, his voice heavy. “They aren’t supposed to.”

“I won’t go.”

Dean kissed his hairline and then let Cas wiggle free to pull the quilt over them, tucking it first around Dean’s back and then burrowing under himself, pressing their chests together once they were underneath.

“We’ll just be married,” Dean said softly, and then, suddenly, he realized the record had stopped. “That’ll be just it. We’ll just be married and we can stay like this.”

Cas turned his head and kissed him.

“You’re supposed to kiss at weddings,” he muttered, and Dean kissed him back after a moment of thought it seemed, kissed him harder than Cas had expected him too. He buried himself in the crook of Cas’ neck after that, silent.

He closed his eyes, holding him, the ache of emptiness between his legs lessened.

“Oh, Dean,” he hushed, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Just the name as Dean kissed his collarbone and then resettled his head, the skin of his forehead still damp where it met Cas’ shoulder.

Another car honked, and a pigeon flew by with a flutter of wings.

“I won’t go.” Cas repeated, but he didn’t think that Dean was awake to hear him.

## Chapter 4

November, 1967

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It was strange how a three day promise could get lost. Cas was swamped with work and Dean was out every weekend racing or prepping or outfitting bikes at Bobby's garage. Cas didn't mind that their interaction usually consisted of watching the new Star Trek together while he memorized medical terminology, but with the end of the summer came the end of Dean's racing season. Dean loafed around the apartment, pecking out of the fridge and complaining about how cold it was going to get in only a few weeks, between shifts at the bar. He cooked more, at least, and he was really only unbearable until the Twilight Zone came on. Cas' complaints were few.

He was merely silly at best, and intolerably needy at his worst.

"You think I'm as good looking as William Shatner?" he asked, leaning between Cas' legs, both of them crammed on the couch, Cas trying to jot down something about Shakespeare. The university was cruel and forcing him into English classes to make him well rounded. He had no interest in Shakespeare unless Shakespeare had written something on how to pass his chemistry class while still having time to write critical analysis essays.

"Anything is possible," Cas replied, resting the back of his book on Dean's head, scrawling something on his legal pad. Dean snorted indignantly, popping a pez from the dispenser in his hand. Cas heard the crunch of the candy as he chewed it.

"Watch this one. It's got the creepy doll. William Shatner isn't in it though," Dean insisted as the opening to the Twilight Zone kicked in. When Cas didn't respond he knocked his elbow into Cas' leg.

"Dean, I can't. I'm studying."

"You study all the time, come on and watch with me. I barely see your face because it's always in a damn book," Dean whined, reaching blindly behind him to swat at the volume. Cas rolled his eyes and kept reading, pulling the book out of Dean's reach.

"Go find something to do," he sighed, tapping his pencil against his chin.

"Let's fool around," Dean twisted, looking at Cas who refused to make eye contact. "Come on," he jabbed. "Come on, let's make out or *something*."

"Dean, what am I going to do when I tell my patients I can't help them because I was too busy having my dick sucked by my boyfriend?" Cas grumbled, trying to concentrate.

"I don't know. Your boyfriend is really good looking. He's really cute, and he can ride a motorcycle, and he can do all sorts of fun things." Cas became vaguely aware of the fingers walking up the back spine of his book and creeping over the edge. "If you cooperate I'll give you a pez," Dean continued, clicking another candy out.

"You are absolutely depraved. I can't fool around with you right now," Cas groaned, tapping Dean's forehead with the pencil. "Please go find something else to do before I lose my mind?"

"I already know what I want to do. I want you to come with me and we'll go on the bed and turn off the light and you'll let me put my hand in your pants."

Cas didn't gratify him with a response and Dean pouted, resting his cheek against Cas' knee for a while.

"You doing anything this weekend?" he asked out of nowhere and Cas' brow wrinkled. He glanced up from his notes and resigned himself to giving Dean his attention.

"You know I'm not. Why do you ask?"

Dean turned back around, stretching his legs out, head pillowed by Cas' stomach while he watched TV.

"You probably wouldn't want to because you have a book to read."

"Dean," Cas said, shaking his head. "What? What did you have planned? We just went out to the country two weeks ago."

"Well, I owe you a trip to the beach," Dean started, not turning around.

Cas cocked his head curiously. Owed him? When was that?

"You know, after I won that race against Boyd? I told you I'd treat you to three days or something."

"That was over a year ago."

"Well, yeah, but still!"

"Ok," Cas said timidly, closing his book, "I remember."

"I know it's starting to get cold, but I thought we could go to the beach. There won't be as many people and if we go early we might have it to ourselves for a few hours. We can do other stuff too, like visit the marina or maybe go see your sister."

Cas stalled.

"I don't think so."

"You said she'd moved out there, though. And you want to see her! I know you do!" Dean had sat up now and turned around. Cas tossed the book on the floor and opened his arms, Dean sliding forward to rest against his chest.

"I don't want to surprise her like that. She's moved back up with my Grandmother 'til she goes to school in January. And just because she told Anna Milton about it doesn't mean she meant for me to know," Cas added quietly, playing with Dean's hair. Anna had been kind enough to pass the message along when he'd met to help her with a research paper. Cas wouldn't admit to Dean how he'd tried to pry more information out of her. Rachel hadn't told Anna too much, but whatever Cas could get was enough.

Dean sighed against him..

"Sure, we won't see your sister then. We'll just go to the beach."

"We'll have a good time," Cas assured him. "We can play with your new camera."

Dean brightened, smiling, nestled between Cas' legs, his body warm and heavy.

"That'd be fun. Record it all or somethin'," he rambled, pushing into the stroke of Cas' hand over his forehead.

"I can't believe they gave you a camera instead of cash. We should have sold it," he said, thinking about it on the shelf in the closet, unused.

"Well, then I'm going to sell your Polaroid," Dean threatened, and Cas paused his scalp massage to pinch him. "Ow!"

"I'm just saying we could have used the money. You're running us out of house and home with how much you eat."

"We're fine; besides, video cameras are cool. I've never had one. It could come in handy someday."

"When would a video camera come in handy?" Cas laughed, rubbing the back of Dean's neck, the other arm looped around his back.

"I don't know, I'm just saying it might. One day you may thank me for not letting you sell it," Dean said sagely in return, nuzzling his face further into the collar of Cas' loose sweater.

Cas laughed softly and ran his fingers through the back of Dean's hair, and he could feel Dean's lips brush against his collarbone. He hummed softly, smiling. "When that day comes, I'll be sure to thank you."

Cas had no idea what to bring to the beach with them besides Dean's video camera and his Polaroid. It was getting cold so he was sure the water would be even colder, so they probably wouldn't be able to go swimming, but just being at the beach with Dean would be enough for him. He packed a couple of sweaters and shirts, and couple of pair of jeans along with other essentials. It took Dean the rest of the week to pack because he couldn't decide on what he wanted to bring.

It was funny actually, that Dean wanted to look his best when he was going to the beach. In the end, Cas went through their bag and replaced some of the items that Dean had packed with other more suitable pairs of clothing. The last thing to get packed was the video camera, and Cas hung his Polaroid camera around his neck, bag slung over his shoulders, ready to go. Dean walked out of their bedroom and approached him, looping his fingers through his belt loops and pull him flush against him.

"We're gonna have fun this weekend." He smiled as he kissed Cas, and Cas brought his hands up, sliding over Dean's chest to rest on his shoulders.

"Shame that we can't do that in public."

Cas pressed his face into Dean's neck for a moment before pulling away, adjusting the straps of the bag and pulling his camera up to his face, looking through the viewfinder. Dean looked away and Cas snapped a picture. The camera whirred and clicked before producing a picture, and Cas pulled it away, waiting a moment before pulling the front off, revealing the picture of Dean.

"You're really photogenic, you know?" Cas laughed softly, and Dean smiled as he walked past him, snatching the picture from Cas. "Hey-!"

"Hmm, you're right," Dean inspected the photo as he opened the door, walking out into the hallway of the apartment building, Cas following behind him and closing the door on his way out.

"Give it back, Dean!"

Dean didn't give it back 'til they were at Bobby's truck, their borrowed transportation for the weekend. Their things crammed in the back, Cas climbed into the cab, slamming the door, smoothing the folded corner of the photo. He pulled the camera over his head and put it on the floor, curling his own feet onto the dashboard, inspecting the scuffs on his loafers, the picture still held loosely in his hand.

Dean turned on the radio and they both sang along to songs they knew, laughing when they realized they had forgotten the lyrics. The ride wasn't terribly long, but Dean wouldn't let Cas drive, and so he'd gotten bored and ended up reading and napping, only waking up when Dean told him he'd checked them into a small hotel about twenty minutes from the water.

"We can go up there if you want. Woman up front said we'd come during the wrong season, but I told her you were my cousin visiting from out of state and you'd never seen the Pacific before."

Cas smiled sadly at the lie.

"Two beds?" he sighed, and Dean nodded.

"We can squeeze," he replied, opening the cab up to pull their bags out. Cas followed, and he supposed it really wasn't that bad. They were standard doubles, to his relief, sitting down on one while Dean tossed their bags on the other. He eyed Cas up and Cas quirked the corners of his mouth up when Dean advanced, rolling them on the clean, slightly musty, coverlet.

"Thank you," he whispered, looking into Dean's eyes, and Dean kissed him chastely.

"Thank *you*," Dean mirrored and Cas frowned, barking a laugh.

"Whatever for?" he breathed, rubbing his thumb on Dean's chin. Dean shrugged. He never did answer, and Cas wasn't convinced he knew exactly what it was he was trying to say. He just looked at him for a long time before straightening and stretching.

"Well, we've got hours to kill before nightfall. You want to go look at the water?" he asked and Cas smiled, eager.

They drove through the sleepy town, following the signs to the beach. Dean didn't say much, and Cas didn't either, looking out the window, watching the landscape roll by. He placed his hand on Dean's thigh at some point and Dean took his own off the wheel to cover it. The window was cool against Cas' cheek, and he imagined the glass like a camera, the trees and grass scrolling along, his eyes the shutter, remembering all of it, tucking it away with the millions of other little memories he had collected over the past six months.

The real camera was idle at his feet, its beige case bumping his ankle every so often.

The road narrowed and forked, curving around either side of the small bay. Where trees once lined the road opened up into a plain that sloped down to the beach, the wind rattling through the tall, weedy, grass and the short scrubby bushes. Dean made Cas choose a direction, but it didn't really matter. There were no other cars. The tires crunched when Dean turned it into the little parking area, cutting the engine and rubbing his hands. He looked at Cas, but Cas was trying to see over the rocks in front of them, opening the door and stepping out, pulling his boots with him. He sat against the truck and tugged his loafers off, nudging his feet into the boots, listening to the rustle of Dean grabbing his coat from the back seat and shifting it on.

Cas shut the car heavy truck door once he had finished changing his shoes and jogged up to the edge of the little carved out space for parking. He stepped up, climbing up the rock face in front of him, and then jumped down, facing the beach. Beyond that, a winding trail through the grass led

to the water crashing on the sand. Cas stood for a moment, fingers splaying and curling against his palms, watching the waves as they slid in and out, gulls screaming overhead, their shrill voices carrying on the wind. They dove at the sea, silhouettes muddied by the overcast sky, while the wind sliced through Cas' hair, making his cheeks rosy. He pulled his windbreaker closer to him, tugging the strings at the collar so it went closer to his neck, and after a few more seconds of watching the surf, leaped back down to the loose gravel, wandering to the truck. He picked up the blanket they'd brought and held it against his chest before jogging back to the point, squeezing between the boulders, eager to look over the bay again.

The grey water crashed, and Cas found himself smiling despite the wet chill threatening to sneak under his jacket. He heard the scuff of a shoe against the rocks and turned to see Dean slipping around the side, squinting in the breeze, looking out at the swells with a subdued sort of happiness. He walked a few steps 'til he was standing next to Cas, and his lips curled up, cutting into the side of his mouth in the crooked way Cas loved best.

"So?" he said, and Cas heard the wind roar on his ears and he moved his eyes from Dean back to the Pacific. The bright checks of his mackinaw coat made him look like a giant red poppy among the bleak rocks and sandy colored landscape, the video camera cradled in its case under one arm.

"We always went to the coast when we were kids," Cas answered truthfully. "But that was during the summer."

Dean scoffed, putting his free arm around Cas, taking in the bare beach, devoid of any other people.

"Well, you're all grown up now, so I figured you needed a new experience," Dean told him, free to take his hand. Cas let himself be lead down the slope towards the water, his own boots filling the shallow prints Dean left behind.

"Everything with you is a new experience," Cas continued quietly, blushing, once they had finally gotten to the flat of the sand, squeezing Dean's fingers reflexively as he tripped over a rock. The seabirds circled above, watching them, ducking their heads, beaks opening up in harsh calls.

"Like I told you!" Dean smiled. "All to ourselves!" Cas looked around the deserted sand and saw that it was true – not a soul except for the two of them. It was quiet except for the methodical rush of the waves and the cries of the gulls. The sun peaked through the overcast clouds and speckled the water with light before slowly folding itself up again. Cas dropped the blanket and let go of Dean's hand, wandering towards the pull of the water without a word. He could feel Dean watching him as he zigzagged over the sand, stopping to pick up a shell and then toss it back to the sea, his hair blowing as he approached the dark waves. Dean didn't follow, letting him get to the edge, staring at the threshold of the beach where the water capped and crashed, and then glided up to the toes of his shoes. He turned back to Dean, eyes wide and Dean smiled, taking a step to him.

"There's a crab!" Cas said, pointing, and Dean came up to him, watching the little creature walk its charming sideways walk back into the water, bobbing with the shallow swirls that pounded relentlessly on the shore. Cas watched it, enraptured, and Dean gently slipped again into the realization that there was no one else. The empty beach echoed his thoughts, and Cas looked up at him, tugging the sleeves of his sweater past the sleeves of his jacket, his fingers starting to get stiff from the constant gale coming off the water.

Cas didn't say anything as he studied Dean's face – he merely looked back out at the water, turning his head to gaze off at the western corner of the sky. "A boat!" he commented, raising his arm, his finger following it as the vessel sailed slowly across the bay. Dean pressed closer to him, chuckling when Cas abandoned his pointing to wave at it. There was no response, but Cas waved

anyway, and Dean, after a moment, did too.

When they weren't acknowledged they let their arms drop, fingers brushing against each other's hands before tangling.

"That'd be nice," Cas spoke. "To sail. You know? Just out on the water like that," he gestured at the waves. "Nobody to tell you how to be or where to go."

"By yourself?" Dean continued, pulling on Cas' hand, putting his other in his pocket, leading him along the water, watching the waves come in and out, always just close enough to his shoes, but never touching. Cas shrugged. The blanket and camera were a little dark dot up the slope, one corner of the blanket flapping in the wind like a little blue flag.

"Well, with you, of course," he amended, flashing Dean a grin and Dean laughed lightly, leaning his head back to look at the birds swooping from the rocks. "I mean it!" Cas teased. "You and me. We could get a boat – one of those nice ones, you know, a house boat or something! We could just sail around the world. That'd be nice. I bet you're allowed to kiss me in international waters."

Dean smirked at him.

"I'm sure I'm allowed to do more than that-!"

He was silenced as Cas punched him gently in the arm.

"Don't ruin it!" Cas growled, playfully, and Dean let go of his hand just long enough to sling his arm around his shoulders, roughly bringing Cas' head to his, kissing his hair firmly, and then the side of his face, Cas staggering along. Cas put a hand against Dean's side, attempting to pry himself off, but Dean was strong and he knew Cas didn't want to get away. Not really. He kissed him again, right at the corner of his eye.

"You're just so poetic," he sighed against Cas' ear, teasing, and Cas knocked his ribs with his forearm. Dean earned a laugh, though.

"You're just jealous because I have great ideas."

"Maybe," Dean shrugged, letting his arm relax over Cas' back, still holding him pinned to his side. Cas laid his head on Dean's shoulder, leaning into him, his fighting hand sliding around Dean's waist, settling above his hip. "That is a pretty good idea," Dean added, "but where would we go when we got tired of it? Not back here."

Cas hummed, falling into perfect step with him.

"I don't know," Cas trailed, looking at the choppy water. "When I become a doctor I'll make twice as much as you do and buy an island."

"A whole island?" Dean marveled, and Cas squeezed him, cheek nuzzling into the warmth of his coat and his body.

"A whole island, just for us," Cas promised, "for when we get tired of seeing the world, or when we run out of records to play, or when we're old. Then we'll just go to our island. It'll have a cabin with a huge veranda and we'll sit on it and complain."

"Why complain?" Dean laughed, and Cas stared dreamily past him, fixated on the ocean.

"Because that's what old people do!" he explained. "I guess if you're with someone you really love you don't complain as much, though."

"I don't know," Dean hummed softly, moving to stand in front of Cas, bending to gently kiss him. "I'm sure that I could find things to complain about."

Cas laughed softly and pulled Dean's mackinaw open, sliding his arms into the warmth of the coat and wrapping around Dean's body, resting his head against his chest. Dean wrapped his arms around Cas, pulling him against himself, and Cas buried his face into the crook of his neck.

"We'd get a house built, a nice two-story house with plenty of room. And it'll have a white picket fence."

"All of this on an island?" Dean laughed and Cas could feel it rumble through his chest, and he settled his hands on the small of Dean's back.

"It'll be a pretty big island." He paused briefly, fingers slipping beneath the hem of Dean's shirt, and he could feel Dean shudder as his cold fingers rested against his warm skin.

Cas pulled back slightly, fingers slipping over Dean's skin beneath his shirt as he looked up at him.

Dean smiled and leaned forward to capture his lips, arms tightening around him for a moment before he pulled one away to card his fingers through Cas' hair. Cas pulled his arms out of Dean's mackinaw to wrap them around his neck, his fingers gently scratching through the fine hairs at the base of his neck.

Cas pulled back and Dean continued to kiss him, at the corner of his mouth and along his jaw, before he pulled back, smoothing his fingers through Cas' hair; pulling it away from his face.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Cas could feel his cheeks heat up, and instead of saying anything else, he kissed Dean like a man dying for air, taking everything that he could in that one short moment. Dean's arm pulled him closer against his chest, and he smiled against his lips as he slipped his fingers from his hair to rest against the small of his back, his fingers bunching up the back of Cas' jacket.

"That's a long time." Cas smiled and let his fingers trail over Dean's cheek. "Are you sure you want to spend all that time with me?"

"I'd give up my motorcycle to spend the rest of my life with you." There was laughter in Dean's voice, and Cas' smile grew wider. He pecked Dean's lips as he slid his hands down the front of his coat.

"You're serious, huh?"

"Dead serious."

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you, too."

Dean kissed him again before Cas pulled back, laughing softly as he moved up the slope of the beach to where he had abandoned the camera on the blanket, Dean right behind him. He pulled it out of its case and opened it, making sure that they had put a roll of film in it before they left.

"Just imagine though," he spoke as he fiddled with the camera, turning it on and pointing it directly at Dean. "An island all to ourselves, our own yard. We could grow old together."

"And become bickering old men," Dean laughed softly, shying away from the camera, but Cas kept it trained on him, watching him through the viewfinder.

"It'd be nice."

Dean kept shying from the camera before he grabbed it and pulled it away from Cas, turning it on him. Cas frowned and pulled his jacket tighter around him, turning away to look toward the sea. The wind blew his hair away from his face, and he had to squint against it. The breeze made his nose and cheeks rosy, and Dean stepped closer to him.

Cas turned his attention from the sea to Dean, smiling as he walked toward him, pushing the camera from his face to kiss him before turning away, walking toward the shoreline. Dean brought the camera back up, following him.

"We could see the world on a boat," Cas turned around, slowly, carefully, walking backwards as he spoke to Dean. "Just imagine all the places that we could go on a boat!" He threw his arms into the air, a grin spreading across his face, and Dean laughed behind the camera.

"I've always wanted to travel. Just could never find the time," Dean admitted as he followed Cas across the beach with his camera, careful not to trip on the sand. Cas stopped and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"I love you, y'know. I love you so much, Dean."

Cas could see Dean grin behind the camera, and he pulled his hands out of his pockets and walked toward him, grabbing Dean's face in his hands to kiss him. When he pulled back, he saw that Dean had pulled the camera away and had it trained on them, recording the entire thing. He should have known that Dean would do something like that.

"I love you too." Dean kissed the tip of his nose, his lips warm against his cool skin, and Cas pressed his face into Dean's neck. He heard Dean cut the camera off as an arm snaked its way around him, and he ran his hand over the front of Dean's mackinaw, the material soft beneath his palm.

"We should get a house one day, though. I don't want to live in an apartment forever."

"It's cheaper than a house." Dean shrugged, and Cas slipped his hand into Dean's coat, fingers resting against his chest.

"Yeah, well, I'll make enough money for the both of us, and then we can get our own house. Maybe a house away from everyone so that we don't have to deal with people."

"You trying to turn us into recluses?" Dean snorted, hand moving up to gently tug at Cas' hair, and Cas pinched him through his shirt, laughing when Dean cursed.

"You know what I mean. I just don't want either of us to get hurt."

"Cas, I'm not going to let anyone hurt us." Cas pulled away to look up at Dean's face. He was serious, his green eyes hard and his jaw set. Dean's hand drifted through his hair, trailed over his cheek, and he smiled softly. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"I know you won't," Cas smiled and kissed him before pulling away, taking a few steps away from him. "I forgot my camera in the truck, I'll be right back.!"

Cas waved once before he jogged across the beach, clambering over the rocks to get to the truck. He pulled the door open, reached in, and grabbed his camera, slamming the truck door behind him, the metal loud in the silence. He made his way back to the beach, pulling the neck strap over his head to let it dangle against his chest, and he noticed that Dean had the camera up, pointing

directly at him. He smiled and lifted his own camera, pausing to look through the viewfinder to snap a picture of Dean in the distance. The camera whirred and clicked, and Cas pulled the picture from it, dropping the camera against his chest.

He pulled the front off of it when he reached Dean, looking up into the camera as if he was looking directly at Dean's face, pulling the picture up in front of it to show him.

"This one's nice!"

Cas pushed it into his pocket, careful not to bend the corners, and he walked down the beach, turning around every now and then to make sure that Dean was following him. It was hard to hear his footsteps over the crash of the waves against the shoreline, but he could feel that he was there.

He snapped a few pictures of the water, pausing to look at the pictures before nodding to himself and putting them in his pocket. He took pictures of the tall grass near the rocks, depositing those pictures into his pocket as well. Mostly he took pictures of Dean behind the camera, Dean with the camera, just anything of Dean. Finally, though, his camera ran out of film and he was left with a pocket full of pictures and an empty camera dangling around his neck.

The sun was close to setting and the sky was getting dark. The wind picked up and it was colder than before. Cas pulled his jacket closer to the him Dean turned the camera off, moving toward Cas to curl his arm around his shoulders, pulling him against his side and kissing his hair.

"You ready to go back?"

Cas nodded and let Dean lead him back up the truck, stopping to pick the blanket up off of the beach where they had left it.

The drive back was quiet, Cas tired from the cold; he let his head rest on Dean's shoulder, and Dean kept his arm around his shoulders as he drifted off to the quiet music from the radio.

He was stirred awake a while later, Dean gently shaking him and pulling him away, carding his fingers through his hair.

"C'mon, let's get inside and get you to bed."

Cas smiled and crawled out of the cab of the truck, slowly following Dean to their room. It was warm and welcoming, and he pulled his pictures out of his pocket and set them onto the spare bed where their bags were laying; he knew it was going to be unused. He shed his jacket and sat,, taking his glasses off and setting them onto the nightstand between the two beds as he rubbed at his eyes with one hand.

Dean sat on the opposite bed across from him, his coat gone and his shoes off. Cas kicked his boots off and Dean held his arms out to him; Cas crawled onto his lap and wrapped his arms around Dean's neck, closing his eyes.

"You have fun today?"

Cas nodded and tucked himself closer to Dean.

"Got lots of good pictures."

"We'll go back in the morning, how about that?"

Cas nodded and crawled off of Dean's lap to sit beside him, grabbing the hem of his sweater to pull it over his head. Dean did the same and then shed his pants, helping Cas get out of his own

when he gave up on undoing the button, too tired to mess with it anymore. Dean laughed softly and pulled the blankets over them as he situated himself behind Cas, arm around his waist, pressing his face into his hair. Cas pressed back against him, humming softly.

Dean splayed his fingers over his stomach, and Cas brought his hand down to rest over Dean's, and Dean breathed a laugh into his hair.

"What's so funny?" he mumbled, his words a little slurred.

"Nothing. Just go to sleep, baby."

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They slept late the next day, rolling out of the hotel room at a little past two. They ate cheap Mexican at a small cantina along the way to the beach, heads bent over the little picnic table out back, smiling shyly at one another, legs brushing across the benches.

They parked in the exact same spot, wary when there was another truck on the gravel, but the beach was deserted nonetheless.

"Probably fishermen," Dean explained, sitting on the sand, fiddling with the camera. Cas leaned into his leg, trying to decide if the sun had warmed the sand enough for him to shed his boots. He decided against it and watched the water roll in and out, chin resting on his folded arms. They had picked along the tide pools earlier, Cas crouching at the little shallow places, dipping his fingers tentatively into the water and smiling at all the little crabs and sea plants, Dean leaning over him to point out things.

Now he shaded his hand from the sun glaring under the clouds, the birds still crying over their heads. The leftovers of their lunch were in a small paper bag at the feet, the last of the flour tortillas.

"How's the film?" he asked after a moment, not looking at Dean. He felt Dean's shoulder snag his as he shrugged.

"We've got plenty."

Cas nodded, sighing, fixated on the swells.

"What're you thinking about?" Dean smiled, scratching at his sleeve. Cas tilted his head, adjusting himself over his arms. He didn't know how to put it. He only knew that he had never, in his whole life, in their whole relationship, loved anyone, Dean, more absolutely. There was a bitterness to it – he would never reclaim the moment, he knew. It was like reading a book for the first time, or the moment right after a movie is over and you're just realizing what it meant.

The certainty came and went and Cas took a deep breath and began to stand. Dean watched him straighten and Cas smiled at the water. Every time it touched the shore it was new – it was falling in love all over again, and the previous one was forgotten, and that wave was the most precious wave for just a second and then it withdrew. It cycled, over and over, steady as the sun rising. The salty air was cool and damp as he inhaled, warm and wet as he exhaled.

"Where are you going?" Dean asked, and when Cas turned over his shoulder, Dean was holding the camera up at him.

Cas waved.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“I love you!” he said, and Dean laughed; Cas had apparently not heard him. Or maybe he had. Either way, he seemed alright.

“I know!” he called back and Cas shook his head. *No, you don't*, he thought, but it didn't matter. He would understand someday. He continued down the beach, knowing Dean was still watching him, and picked up a shell, tossing it to the sea, where it sunk to the bottom. He picked up another, rubbing his hands over the ridges. It was pale with faint stripes, and the interior was worn smooth by the surf and the sand. He tossed it.

“Let me see you!” Dean called, and Cas obliged, turning and waving once more. He cupped his hands, and shouted.

Dean smiled, the wind carrying his voice to him.

Cas dropped his arms, and Dean sensed that something was different. The air had changed.

After he had yelled, it had shifted. Cas was framed in that tiny window, that tiny moment, and when he turned something in Dean reached out, wanting to see his face again. Cas walked to the water, tossing another shell instead.

Dean lowered the camera from his eye.

The sound of Cas' voice on the wind seemed too faint to his memory. He wanted to hear him again, to try and recapture the second that had already gone, as sudden and sharp as the birds winging overhead. He opened his mouth with the intention of saying something, but nothing came. The waves rolled in, and the wind roared over his ears and through his knit shirt. He had shed his mackinaw, and Cas had only his windbreaker, fluttering around his narrow waist like a war-torn flag. Cas paused, watching the flock of birds go rushing over his head and out to sea. He slipped his hands into his pockets, watching their silhouettes blend into the clouds, wings muddying together until they couldn't be distinguished.

The sun slid out, glaring off of Cas' back and then shadowing again.

Something upset Dean about it; the way Cas stood, so far off, his hands held so simply against his body. Dean wanted to ask him to come back, to walk toward him, but he was so fixated on the ocean that Dean nearly regretted bringing him.

Turn around, he wanted to say. Let me see you. Yell again. But he couldn't.

As if he had sensed Dean's discomfort, Cas turned one more time and waved at the camera. Dean waved back, and a wave crashed, water biting at the edges of Cas' boots, pulling back into the sea bed, the shells left behind glinting as tiny shining reminders, their insides silky and iridescent, glimmering with blue and indigo and streaks of green. They rolled back with the water, tumbling in the undertow, the sun glancing off of them. They were like little jewels being pulled in, something strange and glorious, and Dean knew if he went closer he'd see them half-shelled, missing their pieces, the smudged insides exposed. Those shining insides, like God had pressed his thumb in, leaving his shimmering fingerprint.

He wondered if Cas was like that – if God had left his thumbprint in him. Dean didn't want to know; it meant you'd have to crack him open to find out, but in the end, Cas would be beautiful on the inside, he knew. The kind of lovely that when you tilted it in your hands you could see the smoky soft violet and bits of sunlight still caught in him.

Dean lowered the camera from his eye and laid it gently on the blanket, Cas still watching the

water, dark hair blown back.

It was the sort of thing that made you want to cry.

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They made love slow that night, and the box spring mattress groaned with every thrust, but neither of them noticed. Afterwards, Cas stroked Dean's back, his own skin flushed and hot in the small room.

When he closed his eyes in the darkness he could see the faint outlines of deep blue and smears of purple and green like the fireworks you got when you rubbed vigorously. They stayed a moment then evaporated - a glimpse.

Cas sighed in his sleep and Dean tried to stop thinking.

On the way home, Cas leaned serenely back against the headrest. He looked like he was asleep, but he wasn't. He didn't want to ruin the image of the empty beach and the endless water with the scroll of the landscape or the naked road. Even when Dean told him they had recorded all of it, so it didn't matter, he'd shrugged and kept his eyes shut.

"I really liked it there," he murmured. "We should go back."

"We will," Dean had said softly over the crackly twang of a guitar, "I promise."

## Chapter 5

**December, 1969**

-

They'd read about it in the paper, of course. Everyone had read about it. It came right before Christmas, and Cas stared at the headline, unblinking, before moving on into the kitchen. Dean flipped to the weather instead, complaining about the cold while Cas put coffee on.

"Put on another sweater, because I'm not turning the heat up," Cas said, refilling Dean's mug, "we can't afford it right now."

Dean snorted, turning another page.

"The draft's tomorrow," he commented, and Cas nodded, stirring sugar into his own cup.

"We'll have to watch, I guess," he replied.

"Guess so." The page rattled as Dean straightened it out. "Can't believe it's going to get that cold on Saturday. They've got to be kidding..."

Cas watched the milk swirl into the coffee, turning it a toffee brown.

"Is it really December first tomorrow? Feels like it was Thanksgiving just yesterday," he muttered, brow furrowing. No matter.

"It's going to snow early this year," Dean continued, "that's what I think."

"You've been saying that for almost four years, Dean, and every year you're wrong," Cas remarked, still stirring absently. Dean looked up from the table.

"You poisoning me or something?" His laugh broke Cas' thoughts, and he brought the coffee to him, sliding it across the table. Dean's eyes didn't stray from the paper as he drank, skirting his teeth along the edge of his teeth.

"You want any toast?" Cas asked, and Dean shook his head.

"No, I'm fine."

Cas nodded and drank his own coffee, wool socks slipping around the legs of his chair as he curled his feet. "Tips should be good. It's December, so remember to be nice and say happy holidays," he teased, Dean raising his eyebrow, still reading.

"It's wrong," Cas said all of a sudden, face getting hot. "It's wrong of them to do this."

"There's nothing we can do about it," Dean said gently, still not looking up. "So don't get all worked up. There's nothing we can do."

"We can, if they'd only listen for half a second and realize we're not doing any good over there," Cas continued, hand clenching around his coffee mug. Dean shook his head.

"Cas, please. Not now."

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all," Cas whispered, and Dean sighed, folding the paper up and slapping it down on the table.

"Nothing is going to happen," Dean tried to console, but Cas frowned.

"You don't know that!" he snapped, and Dean glared at him for a moment before his face softened.

"Let's go out for dinner," he said enthusiastically, trying to change the subject, and Cas groaned, thinking of the medical school applications he still had to fill out.

"Do I really have to get dressed?" he grumbled, hunching his shoulders, and Dean laughed, standing up and ruffling his hair.

"Come on, you've been moping around for days. Let's go out."

"I don't feel like it," Cas muttered, but Dean was already out of ear-shot. He touched the newspaper and turned it around so the headline was facing him. He stared at it for a while and then flipped it over, rubbing his face tiredly. Maybe he was coming down with something.

He sat in the silence, listening as Dean walked around in their bedroom, the closet door opening and closing, the heavy footfalls meaning that Dean had put his boots on. Cas was lost in his thoughts, his hand moving over the newspaper before coming back to curl his fingers around his coffee cup. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder and Dean leaning over to kiss his cheek.

"C'mon, Cas, get ready so we can go eat."

Cas shook his head and brought the cup to his mouth, taking a sip before setting it back down.

"I don't feel well. Can we go another day?"

He closed his eyes when Dean smoothed his hair back, his palm resting against his forehead, and he lifted his hand, fingers closing around Dean's wrist. Dean kissed his hair, his hand moving down to rest on his shoulder, and Cas leaned into the touch, grabbing his cup of coffee again.

"Yeah, we'll go another day."

Dean moved away and headed back into their bedroom, the paper laying on the table was a constant reminder of what was to come.

The medical school applications went ignored the rest of the night, and they ate leftover spaghetti from the previous night, Dean gently knocking his foot against Cas' shin, smiling at him over his fork. Cas laughed softly as he ate, reaching across the table to take Dean's free hand in his own. Dean curled his fingers through Cas' and they ate in a comfortable silence, their feet bumping into each other under the table, both of them laughing.

They watched Star Trek, Cas' head in Dean's lap, and Dean's fingers sifting through Cas' hair, smoothing out the tangles from him not brushing it out the entire day. Cas wasn't paying too much attention to the episode, but every now and then Dean laughed, and Cas just listened to him.

At some point he had drifted off to sleep, and by the time that he woken up, the television was only emitting static, and Dean's hand was still on his head. He rubbed at his eyes and sat up, Dean grunting as his hand dropped onto the couch, and Cas reached out, smoothing his fingers through his hair, leaning forward to brush his lips against his cheek.

"Dean," he whispered, and Dean snorted as he pulled back. Cas couldn't help but laugh as Dean cracked his eyes open, bringing his hand up to rub at them, groaning.

"What?"

"C'mon, let's go to bed. It's late."

Dean nodded and gently kissed Cas before he moved off of the couch, turning the television off on his way to the bedroom, and Cas followed behind him, shedding one of his sweaters on the way. The apartment was cold, and the floor was cold on his bare feet, but the bed was warm when he slipped beneath the covers, immediately curling close to Dean, head pressed beneath his chin.

He hummed softly as Dean smoothed his hand down his back, fingers slipping beneath the hem of his sweater to rest against the small of his back. He curled his arm around Dean's middle, pressing as close to him as he could get, fingers bunching up the back of his shirt as he pressed his face into the collar of his sweater.

"What if-"

"Don't," Dean cut him off and Cas shook his head. His throat felt tight, but he didn't want to cry, not in front of Dean, not right now. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going to leave you."

"Promise?" Cas flinched when he heard his voice break, but Dean tightened his arm around him and kissed his forehead, and he relaxed, if only a little.

"I promise."

Cas didn't feel better when he woke up, and he lingered in bed for longer than he should have, and he knew Dean was put out with him.

"You're letting this get to you, and that's pointless," Dean grouched, throwing on his clothes while Cas moped, staring up at him from the pillow. He wasn't impressed by how well Dean appeared to be taking it. He wasn't relieved that Dean wasn't worried or anxious or nervous. It made him mad.

"Does it really mean nothing to you that you could be drafted today?" he snarled, sitting up, shoving Dean's hand aside, away from him. He glared at the sheets. "How can you be so fucking indifferent about it?"

"So what if I do?" Dean bit back, throwing his arms up. "So what if I do, then what are we going to do about it? We can't do anything about it. That's the point! It's not up to us!"

"You could at least act like you're upset!" Cas roared, kicking out of the blankets and shoving past him to the bureau. He dug through the drawers, throwing shirts to the floor. "You could at least act like you gave a fuck about it!"

"What do you want from me?" Dean shouted, and this wasn't what Cas wanted. It wasn't. Not today. "Do you want me to throw something? Or cry about it? Because I'm not going to do that because it won't change anything! If it did, I would!"

"I just wish you'd say you were scared!" he yelled, slamming the drawer shut. Something tumbled off and hit the floor. "I wish you would say you were scared of it and that you didn't want to. Or something. None of that bullshit you feed me about not getting worked up over it!"

"I don't want to!" Dean said harshly, sitting heavily on the bed. Cas grit his teeth. "I'm not going to get like that over something like this."

“Then when will you?” Cas snapped, finally wheeling on him. Dean was slumped over, his head in his hands.

“I don’t know,” Dean answered, quietly, “I’m scared, alright. There. I’m scared, but I’m also practical and I know the money would be good.”

Cas closed his eyes, face screwing up.

“Why do you keep saying that? You’ve been saying that for months,” he hissed, “I’ll get another job. I can wait a semester or two, why do you keep saying that? I know I make a fuss, but it isn’t that tight, and I would never ask you to enlist.”

“Because it’s true! All my friends at the garage are *gone*, Cas! They’re over there, and they’re doing pretty well!”

“Stop talking like that!” Cas cried, “Stop talking like that I can’t stand it! It’s different for us!”

“How the hell is it different for us? They have wives Cas, some of them even have kids -!”

“It’s like you don’t even care, do you? The risk that we take? Every day we do this I’m at risk of losing you! Don’t you understand? They could evict us, or someone could hurt you just by being with me, and now you want to go off and pick up a gun and head off to some fucking jungle! Thank you, that is so reassuring!”

Dean folded his hands between his knees when Cas stalked by him and slammed the bathroom door. He looked at the floor and stood, knocking on the wood.

“Cas, come on,” he pleaded. “Come on, do you really want to do this today?”

Cas leaned against the sink and breathed deeply.

“I get it,” Dean started, his word softer, “I get it, alright? I know – I know it’s different.” Cas didn’t respond. “I don’t like thinking about that shit, you know I don’t – but you can’t just give me the silent treatment.”

Cas remained still.

“Are you really going to do this?” Dean’s voice was getting coarse again. “You know what? Fine. Do whatever you want. Just shut yourself up, I don’t give a damn.”

“You never do,” Cas muttered, and Dean opened the door.

“What?”

“I said you never do. You never give a damn. You always keep going, no matter what, and when I stop to think about things you make me feel like an idiot because I don’t just throw myself back in.” He gripped the sides of the sink. “You just say I overthink it. Well maybe I am overthinking, and it’s because you won’t talk about it, and you just start *doing* things.”

“What’s talking about it going to fix? We’re still going to watch them pull the rabbit out of the hat tonight, and then everything will go back to usual.”

“What if it *doesn’t*, Dean?”

“Then there’s still nothing we can do! They’ve got us pinned, Cas! I’m damned if I stay here, and I’m damned if I get drafted, and I’m damned either way because I’m a faggot! You can ask any

goddamn lady on the street and she'll tell you the same thing!" Dean was starting to yell again, and Cas watched him in the mirror. "I learned a long time ago that crying about it isn't going to solve any of my problems, alright? It didn't bring my mom back and it didn't make me stop liking dick, and it didn't keep my dad from forgetting to take his rings off! You just keep going!"

"So it doesn't hurt you?"

"Of course it hurts me! I'm terrified of this goddamn war! I'm terrified of what it will do to me! I've seen the ones who come back –they're like ghosts, Cas! I don't want to be that! I don't want to come back half of who I was!"

Cas rotated so he could look at Dean's actual face, not just the one in the mirror.

"Listen to me. Really listen to me; every day you wake up and you go to work and I don't hear you again for hours, Dean. Do you know what that does to me?"

Dean opened his mouth and Cas continued, shaking his head,

"I can't watch you when you're at work. I can't make sure you're safe or that no one will hurt you, and it's the worst feeling in the world. Every day I don't have the control that other people have. When those men go to the garage their wives don't have to worry about hearing they were beat half to death in an alley or that they were fired for sleeping with another man. It's enough to watch you risk your life on the fucking racetrack, and now they're trying to take you away from me for a year and I don't..."

He realized he was crying and he swallowed, scrubbing at his face. Dean sighed.

"We're careful," Dean insisted softly, walking to him, "We've always been so careful."

"That time with Alastair – Dean he could have killed you."

"He'd had it out for me. We were rivals on the track and he wanted to make it personal."

"Don't play it off when I saw what he did to you," Cas growled. "Dean, if I hadn't been coming down the stairs, I never would have found you. You could have bled to death."

"I didn't, and by tomorrow you'll know this whole fight was stupid. I'll be called in the lower bracket and we won't have to worry about anything. They won't even call me."

Cas knew he wasn't going to win.

"You want to go out to eat?" he asked, quietly, and Dean nodded, not really listening.

"Sure."

They ate noodles at the Chinese restaurant up the block, and Dean stared at the sunny sky out the window.

"Maybe it will snow on Saturday," he said, and Cas stared up at the bright blue. They knew better than that. They walked back to the apartment, and when Cas opened the door for Dean he smiled at him and Dean smiled back and, for a moment, it was alright. Cas closed his eyes in the elevator and thought of the beach that one rainy November. They hadn't gone back yet – maybe after this had all blown over he'd suggest it. They could go when it was warmer and swim. That'd be nice. Dean would like that.

They came back and Cas couldn't do anything productive, so he napped on the couch. Dean

pretended to read the newspaper. They both drank too much coffee for the middle of the afternoon. They sat side by side on the couch and when the man called Dean's birthday neither of them said anything about it being below a hundred.

Dean got up and went to the window, lighting a cigarette, leaning on the sill, watching the traffic down below. Cas remained motionless, fingers playing with a loose button on his cardigan. He twisted it till it came off and then he stood. He walked to the kitchen, flicking the light on, reminding himself that they needed to get the buzzing sound fixed. Maybe it was the wiring.

Maybe they just needed a new light bulb. The TV was still going in the other room, calling out numbers, and Cas blinked into the open refrigerator, pulling out the milk.

"Oh," he mumbled, reaching for a towel – it had slid right out of his hands. He dropped to his knees, shoulder making the fridge door swing, and started mopping it up, but it seemed to be getting everywhere. The carton was still overturned; that was probably why. He thought about righting it, but his hands kept moving over the cold milk, scooping it towards the towel.

"Stop," Dean said, and Cas hadn't heard him come in. He was busy trying to clean up the milk.

"Cas, stop it."

"It's fine," Cas answered. "It's fine. It's ok."

"Cas...baby, stop," Dean whispered, trying to take the towel out of his hand, but Cas wasn't done yet.

"Just go sit down, I've got it," he insisted, but his voice was climbing higher into his throat. He swallowed it down, calm. "It's fine. It's ok, they made a mistake. It's nothing."

Dean put his hands on his shoulders and forced him upright, green eyes round with worry.

"Cas," he started, and Cas shook his head.

"No."

"Baby, you have to hold it together," Dean hushed, rubbing his shoulders. "Don't get upset."

"I'm fine," Cas cried, and he tried to pull out of Dean's grip, and his pant leg was soaked with milk, which meant he'd have to wash it that night. He succeeded and put his hand up on the counter, determined to heave himself up, but he found his body was too heavy. He blamed the milk soaked into his pants. He blamed it even as he buckled forward.

"No, no, no," he muttered, and Dean touched his face and his neck like he didn't know what else to do. It was fine. Couldn't Dean see it was fine? It was a mistake, spilled milk, clean it up, no use crying, right?

No use crying because there was nothing they could do, so why was he crying? Why was he crying now when it didn't help?

"Boys go over and come back every day," Dean said. "Every day, Cas."

"Don't fucking rationalize it to me!" Cas screamed, shoving him off, "Don't you – don't you dare...59, Dean. You were number 50 fucking 9!"

He buried his face into his hands. Dean sat, in a daze, watching him. There was still milk everywhere and it infuriated him. He gnashed his teeth around something incoherent and then

gasped, trying to reign it in.

“Fuck,” Dean mumbled. “Fuck, there’s milk everywhere.”

He righted the carton and Cas reached forward and touched his hand automatically. It was shaking so hard. He looked up at Dean’s eyes and curled towards him, gathering him up against his chest.

“Shhh,” Cas whispered into his hair. “Shhh, it’s alright,”

Dean sobbed against his shoulder, and Cas rocked them back and forth, the milk sloshing as he scooted forward. Dean’s hands fisted into the material of his sweater, blunt nails biting into his back.

Dean’s palms were damp where they pressed against him.

“Fuck,” he whimpered, and Cas rocked them because he didn’t know what else to do.

“Goddamn milk,” Dean choked. “Fucking milk everywhere.”

“We’ll clean it up,” Cas soothed, his cheeks itching where the tears kept falling. “Don’t worry.”

Dean pulled back, prying himself from Cas’ body, standing up. He grabbed another towel from somewhere and got back down on his hands and knees, finishing what Cas had started. He pawed at his face as he did so, sniffing and clearing his throat.

They sat mutely across from each other. Cas’ knees ached from the cold floor. He righted his glasses where Dean’s shoulder had bumped them askew. The quiet was overwhelming. Dean took a sharp breath and Cas looked up to find he was scratching the back of his head.

“It’s going to be fast. They need men,” Dean started, and Cas nodded numbly along. Yes, uh-huh. He understood. “So they’ll want us out of here quick. I’ll have to go down to the recruiting station.”

The phone rang, scaring both of them.

“That’s Sam,” Cas said automatically, but Dean didn’t move. “It’s Sam,” Cas repeated, and Dean twitched.

“I’ll have to put my bike in storage,” he mumbled, rubbing his jaw. Cas stood shakily and walked to the bedroom, picking the phone up out of the cradle.

“We just saw the numbers,” Sam rushed, and Cas twirled the phone cord around his finger, toes curling and uncurling on the hardwood. “Jesus Christ, I can’t believe it. How is he? Is he alright? Is he mad?”

“We have a lot to talk about,” Cas answered blandly; his tongue was dry and kept getting caught on his teeth. “He’s taking it well, I think, once the shock wears off.”

“Jesus Christ. I never thought this would happen, I really didn’t, I mean, I never thought...” Sam trailed off and turned away from the receiver, hushing something to Jessica. “Jess is beside herself,” he muttered, “absolutely beside herself.”

"He's going to be okay," Cas said, mostly to himself, and he heard Jess speaking to Sam on the other end of the line. Dean was going to be okay, he was going to be fine. He was leaving for a little while, but he was going to come back just as he was before, and everything would be okay. He would come home.

"Can I talk to him?"

"Yeah, yeah," Cas spoke slowly, pulling the phone away from his ear and setting it down. He walked back into the kitchen where Dean was, still on the floor, his eyes were red and his face was wet. Cas crouched in front of him.

"Sam wants to speak to you."

Dean shook his head and grasped at the front of Cas' sweater, bunching the fabric in his hands and pulling him closer. Cas followed and Dean pressed his face into the crook of his neck, arms wrapping around him.

"I don't want to leave you."

"Sam wants to speak to you," he repeated as he placed his hand on the back of Dean's neck, rubbing circles on his back with his other hand. Cas held him tight, hushing him.

"What are you going to do?" Dean said from somewhere around his shoulder, voice thick.

"I'll wait for you." He could feel Dean's lips curl into a smile against his neck before he pushed away, kissing him breathless before he stood and walked into the bedroom. It was silent for a moment, but then he heard Dean speaking to Sam in the other room. Cas ran a hand through his hair. His pants were wet from the milk, his sweater too, and the mess still wasn't completely cleaned up.

He pulled another towel down from the counter and mopped up the last remaining milk from the floor before he stood and tossed it into the sink with the rest. He could take care of them later once everything had been calmed down and settled. He couldn't hear what Dean was saying, and really, he didn't want to. He didn't want to focus on what was happening at all.

Dean's voice grew louder for a moment before quieting, and Cas walked into the bedroom, shedding his cardigan and the shirt beneath. He dropped them on the floor with little ceremony, moving on towards the closet to pull out a dry sweater. He ignored Dean on the phone, pulling the sweater over his head and returning to the living room. The television was still on so he turned it off, moving across the room toward the turntable. He turned it on and flipped through his albums, pulling one out and setting it on the turntable, finding the song he wanted. It was calming to do, to drop the needle into place.

The crackle of the speakers broke the silence, and then the music began to play. Cas dropped down to sit on the rug, pulling his sleeves over his hands as he wiped at his eyes while Elvis played. He didn't know what he was going to do with himself while Dean was gone. Of course, he was going to continue on with school, maybe get a job to keep a roof over his head, but he was going to wait for Dean to come home. He was going to wait for Dean to come home in one piece, same as the day that he left.

The song ended and Dean emerged from the bedroom and sat down beside him, bringing his arm up to curl around Cas' shoulder, and Cas leaned into him.

"What did Sam say?"

"He didn't have much to say. There's really nothing *to* say. He thinks I should volunteer – just get it over with."

Cas sighed and moved, pulling away from Dean to crawl into his lap, tucking his head under Dean's neck. Dean kissed his forehead, rubbing his hand up and down on his back.

"I don't want you to go."

"I know, baby, I know," Dean said, kissing his temple and smoothing his hand through his hair. "It'll go by so fast. You'll be busy with school and your friends, and you won't even notice that I'm gone."

"Don't say that." Cas croaked as he rubbed his face against Dean's shoulder. "Don't say that, Dean. You're not going to be here, and I'm not going to know what to do with myself."

Dean kissed him again and again, and Cas sobbed against his neck until his throat hurt, and then he stopped. The record quit playing, the needle lifting, but it continued to spin on the turntable. It was silent, all except for the sound of them breathing and Dean humming as he gently rocked Cas, one hand moving over his back and the other through his hair.

"We can move," Cas said, his head a haze of thoughts and projected images.

"We can't escape this, Cas. This just isn't something that we can run from."

Cas turned his head away from Dean's mouth and fidgeted.

"We can move to-"

"I'm not going to be a draft dodger," Dean cut him off, and Cas dropped his hands into his lap, wringing the hem of his sweater with his fingers. Dean gently grabbed his hands and brought them up, kissing his palms, the backs of his hands, his wrists. "This is something that we can get through."

"You promise?" Cas sniffed, bumping his forehead against Dean's. Dean laughed softly before he kissed him.

"I do."

Dean went down to the recruiting station the following day and signed up, and Cas didn't want him to, but Dean was determined to not delay the inevitable. Dean was twenty two; he was ripe for drafting and had no deferments. The man at the station was surprised he hadn't signed up earlier.

It was odd. He was I-A. He was going to be deployed. The induction letter arrived, and when it did, Dean left it on the table for Cas to read. He never did. It stayed there until it disappeared. It didn't snow that December, and Cas knew Dean was disappointed about it, like he always was.

"It's just waiting till you get back. You'll get back and it'll snow for a whole week and the roads will get closed up and we'll have to stay inside all day," Cas joked, holding his hands, rubbing the backs with his thumbs. He hadn't cried since the day Dean got drafted and he was doing his best to keep it that way because Dean was right – it didn't help anything. When his face got worried Dean would shrug, biting into his sandwich, or shutting a door, or pulling a shirt on, or pulling the quilt straight on the bed.

"You'll barely miss me."

Cas would say something like, "I'm sure you're right".

What a sad lie it was; how strange and stupid that he pretended it was nothing, but it was better than telling him he loved him till the words exhausted themselves, and it was better than saying he was scared and sad and wrecked over it. That he wished it were him instead, and not Dean. Not Dean, anyone but Dean. The words felt so meaningless when he tried to say them, like throwing a

rope into deep water and watching it sink.

The last day crept in like a thief in the night.

Dean kissed his neck, his chest, his stomach, and he was still soft, covering his eyes with his hands so Dean wouldn't see him cry. He bleated his apologies and Dean held him tightly, telling him it was alright, and Cas was so disgusted with himself for it. He should have been able to do that, but he couldn't. He just couldn't.

"I love you for more than fucking you," Dean had said harshly, forcing his hands away, "so stop saying you're sorry," and the desperation in his voice had made Cas shake his head and bite back the sob pushing against the back of his throat. "It's not about fucking you, it's not about that," Dean whispered, over and over, and Cas kept shaking his head, touching Dean's shoulders and then letting his hands flutter over his back and chest, unable to be still. He cried hard for ten minutes into the pillow while Dean sat on the edge of the bed, one hand on his leg, thumb smoothing over his calf through the wrinkled sheet.

When he stopped Dean got up and made himself coffee. They didn't sleep. They ate peanut butter sandwiches on the bed, Dean looking at him despite his red rimmed eyes, and when they were done they brushed the crumbs off and leaned against each other, watching the sun come up.

"I wonder what it will be like," Dean said softly against Cas' stomach, nuzzling into his shirt.

"Hot," Cas replied distantly. "Green. You'll probably see some really beautiful things."

"I'll tell you about them."

"When you come home," Cas whispered.

"When I come home," Dean replied.

They decided Cas wouldn't send him any letters. He was busy with school, and Dean didn't like to get sentimental when he could help it, and it was just too much, they both had agreed. It was just too much to ask of themselves, and that was alright. Sam drove them to the base, Jess in the front seat, turning around every five minutes as if to say something, but she never really did. She commented on the weather or what they'd eaten for lunch, but something else hovered on her lips that she never said.

Maybe it was the same thing Cas was thinking – that they should kiss right there in front of some general and get slapped on the wrist and sent home. Dean's face was hard, and stubborn, and Cas knew that Dean wouldn't budge. He was going over.

Cas shut his eyes and found Dean's hand on the seat between them; he squeezed it.

Sam and Jess got out of the car and Cas wasn't surprised when they turned their heads, Dean leaning in to kiss him. He kissed him, and Cas knew it was the way people kissed before they died, or left forever, and he wanted to hold onto his hand and make him stay in the car, but he knew that he couldn't.

Wasn't that what he loved? You couldn't make Dean do anything. He loved that.

*I love you in my bed at night, and when I wake up, and I love hearing you sing, and I love telling you to stop bothering me, and I love walking to Van's noodle house with you, and I love you – I love you, so promise you'll be like the ocean and come back to me, even when they pull you away. Always come back to me.*

“What?” Dean whispered, and Cas opened his eyes.

“When you’re afraid, just think of me,” Cas said, knowing that wasn’t what he had said the first time, “Just think of that day at the beach. I’ll be there.”

“You got that picture?” Dean said, and Cas nodded.

“In my pocket.”

“You look at it every day,” Dean’s voice caught, and he swallowed. “Look at it every day, alright? You look at it every single day, don’t let one day go by without looking at it, and I’ll be looking right back at you...”

Sam tapped on the window and Dean looked up at him over Cas’ shoulder. They got out without a word.

Sam hugged him tightly and Jess fussed with his uniform, fixing the collar before Dean caught her hands and kissed her. She smiled, crying, and threw her arms around his neck. Cas looked around and saw the mothers and fathers and countless siblings. The wives and the fiancés and girlfriends.

He held out his hand for Dean to shake, the other men beginning to funnel towards the lines. Dean touched his fingers and then gripped his hand hard.

“Remember?” Cas blurted, suddenly, and Dean’s bottle-green eyes widened. Cas smiled. “Remember what you said?”

Dean shook his head and Cas’ face crumpled, and he tried to keep it straight, taking a deep breath, putting his other hand on the back of Dean’s.

“Doesn’t seem right,” he attempted. “You said it *‘doesn’t seem right to say goodbye’*.”

Dean stared at him for a long time, and Cas watched the realization drift across his features. He squeezed their hands.

“See you then,” he said quietly, and then he was pulling away, and Cas felt the material of his uniform against his thumb. He watched Dean back off and turn, tossing his bag over his shoulder.

“Come on, darling,” Jessica hushed, filling his empty hands with her own. “Come on.”

She turned them away, and Cas felt the lights flicker out with every step he took towards the car. He closed his eyes against the crouching darkness, and thought of the ocean, and the flecks of November rain on the windshield of Bobby’s truck – how they had seemed to run together, and how blurred it had all looked then. How strange and quiet and grey the world was. He thought of Dean’s blood-red mackinaw.

His steps stumbled.

## Chapter 6

1971

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Vietnam wasn't what Dean would have expected at all. It was green and humid, and at least Cas was right about that, but Dean thought to himself that maybe things would have been different if he was over there for a different reason. The scenery was beautiful, don't get him wrong, but he just saw things differently. Every time he went somewhere, he always sought places where he could keep cover just in case anything were to happen, because he wasn't about to get left in the open where he could get shot

He had someone to go home to, someone that expected him home in one piece, and he was going to keep his promise to Cas.

Adam Milligan joined their platoon a few months before Dean's departure home. He was a greenhorn, shipped straight from Kansas, and most everyone avoided him the first couple of weeks because no one wanted to be caught near him if he made a rookie mistake in the field. The new guys were usually the first, and the first to get shipped home in the body bags.

It was raining and they had settled down to rest for the night at base. Dean was seated on the edge of his cot, cigarette dangling from his lips, when Adam walked into the tent, shirt clinging to his skin; soaked to the bone. Dean laughed dryly, blowing smoke out of his nose as Adam wandered over to him, sitting on the cot across from him.

"Get caught in the rain?"

Ashes fell from the end of his cigarette as he fished around behind him, pulling his pack of smokes out and offering it to Adam. Adam shook his head and waved him off, and Dean shrugged and set the pack down beside him.

"No, thank you."

Dean raised his eyebrows, surprised that the kid was actually polite. He had been dealing with men that were as rude and crude as him for months, so it was almost a relief to have someone around with some manners. He finished off his cigarette with one last pull, dropping it onto the ground and tamping it out with the heel of his boot. Adam shifted on the cot in front of him, eyes darting around the tent before stopping and focusing on Dean.

"So what brings you inside?"

"It's raining."

Dean laughed again, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. "No shit. It's always fucking raining. Woulda been a miracle if they had sent us out here during dry season."

Adam laughed softly and leaned back, attempting to wring some of the water from his shirt, only managing to stretch the bottom. He frowned and placed his hands in his lap.

"How long you been out here?"

"Few months," Dean shrugged a shoulder, placing his hands on the cot and leaning back slightly, watching Adam the whole time. "It's Milligan, right?"

"Yes, sir," Adam nodded, smiling slightly. "Adam Milligan."

"You don't need to call me 'sir'. Dean will do just fine. Or Winchester, like the rest," he sat up and Adam pulled back slightly, leaning away from him. The kid was a stick with a mop of hair, not long, but a mess. He couldn't have been over eighteen, and the thought made Dean's stomach sink. He couldn't believe that they were sending kids fresh out of school over to this place.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"God damn," Dean breathed, smoothing his hand over his face. "I guess they don't got anything better than to send kids over here, huh? Funneling you poor fools right into the meat grinder."

Adam shrugged and Dean shook his head. Not a lick of fear in the kid's eyes. If anything, he was indifferent to it all. Probably poor, Dean figured. A lot of boys enlisted to make money – if they could last that long. He reached around him and grabbed his pack of smokes, fishing another cigarette out of it. He lit it quickly and tossed the used match onto the ground, taking a long draw. Adam watched him, and Dean saw the glimmer of innocence. He bit back the urge to sigh. It was okay for Dean to be over here, just dandy, but he hated seeing kids Adam's age. It felt like they only lasted a night and then they were lying on the ground, begging for their mothers.

"You got anyone back home?"

"My mom." There was a pause as Dean breathed out, smoke clouding in between them and Adam coughed, waving his hand through it. "Do you?"

"My brother," Dean answered quickly, taking another pull from the cigarette. His helmet was on the ground near his boots, and he gently pushed it beneath his cot with his heel; the picture inside was folded and creased many times over but safe from the rain and elements.

"You don't have a girl back home or anything?"

"That's none of your business." Ashes fell onto his boot and he kicked them off, Adam following the movement with his eyes before they returned to his face. He was frowning, and Dean shrugged.

"I bet you do, huh?"

"Drop it, kid."

"Is she pretty? What's her name?"

Dean pulled the cigarette from his lips and held it between his fingers, jabbing them in the direction of Adam. Adam flinched and leaned back.

"You got a girl back home?"

"Well, uh, no."

"I don't either, so shut your mouth, will you?"

He returned the cigarette between his lips and took a pull, and Adam scuffed the toe of his boot against the ground. It was silent between the two of them, the rain beating against the roof of the tent, and he could hear people talking outside. It sounded like Ash and Henrikson, talking about

some broadcast that Ash had gotten over the radio.

Adam broke the silence first, and Dean groaned.

"So what's your brother like?"

Dean finished off the cigarette threw it onto the ground with the previous one, giving it the same treatment with the heel of his boot.

"Smart. The kid's a hell of a lot brighter than I am. He's studying to get into Harvard Law. He's at Stanford at the moment." He smiled fondly and ran a hand through his hair. He missed Sam like crazy, and he missed Jess too. He missed seeing them together, all smiles and laughter, Jess' golden hair even brighter in the sunlight, and Sam having to bend down to kiss her cheek.

"California?" Adam marveled, tipping his head forward. Dean laughed.

"NorCal," Dean finished, and Adam dimmed. "What? You wanted me to say Hollywood?"

"I don't know. I've never been out of Kansas. Well, that used to be true."

"Kansas to 'Nam, my God," Dean laughed again, harder. "They pick you boys up like summer corn."

"I *enlisted*," Adam scoffed, flushing, "My mom's been working alone all her life. I figured this was good way to pull my weight."

Dean didn't say anything and they lapsed into silence again.

"You miss him a lot, huh?"

"You don't even know the half of it, kid."

Adam smiled and scratched at his wrist absently, looking at the ground.

"I haven't even been here that long and I already miss my mom. I miss her like crazy." He brought his hand up to rub at his eyes, and Dean leaned forward, gripping his shoulder. Adam smiled, a small smile, and Dean squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. The look he gave Dean reminded him of Sam when he was younger, when he would ask where their mother was, ask if she was going to come home anytime soon, and it broke Dean's heart.

"Hey. You'll be home in no time, okay?" He didn't pull his hand away until Adam nodded and rubbed at his eyes again. "A few months will feel like a couple of days, trust me."

"Yeah, okay," Adam chuckled, rubbing the palms of his hands against his pants. "Yeah, I trust you."

"But you don't ever let 'em see you cry, alright?" Dean insisted. Adam nodded vigorously, steeling his face. He looked like a tough kid. He held himself differently than the others, even though he was younger. Dean had been watching him from afar for a while. "They see you cry, you're cooked," Dean continued, rolling his neck and shoulders, the rain picking up.

"I doubt anyone would even care. No one talks to me."

"It's because they 're waiting to see if you'll fuck up. You're green, baby," Dean drawled, tapping his fingers idly on his matchbook. He raised his eyebrows at Adam. "You gonna fuck up?"

"No," Adam bit, straightening up. "Hand me a cigarette."

“That’s more like it,” Dean grinned, tapping one out into Adam’s hand. He bent forward and Dean lit another match, shaking it out once the end of Adam’s smoke was glowing. Adam coughed lightly and shook his head.

“Been a while,” he choked, eyes watering. “Tastes like shit.”

Dean shrugged, considering the notion of having a third. There was nothing else to do. He shook his head and tucked the pack away for later; no sense in wasting them.

“I haven’t smoked since high school. Mom made me quit,” he continued. “Says it’s unsanitary.”

“Hmm,” Dean nodded, scratching his forehead, not really listening. His thoughts drifted; he was so damn tired he couldn’t even rein them in.

“Someone else I know says the same thing,” he said, after a moment blinking to wake himself up, and Adam perked up, tapping ashes to the ground.

“Your mysterious girlfriend?” he mocked, and Dean rolled his eyes.

“If it were, what would that fucking even change? You still wouldn’t know her from Eve,” Dean replied, standing and stretching and then sitting back down, the cot groaning under him.

“I’m just curious. All any of the other guys do is talk about the pussy they get. Figured you’d be the same. They talk about you too.”

Dean laughed, head thrown back, turning his wrist so it popped.

“I’m sure they have a lot to say,” he smiled, and Adam stubbed out the cigarette as Dean had done, withdrawing a pack of gum from his pocket. He unwrapped a piece and chewed it.

“Not really. They said you’re the best marksman in the unit. And that you don’t say much. Say you’ve got a hard-on for Henrikson too,” Adam chewed, and Dean shook his head at the absurdity. “You two pal around.”

“I respect Henrikson and he respects me, which makes him my friend – but they are right, I’m the best marksman we’ve got in this piss ant platoon.”

“How come you’re so quiet? I mean, if I were older, I’d make a ton of friends,” Adam rambled. “If I had half the respect you did – I’d be using it, you know? But you never ask for favors. I know that. I’ve watched you. You never do.”

Dean’s mouth twitched and he rolled his shoulder again, feeling the tight muscle pull and ache.

“I’m not here to make friends,” Dean answered, “I’m not here to do any favors for anyone,” his face was stony as he spoke, his voice soft, “I’m here to do what they tell me so I can collect when it’s over and go home. I’ve made a promise, and that’s all I care about.”

“Did you promise her you’d marry her when you got home, or what?” Adam snapped around his gum, and Dean lifted his eyes to him. Adam’s chewing slowed to a halt.

“Here’s some advice, little brother,” Dean began, whispering. “Don’t talk about shit you don’t understand.”

“Sorry,” Adam murmured. “I didn’t know...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean sighed. “It’s complicated, that’s all.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Adam grinned and Dean reached over and punched him hard in the arm, making him yelp.

“Shut up. And next time you’re in line, don’t look around like some idiot – you hold up the group.”

“Dick...” Adam grumbled, rubbing his shoulder, smiling a little at Dean. Dean was back to brooding again, eyes distant, and Adam knew he wasn’t going to tolerate any more stupid questions. He didn’t seem like that kind of person. What he said made sense though. He acted like he wasn’t there. Not really. He was just holding place there for a while, biding his time ‘til he was somewhere else – just passing through their unit without really being a part of it. Except for Henrikson, who valued him and asked for his opinion at times, and Ash, but Ash was odd and a genius and no one except Dean and Henrikson really talked to him with any kind of authority.

Adam licked his lips.

“So do you love her?”

“Yes,” Dean said automatically, and like a reflex, pulled his cigarettes out and lit one.

“How did you know you loved her?”

“What the fuck is this, Milligan? You writing a book? One of those romance novels?”

“No, I just wanted to know!” Adam rushed. “She’d probably want you to make *one* friend.”

Dean chuckled good-naturedly and pursed his lips around his smoke, inhaling, his dirty fingernails brushing against his mouth.

“How did you know?”

“Moment we met,” Dean answered. “That’s when I knew.”

Adam blanched.

“You’re a fucking sap, you know that?” He scratched the back of his head. “Seriously Winchester, who the fuck even talks like that? Love at first sight? That’s bullshit.” Dean smiled like he knew something secret.

“What am I supposed to say? When we fucked? That’s what the rest would say, but they wouldn’t know true love if it bit them in the ass. But maybe you’re not asking about real love. You’re just after tail. I know how a nineteen year old works.”

“You don’t know jack shit.” Adam blushed. “I was asking about real love. You know, getting married and shit like that. Makin’ kids. White picket fence. So you can suck a dick, asshole.”

Dean barked another laugh, smoking his cigarette slowly, making it last. He didn’t answer Adam further, looking instead at his chest – a thin gold chain was wound around his neck and disappeared under his shirt.

“What’s that?” He pointed at it and Adam looked down, surprised, before pulling it out and holding the thin medallion in his hand.

“It’s a St. Michael. My mom had it sent before I left BST. She said it’s supposed to protect me, or

something.” He rubbed his grubby thumb over it and then tucked it back in. “I don’t know; I don’t really buy into all that, but it makes her feel better, and it’s like having her with me. You get that?”

Dean nodded, thinking of the photograph shadowed away in his helmet.

“When you feel like you’re losing it, just look at that. It’ll keep you who you are,” he advised. “You don’t want to go home to your mama changed, and trust me, this war is changing boys faster than they can change their clothes.”

Adam nodded sagely.

“Do you ever get scared?” he murmured and Dean drew on his cigarette for a moment.

“Yes,” he said after a minute.

“What do you do?” Adam’s voice was quaking. “I was...I was scared shitless during that last raid. I thought I was going to die. I really did. I didn’t even know what to do.”

Dean swallowed thickly, trying not to think about the last raid. They’d burned the village to the ground; so many little ones watching them do it. He closed his eyes for a moment before opening them.

“Just pick something. Something that makes you happy, and you think of it. Then you hold onto it until your legs work again and you can get your bearings and know what you’re supposed to do.”

“What do you think of?”

Dean hesitated.

“A lot of things.”

He shook his hand, his cigarette having burned down a little too close to his skin. “I imagine I’m looking through a movie camera – just filming it. For a documentary or some shit. That usually helps, and when you’re remembering later, you can’t hear nothin’. Nobody screaming or bitching or any of it.”

“Do you think of her?” Adam whispered, peering at Dean. The older man wasn’t looking at him, but the floor. Adam wanted to know – he wanted to know the secret. Why Dean kept her locked up, away from all of them.

“Not if I can help it,” Dean confessed, feeling sick to his stomach. He had promised he would – he had, but he couldn’t bring himself to when they were in the field. “They’ve got no place here,” he trailed off, “If I think about them too long this place is going to grab hold of them like one of those huge snakes – those big long fuckers that you almost step on. It’ll swallow h-...” He cut himself off and took a last pull from his smoke.

“Can you help it?” Adam tried, and Dean smiled sadly.

“Not usually,” he murmured, dropping the third stub to the ground, pressing his foot down like the rest. “But that’s how it goes. That’s what you gotta do. You think of your mama, you think of that medallion or St. Michael, hell, think of my gorgeous face, you won’t be scared.”

Adam rolled his eyes and both of them looked to the opening of the tent as Henrikson called for Dean, his voice booming through the base.

“Sure, Winchester,” he mumbled, and Dean stood, walking out, ruffling Adam’s hair as he went

by. When he was gone, Adam stared around, eyes landing on Dean's cot and the small collection of things he had. There was a small date book and when Adam stood and flipped through it, curious, it wasn't filled with anything except x's on the calendars, no doubt counting down Dean's TOD. There weren't any letters, but there were scraps of paper with motorcycles drawn on them, and a cross section of an engine. Adam was impressed by these, but set them aside, looking for *something*. Something that would give her away.

Adam needed to see her face; needed to know Dean was right about it all.

He peered around, even glancing under his pillow, but there was literally nothing to indicate Dean had any family at all. Frustrated, Adam looked under the bed and saw Dean's helmet sitting idly beside one of the crossed legs. He could see the words "Buck Stops Here" written in black paint marker on the front, but that wasn't out of the ordinary. Everyone wrote something on their helmet. There was something else too, but Adam couldn't read it, and his insect repellent was tucked under the elastic, but that was really it. Footsteps made him straighten and he hustled out of the tent, still thinking about the helmet, but then everyone was gathering and he joined the flock.

Maybe the others were right – there was something more to Dean Winchester's story, but he wasn't willing to tell.

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"Looks like we're swimming today, ladies, so let me see those skirts up!" Henrikson crowed from the end of the line. Adam groaned and Dean jabbed him forward, adjusting his pack on his shoulder and holding his gun up above his head. His arms, hardened from months of toting the M-16 around and his entire existence on his back, barely protested as he held it up.

"Quit bitchin' and walk," Dean snapped, wincing as he followed Adam down into the swampy water, his boots sinking into the muddy bottom. It was hot as fuck, and the mosquitoes swarmed around their bodies, the film on top of the waist-deep water parting as they pushed through. The line snaked around trees and underbrush. Henrikson was singing *Wade in the Water* behind them and Dean fought the urge to tell him to shut up. It was annoying the piss out of him. The sooner they get out of the swamp the better.

It was bullshit, the mission they'd been called in on. He watched Adam's back, almost bumping into him as a snake slithered past in the water, Adam stalling briefly to let it pass before continuing. Dean rolled his eyes and smacked Adam's helmet, making Adam growl something and shove on. They were back on dry land soon though, and once everyone was out, the medic went around checking for bites. One kid had twisted his ankle on a route and nearly drowned as a result, but otherwise they were all intact.

"Rest up, we're walkin' farther tomorrow!" Henrikson yelled as they made camp, clustering off into their groups and rummaging through their things.

"Bullshit mission," Dean griped, "Another fucking search? Chasin' our fuckin' tails out here. Makin' us walk miles for some bullshit mission."

"We're providing backup, asshole, not just a search-" Ash commented, unloading his radio, making sure it hadn't been damaged by any water. Dean shook his head.

"They call it backup, but what they mean is bait. They wanna see if the gooks are gonna spring us before we get there. They lost track of 'em and they don't know what direction they went."

"Shut the fuck up and eat something, would you?" Ash laughed, "Your blood sugar is low,

princess.”

Dean rolled his eyes and brought up the little silver can from his bag, opening it with a swift pull of his wrist. Adam did the same, shoveling his into his mouth like he couldn't get it in fast enough.

A fat raindrop landed on Dean's face and he nearly threw the can down.

“All it ever does is fuckin' rain,” Dean said, Adam sighing heavily beside him in agreement, already scraping the bottom of his can, having burned through his ration without a second thought. “Can't even light a fuckin' cigarette,” Dean continued, grumbling to himself, using the cleanest part of his hand to swipe at his fork while Adam laughed, mouth full. Dean shook his head, his food wet. It pissed him off. Everything was wet. It was always wet – or damp. Your clothes, your hair, your skin, your matches. Everything, always sagging and drooping and soft.

“What's sagging and drooping?” Ash said, looking up from where he was doing a diagnostic on the radio. He gave Dean a wry smile and Dean smirked.

“Your dick,” Dean answered promptly, not batting an eyelash. Adam coughed a laugh around his fork and slapped his own chest a few times as he swallowed.

“Not what your Mother said!” Ash cackled, fiddling with his equipment.

“Yeah? Well, my Mother's dead,” Dean finished, putting his can aside, wiping condensation from his face. He wasn't even hungry. Ash laughed again, softer this time, shaking his head, and Dean used the heel of his boot to dig a groove in the ground, making an ant scatter frantically from underneath. Adam kept eating, staring off into space and Dean looked at him and his thin frame. The kid would have been better off being born a coat hanger with the size of his skinny arms. Dean picked up his can again and put it on the other side, closer to Adam's leg.

“Finish this,” he said, gesturing at the half full can and the sloppy meat inside. Adam looked at him, puppy-eyed and hesitant, waiting till Dean gave him a stare, shoving the can further. “I don't need it.”

“If Milligan don't take it, I will!” Ash sounded, smiling, and Adam rolled his eyes, scraping the rest of Dean's supper into his mouth with even little strokes of his fork. He didn't look up as he ate, Dean nodding in satisfaction.

“I don't know why I bother, you got nowhere to put your food,” he drawled, his fingers twitching for a cigarette. If only it would stop raining for two seconds. He supposed he could stay under a tree with Ash, but that meant moving and he was perfectly content to sit for the moment. They'd been marching for hours and his feet were numb and tingling from the trek. Scowling, Dean dug his heel in more and then stifled a yawn, Adam absently swatting at a mosquito that kept landing on his neck, his bony fingers rubbing where it had sank into him, short nails scratching at the skin.

“I got a high metabolism,” Adam responded, and Dean vaguely remembered his earlier comment and smirked, puffing air through his nose.

“That's just Italian for skinny ass,” he grumbled, not missing a beat. Adam rolled his eyes again and kept eating, clearing Dean's leftovers.

“You know, you're a real son of a bitch,” Adam commented, jabbing his fork in Dean's direction, swallowing his food in a gulp. “No wonder you don't talk about nobody at home. I mean, I used to think it was because you were sad or somethin'. Like you didn't like talking about it. Now I know it's just cause you're a dick and you don't *have* anybody.”

“Little brother, you don’t know the first thing about me,” Dean chuckled, picking up a stick, starting to make notches in it with his knife. He shook his head, sighing. “Not a goddamn thing.”

“Then prove it!” Adam insisted, and Dean couldn’t believe they were actually going to have this conversation *again*. “Come on, everyone talks about theirs, but you never say nothin’. Not even a word. So, tell me what kind of girl you got waitin’ for you. And I’ve looked around you got no letters and no pictures nowhere. ‘Cept maybe whatever it is you keep in that helmet of yours – you hold onto that with both hands and I’ll be damned if you’re keeping a picture of her tits in there.”

Ash glanced up from his radio, eyebrows raised.

Dean met his eyes and then flickered them away.

The rain drummed on a barrel a few feet away, softening the sound of Dean hacking into the stick with his blade.

“Your mother ever tell you it’s impolite to go asking after people’s personal life?” Dean said, giving Adam a wearied stare. Adam stacked their empty cans and took a drink of the whiskey in the small flask he kept in one of his bag’s many pockets.

“She’s ugly,” Adam said and Dean tossed the stick back down to the ground. “That’s it, she’s ugly.”

“Do you not have anything better to do other than irritate the living shit out of me?” Dean yawned, and Adam sat forward, pouring some of the watery gravy out of an empty container, watching it run into the small cleft Dean had made in the dirt.

“Come on, Winchester,” Ash laughed, closing up his radio. “Like you got better shit to do yourself.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Dean bit out and Ash smiled.

“No, please, encourage me!” Adam continued, his knee bouncing, “Who is she? What’s she like?”

Dean groaned, rubbing his eyes, ignoring Adam’s question flat-out. Adam wasn’t deterred, and Ash stepped out into the rain, stamping out a flat area to sit on while he stretched his back with quick, calculated, twists of his spine.

“She some old hag?”

“I swear to God if I get leave with you I’ll put a bullet through my skull,” Dean groaned, and the cutlery clanked against the can as Adam shifted, burning with curiosity. A raindrop fell on Dean’s hand and he didn’t bother to shake it off; he let it slide down his bare arm, his t-shirt clinging to him in the humidity.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m gonna assume you’re in a relationship with your right hand,” Adam said with mock sobriety and Dean beat down the urge to strangle him.

“Remind me to beat the shit out of you in a few years,” Dean answered cheerfully enough and Adam just looked at him ‘sincerely’, his eyes drooping and almost earnest.

“Dean, your aggression denotes defensiveness!”

“*Enough*,” Dean said sharply and Adam quieted, watching him with apprehension. Dean took his

helmet off and threw it on the ground beside him. “You want to know so fucking bad? Look for yourself.”

He looked at Ash and Ash shook his head.

“Aww, no, Winchester, you ain’t draggin’ me into this.”

He stood, waving his hands defensively, “I got places to be other than here!” he said, wandering away. Adam looked at the helmet and grabbed for it, smiling in victory, but Dean was watching him with a grave face.

Adam cleared his throat and rubbed his hands together, pulling the helmet up to his lap. He looked inside, and there it was. A little square of off-white crammed against the top.

Dean watched him steadily as he took it out and Adam’s confusion bloomed on his features.

“Is this your brother?” he asked and Dean stared at him.

“What do you think?”

“Are you queer for your brother?”

“Motherfucker, Adam.”

“Who is this?” Adam whispered, smoothing the photograph out. The man – well, he couldn’t say man exactly. He was youngish looking, and his smile was quiet and sweet, split evenly by the crease. Adam couldn’t get his head around it.

“His name is Cas,” Dean said, and my god, how long had it been since he’d said his name, “and I swear on your mother’s life, Adam, if you tell anybody about this, I will make your life a living hell. Do you hear me? A living hell.”

Adam nodded dumbly along, still staring at the picture.

“Is he...no. No that can’t be right,” Adam said, still staring at the picture that had obviously been folded and refolded a thousand times.

“You know now, so you can shut the fuck up about it,” Dean grunted, snatching the picture from him and pushing it back into the helmet which he yanked from Adam’s lap. Adam flinched, still stunned.

“So, you and him...”

“If you say anything to anyone it will be the last thing you do.”

“I’m not gonna tell, I just – you and him?” Adam bleated. “And everyone else...” The realization dawned.

“They already figured it. Well, most of them suspect,” Dean said blandly, putting the helmet gently at his side. “That’s why they don’t talk much to me. You’re the nosiest fucker around here, though, and you were driving me crazy. If Henrikson can tell he doesn’t give a shit. I’m a warm body. Ash don’t care either way. He called me out on it the first time I met him.”

“Where did you meet him?” Adam asked and Dean rolled his eyes, rubbing his face as more rain began to fall. He covered the open helmet with his bag.

“At a party, dumbass.”

“A party?”

“A fuckin’ party, where do you think? A cave?”

Adam pressed his lips together.

“I didn’t know you people threw parties.”

“*You people?*” Dean laughed dryly, “Adam, we’re just like everyone else. We do go to parties. And move in society. We get jobs and pay electric bills. Exciting stuff, right?”

“You know what I mean,” Adam blushed, kicking at him. “I’ve never met a queer before,” he whispered as an afterthought and Dean laughed harder.

“Yes you have, you just don’t know it.”

“And all that shit you said about girls!” Adam protested, “You don’t know a damn thing!”

“I never lied to you!” Dean interrupted, and Adam’s eyes bugged. Dean grinned slyly at him. “I never said I was selective.”

“But you love...” Adam shook himself out again. “You said you loved him.”

“I do,” Dean assured. “I told you, I never lied.”

“You *love* him?”

“Little brother, you ask the dumbest fucking questions.”

“It ain’t the craziest shit I’ve heard over here,” Adam mumbled. “Maybe that’s why I’m not so shocked.” Dean nodded.

“It’s the least of your worries,” Dean finished, his voice dropping to a murmur that melted in with the rain, “this whole world tries to meddle with other people. It’s the reason we’re even in this hell.”

Adam nodded. “Do you miss him?”

“Is the day long?” Dean muttered.

“So what was it? What was it that you promised him?”

Dean was still, and before he could answer, Adam continued.

“Is he who you think about? When you’re scared? Cas?”

“Don’t say his name here,” Dean whispered harshly, “Don’t do that. Not here.”

Adam closed his mouth again and sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “Well, shit,” he said, “I feel like a jackass.”

“You should,” Dean smiled. “But it’s nothin’. Long as you don’t tell.”

“I won’t, I swear it. You’re right about other people meddling. You’re right about that. It does nothing but bad. What should I care what you do? I mean, really.”

“Go find yourself something to do. Get some sleep. You got walkin’ to do tomorrow,” Dean cut him off and Adam realized he’d been rambling. He fingered the St. Michael around his neck and walked off a ways, setting out his bedroll and lying down on it.

Dean didn’t know if he regretted telling him yet. Time would tell, but he trusted Adam. He was scrappy and loyal, and he trusted Dean implicitly for some reason.

The sun was beginning its journey downwards and Dean had a night shift. He closed his eyes, attempting to get some rest while he could, before someone came and roused him and he had to gear up and replace someone.

He leaned against his pack, and closed his eyes.

The mission was bullshit. It was all bullshit. They were going to get ambushed, he just knew it. He could feel it rising up in him like bile at the back of his throat, and it made him restless and weary at the same time. He wanted to pace one second, and the next he didn’t want to move for the rest of his life. His heart accelerated and he tried to breathe, focusing on something else. Adam snored, exhausted, and Dean remembered when he could sleep like that, but lately it hadn’t been coming so easy. His dreams were vivid and distressing. They made him ache.

He opened his eyes and looked at the place where Ash had been, the light breaking it up, making strange shadows on some of Ash’s things still strewn about. Like some other room, filled with some other belongings. A turntable, a double bed pushed up against a wall, the nightstand looming beside it. He heard a clock ticking in the drum of the rain; the pop of a gas burner being lit, the sound blooming like a rose out of the still air. Someone humming, turning the pages of a book with the soft-slip of a finger.

The murmur of insects seemed to ebb and surge like some inland tide, their mindless rattling transforming and shifting into more familiar noises, just as the rain did. It was still raining; it always was in that steaming country.

He listened, and the longer he did, the more it did sound like waves - like the ocean hitting grey rocks. The sunlight he had hidden behind his eyes that day, what little he could collect, washed the inside of his eyelids to a muted grey; the grey of the sea, the grey rocks, the grey clouds.

The squeak of something metal became the cry of a gull over the roar of the water.

*“Come home.”*

The windswept voice met his ears and Dean’s finger twitched.

“Soon,” he promised, and Cas picked up a shell, running his fingers over the ridges. The world was the grainy quality of photographs. He was behind the camera again, watching Cas as he tossed the shell into the sea, smiling as it splashed. “Look here,” he said, and Cas turned, blinding and bright, the sun glaring off of his skin, obscuring his face for a moment before it drifted back into view.

He smiled, walking towards Dean, towards the camera, stopping just short of it, glancing shyly around.

Dean could hear the reel spinning, the click of the inside mechanisms, and the ocean. Cas laughed, and made some timid face, kicking at the sand, the wind raking his hair over his forehead.

“I can’t hear you...” Dean said, and Cas looked up, his eyes soft. Dean shook his head, but the image never moved, unbroken by his motions. The steady view of a camera lens.

Cas tilted his head, looking into the camera, but it seemed as if he saw beyond that, like he could see all the way to Dean.

“God, have I forgotten your voice?” Dean whispered, suddenly anguished. Cas never faltered, and he looked up suddenly, the camera following his eyes to the gulls.

“No, no, look here,” Dean continued, his voice dwindled to a desperate murmur, “No, God no, don’t let me forget his face...”

The camera centered itself again and Cas took a step forward.

*I love you*

Dean watched his mouth, the pearly teeth, the curl of his lips around the words, but he couldn’t hear them.

*I love you!*

He had laughed it that second time, and the wind pushed against his clothes, through his hair, but it was like watching behind glass. He had laughed it that second time, Dean remembered, could tell from his eyes. Cas turned.

He walked a few steps, down towards the surf and waved, glancing over his shoulder.

Dean felt his arm lift and he waved back.

*I love you!*

Cas had cupped his hands to shout – Dean felt the tears cut down his face, the chill of the air making them feel almost too-warm.

“I love you,” he whispered, and Cas waved again, laughing as he turned back to the sea.

“I love you. I’ll be home soon. I love you.”

Cas bent, picking up another shell.

“Wait for me,” Dean said, his voice trembling, “Don’t go out too far.”

Cas tossed the shell to the waves.

Dean opened his eyes, looking at the distant shape of Adam in the dark, listening to his breathing. It was night now, and when he squinted at his watch he saw he had two hours before his shift. He swallowed, inhaling slowly and ran his sticky hands over his face, cool with sweat. His head tilted back on his bag, neck cricked. He tried to regain a sense of reality, the dream still dissolving, its remains washing up like displaced seaweed. He wished he could dream of some other memory. It used to be his favorite one. The seaside and Cas in his windbreaker, the feeling of their hands sliding over each other, the emptiness of the world. Cas’ hair touching his chin as they watched the water, his laughter when he grabbed him by the middle and picked him up, the way they’d tossed bread to the gulls and talked about flying and boats. About dreams and houses on islands. Now there was only silence, the endless void of a movie camera, the idle way Cas walked by the water, stooping to stare at crabs or watch for little fish, trapped there, in that moment. He felt so far away, and with every step Cas took the distance kept growing and he didn’t know how to make it stop.

He closed his eyes against the dark, trying to think of nothing, but the dreadful silence stayed with

him. Where had his voice gone? Who had taken it? What drowned him out and made him silent and sad-eyed? When he looked at Dean, and his eyes were so sad, like he wanted to say things he couldn't.

Dean rolled over and rubbed at his face some more.

He wanted to speak out, but Cas' name was trapped on his tongue.

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Adam never said anything about Cas to anyone, and he never brought his name up around Dean again. Dean was glad for it, glad that Adam had listened to him, and had respected him. He was a good kid, and a strong one. But that didn't mean that things would get better just because someone didn't go running their mouth about where Dean liked to put his dick.

The days were hot, the air was sticky, and they spent most of their time trekking through the jungle and waist-high grass. Always on the lookout, watching their backs and watching where they stepped, webbed in the constant state of paranoia. Everyone was trying to stay alive so that they could return home.

Adam did stay close to Dean though, not only because Dean was the only one who would really talk to him, but everyone liked to keep their distance from him out on the field because he was still too fresh to be trusted, too easy a target.

They walked along the edge of the forest on their left, an empty field on their right, and Adam wouldn't shut up about the mosquitoes biting at his neck.

"Will you quit complaining?" Dean snapped and shoved him from behind. Adam stumbled and swatted at the back of his neck as he turned to look at Dean.

"I don't wanna catch nothing from them. Who knows what kinda diseases are out here?"

Dean just shook his head and urged Adam on, adjusting his hold on his M-16.

They didn't encounter anything for the rest of the day, and Henrikson had told them to rest up once the sun had disappeared behind the horizon. It had cooled down slightly, but the bugs were worse at night, and Dean had to deal with Adam mumbling to himself and complaining under his breath until the kid had gotten tired enough to roll out his bed and hunker down. Dean was always on the night shift now - Henrikson had assigned it to him permanently when he noticed that Dean never really got enough sleep, but could run on just a few hours. He stood above the others, tapping out rhythms absently on the stock of his gun, scanning the jungle and passing his eyes over the others. Some didn't sleep; they played cards or wrote letters, huddled around the lamps in clumps. Most slept, twitching and groaning, or bitching about getting comfortable.

Dean watched Adam the most, he knew. It wasn't his job to take special care of him, but something determined him to get him home in one piece for his mother. He passed it off as not wanting to deal with the repercussions of the alternative, but in all honesty it was an unconscious decision to watch over Adam. His brotherly instincts taking over, or something.

Adam snorted in his sleep and rolled over, throwing an arm over his face, and Dean smiled, pulling his helmet off of his head and scratching his hair. Looking around, he pinned it against his knee and fished the picture out, unfolding it, smoothing the edges and wrinkles out. He couldn't see it very well in the dark of the jungle, but he had memorized a long while back. Cas' sweet smile. The smile that he only used for Dean, the smile that said so many things with just a small

hint of teeth, eyes large and blue and sincere. He'd probably been talking to him before it was taken, but Dean couldn't remember for certain. He only knew it was his favorite.

He ran his thumb over the photograph, tipping his head back and looking up through the limbs of the trees above him, the sky completely obscured from sight. He looked back down at the photograph, and folded it back up before tucking it back into his helmet. He set his helmet back on his head and adjusted his gun, resuming his watch.

Someone came to relieve him some hours later, and by the time he'd wandered back to Adam he had decided to sleep sitting up. For the first time in a few days he was tired and he pressed himself against a tree, his pack behind him. He closed his eyes and let himself drift off.

Cas smiled beneath him, bare arms wrapping around his neck, lips against his own, and god, how he missed kissing Cas. He kissed him like he was dying, licking into his mouth and taking, stealing his breath away. Cas pulled back, smiling, laughing, but it was silent as Dean smoothed his fingers through his hair and kissed him again.

He touched his neck, fingers ghosting over his skin, and Cas squirmed beneath him, mouth opening in another vacant laugh.

"I'll be home soon," Dean promised, and Cas tilted his head on the bed, tracing his cheek with an idle thumb. Dean covered the hand with his own before Cas tangled their fingers together, lifting his eyes to Dean's in a secret sort of way.

Dean kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his lips; he kissed him everywhere, touched him everywhere. He didn't want to forget him, didn't want to lose him. He could feel Cas dig his fingers into his shoulders, and Dean kissed him again, Cas gasping soundlessly into him, nails scraping down his back.

He leaned back, pushing Cas' hair from his face, and Cas stretched his arms above his head, smiling up at him.

*I love you*, he mouthed, and Dean circled his face with his hands, framing it with his fingers. Cas' eyes sparkled playfully.

"I know," Dean answered.

Cas pushed up and wrapped his arms around Dean's neck, pressing his face against his shoulder, body shuddering against his. Dean hushed him and smoothed his hands down his back, and he could feel wet on his shoulder, but when Cas pulled away, and Dean went to kiss him again, he froze. Cas wasn't crying, he was bleeding. It ran from his nose, and Dean panicked, reaching for anything to wipe it away, but there was nothing to grab, and his hands came away bloody.

He woke up gasping, eyes wet, and he immediately rubbed at them with the backs of his hands, struggling to catch air. He leaned forward, burying his face in his hands, and he flinched away when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey," Adam whispered, and Dean pulled his hands away from his face, looking up at him through the dark. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," Dean scrubbed a hand down his face and straightened up. "Just a bad dream. No big deal."

Adam nodded and gave his shoulder a pat and firm squeeze, and it was only a little reassuring, before he turned away and returned to his bedroll.

It was the first of many nightmares, and from that night on, Dean mostly dreamed of Cas. They weren't like the dreams before, the ones when they were on the beach and Cas was fading away; instead, Cas was bleeding. Purple bruises bloomed on his skin when Dean touched him, and blood leaked from the corners of his mouth and his nose. It caked and cracked when he smiled, unaware of what was happening even when Dean tried to stop him.

“What’s happening?” Dean cried, throwing himself away from Cas, holding his hands up, one particular night. Blood trickled onto the floor. It was matted into Cas’ hairline and seeping into the collar of his shirt.

“What’s happening to you?” Dean yelled again, not knowing what to do. Cas stared at him, smiling his sweet smile.

*It's alright...it's alright. Everything is ok.*

Dean shook his head, blood pooling on the floor and inching towards his feet, spreading out where it dripped from Cas’ sleeves and pant legs.

“No, no, you’re dying!” Dean shouted, and Cas looked so concerned, taking a step forward.

“I’m killing you, Cas!” Dean screamed, pushing him away. Cas slid in the slick of his own blood, staring at his hands. He rubbed his palms thoughtfully, glancing up at Dean.

*It's alright,* he smiled, reassuringly, and Dean felt the tears start.

“No, no,” he wept as Cas’ grew paler and paler, the bruises mottling his neck and his chest and the tops of his feet. He stood and put his sticky, warm, hands on Dean’s, holding them. He kissed Dean’s jaw with his split lip, and Dean felt his mouth something against his skin, but he couldn’t make it out.

“Stop – stop,” he’d gasped, sitting straight up, and then he was awake again, shaking, his fingers curled in fists. He’d bit his knuckle to keep himself from screaming, Cas’ eyes looking so blue against the red, and so calm. Dean didn’t know what it meant, but it scared the shit out of him, and they were so real that often, even after he’d woken he didn’t know where he was. He started to become more distant, didn’t talk as much as he used to, and Adam took notice when Dean began sleeping less than normal.

It was a day before they were supposed to arrive at the checkpoint. The jungle was dense and the humidity was so heavy in the air that it was hard to breathe. Dean's clothes stuck to him, and even though he was used to it by now, it was still annoying. He was tugging at his them when Adam bumped him with his shoulder, and Dean jumped slightly, hoping that Adam hadn't noticed.

"Hey, why're you so jumpy?"

"What are you talking about?" Dean faked a smile, bumping Adam back with his shoulder and hefting his pack higher onto his back. Adam just shook his head and took another step.

There was a bang and Dean bristled, snapping his head up just in time to see Corbett catch a bullet straight through his neck. His blood splattered onto the grass and he dropped, something in his bag clanking. Then the metallic zip of a bullet slicing the air, followed by another. They held, waiting. The rain dripped. It seeped. They waited.

Henrikson yelled to take cover and Dean yanked Adam behind cover, throwing him down at the base of a tree while he took the safety off.

He waited.

“Man down!” someone called, too late, and Dean could see from where he was as Teixeira, their medic, the medic skidded to his knees to kneel beside Corbett, pressing his hand to his neck to staunch the bleeding. Adam watched with wide, frozen eyes. Corbett’s legs kicked and then he stilled, head lolling, hands locked around the person’s wrist. .

“Mother fucker!” Dean hissed, readying himself.. Adam stayed pressed against the tree, hand fisted around his medallion, eyes shut. “Milligan!” Dean said and Adam looked at him. “Stay cool, little brother,” Dean smiled and Adam smiled hesitantly back, nodding. Dean looked around and found Henrikson covering Ash. Ash was working the radio, calling coordinates into the receiver, keeping his voice as quiet as possible as bullets split the thick air, the metallic rattle of machine guns sounding closer than before.

“*I need analysis!*” Henrikson screamed, “Come on you lazy fucks! Tell me what you see!”

Dean squeezed his eyes shut and gripped his gun, dropping low. He crouched, bending around the side of the tree and scanned the area.

He turned and waved Henrikson, holding up five fingers and then five more. Henrikson gestured for him to come closer and Dean looked at Adam. He smiled reassuringly and Adam urged him forward.

“I’m fine,” he muttered, winking, and Dean reached out a hand to slap the flat of his hand on Adam’s helmet before rushing towards Henrikson, slipping behind the next tree while more bullets flew past him. His heart hammered in his chest.

“At least ten, but I think they’re bating – there’s more on the opposite side,” Dean hushed, Henrikson ducking his head to hear. He nodded somberly.

”We’re naked,” Henrikson grunted. “Naked as the day we were fuckin’ born.”It was a flurry of movement and orders after that. Dean rushed ahead with two others, and Dean took out one of the gunners on the first try. The other sergeant had the flank, moving up the left while the front held their attention, and Dean wanted to look for Adam but he couldn’t find him. Dean raised his gun again, and pulled the trigger.

A shadow dropped to the ground. There was a scramble in the underbrush and the scream to take cover as a grenade lobbed through the air and Dean crouched down, hands over his head. He felt dirt scatter against his helmet and the drum of guns above his head as he lifted his face, crawling forward, pausing to fire every few feet.

More shadows filtered through the trees, darting in the vines and blurring, having been hidden behind the first wave.

“Sons of bitches just keep coming!” someone yelled, and Dean blocked them out, looking through his scope, waiting. He exhaled and pulled the trigger again, and another shadow crumpled to the ground.

The fire continued for several more minutes, and the ambushed dulled to a lull. They were a rag tag troop of VK, and though they had hidden well, their platoon outgunned them. There was silence and then Henrikson ordered them to fall back, and Dean hauled himself up. He was running towards the rest of the platoon when there was a rattle from the underbrush and he turned. The sun split the trees, silhouetting the figure that emerged.

“*Hold your fire! Stay cool!*”Henrikson yelled, but it was too late – there was the dull crack of a discharge. Once. Twice.

“*Mother Fucker, I said hold your fire!*!” Henrikson screamed and Dean stared as the figure buckled forward, clutching its abdomen. He caught the gleam of dirty brown hair as the helmet dropped, and Dean was running.

“Son of a bitch!” Dean gasped, grabbing the soldier who had crawled to Adam first and shoving them off.

“Winchester, get the fuck out of the way!”

“Who did it?” Dean said hysterically as he bent over Adam, slipping to his knees, pulling him to his lap. There was blood all over the front of his uniform and it was leaking past his hands. He gasped, choking on blood as it slithered from his mouth, Dean yanking his vest off to apply pressure. Adam’s eyes rolled upwards. The men were silent, staring as Dean touched Adam’s sweaty face, turning it to him, dirt smearing on his forehead and cheek.

“Don’t you dare die on me,” Dean growled, pressing harder as the medic came forward, shoving his hands away to inspect the wound. “You are not gonna die like this, you son of a bitch. I’m not letting you die like this!”

“He’s bleeding out,” the medic said calmly, pulling a packet from his bag, tearing the top with his teeth. He shook the Quik-Clot out over Adam’s belly, the blood congealing in a thick layer.. Adam bucked up, howling, and Dean shushed him, holding him still. Henrikson cursed, kicking someone.

“*When I give you an order I fucking expect it to be followed! No exceptions!*” they cowered under his stare, “You think I’m *running* my fucking mouth? YOU think I’m just trying to hear myself talk, you look at him! You look at him right now! He’s one of your own! *You poor stupid fucks* Can’t you tell a god damn enemy from one of your own, you *useless* mother fuckers!”

They quieted as Adam gurgled, clamping his hand on Dean’s vest. Dean shook his head.

“Easy, easy, take it easy,” he turned over his shoulder as Adam twitched, moisture collecting at the corners of the younger boy’s eyes., “Call it in! We gotta get him out of here!”

Ash turned to the radio and the medic lifted his head to stop him.

“Don’t,” he said quickly, pulling the syringe out, fiddling with the cap. He tapped the needle. “we’re gonna lose him.”

Dean smoothed Adam’s hair from his face and Adam choked again, swallowing down the blood rising up the back of his throat.

“M-my mama...” he said, eyes getting glassy, and Dean nodded.

“I’ll tell her, don’t worry, I’ll tell her,” he whispered. “I’ll tell her you went honorably. I’ll tell her you fought hard, you fought hard, little brother.” His voice hitched.

Adam’s hand fell to Dean’s and squeezed while the other jerkily moved to his neck, snapping the medallion off of his neck. He opened his mouth and Dean stared into his face, as he pushed the little gold chain in his fist into Dean’s chest.

“I’ll send it, she’ll get it,” Dean started and Adam shook his head.

“No!” he cried, and he gurgled again, “You...” he trailed, and Dean took Adam’s hand, the fingers uncurling to press the medallion into his palm.

“I’ve got it,” Dean said weakly,, “I’ve got it, don’t worry.”

“...You,” Adam repeated before he shuddered. His legs kicked and then his head rolled back against Dean’s arm. Dean stared at his dead face, still holding the medallion limply in his fingers.

“He’s gone,” the medic said, and Henrikson cursed. Dean kept staring down at Adam’s dead eyes, wiping the tears away where they fell on his skin, making shallow paths in the grit. He slowly lowered Adam from his folded knees, his arms held stiffly over his chest. Dean pulled his drenched vest from his torso and shook it out, laying it over him.

“You and you, carry him to the checkpoint,” Henrikson said softly, the medic pulling a body bag from his kit, unfurling it. “Winchester.”

Dean looked up, but didn’t meet Henrikson’s eyes.

“Get his tags and search him for mail.”

Dean nodded vaguely and lifted Adam’s head to pull the dog tags from around his neck, shoving them into his pocket. Adam’s eyes stared vacantly up through the trees, mouth slack. Dean checked his pockets next and found the crumpled note for his mother. He touched the bloodied corner and then put it with the tags, finally standing. He raised his head to the other men standing gravely by.

“I don’t know which one of you did it,” he started, “but if I ever find out, I will kill you. You’re supposed to look out for the young ones. They trust you. He trusted you, and I swear on his grave if I ever find out who killed him, it will be the end of you.”

He looked back down at the ground and walked past Henrikson, who put a hand on his back to pull him back so he could walk beside him.

The weeks blurred.

Dean didn’t know what to do with himself. He wrote the letter to Adam's mother, but he knew it wasn’t enough. She was his only son. Her only, and he was dead, and Dean couldn’t stop it. All he had to show was the letter he sent home with his body.

He was a brave boy. Dean had loved him like a little brother. He was so sorry.

So sorry.

When he closed his eyes at night Cas held him while he cried, scratches and welts rising in the wake of Dean’s touches.

*Come home*, he’d mouth, and Dean would shake his head, staring at the ground. Cass footprints were bloody and he’d stop every once in a while, the three bullet wounds in his abdomen making him cramp and double over before straightening. Dean was used to seeing them by now and just let them happen.

There was nothing he could do.

*Come home*, Cas would repeat, and finally, Dean was able to lift his head and stare at his face. He touched the skin under his eye and the skin rippled into a delicate yellow bruise, and Cas leaned into his palm.

“Tomorrow,” Dean rasped, “tomorrow...”

He woke up and for the first time in a long time his face was dry. He packed his things quietly and shook hands with Henrikson and Ash.

He got into the chopper and watched the jungle disappear beneath his feet, getting farther and farther away. It was happening.

He was done.

He was going home.

He bent his head into his knees, the chopper so loud no one could hear him as he sobbed. Another man leaving with him placed an arm around his shoulders and kissed his head.

“I know, man, it’s fucking emotional, right? Hell on earth and we’re finally getting out. It’s un-fuckin- real!”

Dean patted his shoulder, nodding, and wiped his eyes, watching the green land scroll under his dirty boots, and touched the St. Michael under his shirt in apprehension.

“I ain’t seen my lady in thirteen months and I’m scared as hell! Wonder what she’s gonna look like...you ever worry you won’t recognize any of them?”

Dean wanted to say no, but he couldn’t, so he just smiled instead.

He wasn’t afraid of not recognizing Cas.

Dean was far more afraid Cas wouldn’t recognize *him*.

## Chapter 7

June, 1972

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Cas got a ride with Sam and Jess to the airport, and the entire way there, he couldn't stop moving. He kept tapping his feet on the floorboard, tugging at the sleeves of his sweater, and pulling his glasses off to clean them, even though he had just done it minutes prior. Every now and then Jess would turn around and say something to him, maybe reaching out to playfully flip his hair. He would laugh and swat her hand away, and she would laugh too and turn around to say something to Sam.

He knew that most men that returned home from the war weren't the same men that they were when they left, but he had hope—he always had hope that Dean would still be Dean, and nothing would have changed. They hadn't exchanged letters, packages, anything, so Cas had no idea what Dean had been up to over seas; he had some idea, but he didn't want to think about that.

Jess turned around and reached back to flick Cas' hair again, laughing.

"You excited?"

"Of course I am!" Cas grinned pushed her hand away from his hair. He had actually attempted to make it look nice for today, and Jess kept reaching back to mess it up. He had tried to dress up too. He wanted it to be special; he wanted it to be good.

"Are you going to kiss him out there? In front of everyone?"

"Don't be absurd, Jess!" Cas barked a laugh, flipping the ends of her hair with his fingers, and she laughed softly, shaking her head. Sam rolled his eyes in the rearview mirror and Jess leaned across to kiss his cheek before turning back to Cas.

"It would be such a shocker, I bet!"

"It would, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to do it."

"Alright, enough about kissing my brother!" Sam chuckled, parking the car and cutting the ignition off. "We're here, so let's go see him!"

Cas stood beside Jess at the airport, and he could feel his hands shaking at his sides for a moment before Jess reached over and slipped her hand into his, squeezing it reassuringly. He squeezed her hand back, and she gently bumped him with her shoulder.

"It's going to be fine, Cas," she whispered. "He's going to be fine."

He nodded and squeezed her fingers again, the sound of a plane roaring in the distance as it went over the terminal.

The soldiers filed off of the plane, and Cas kept a lookout for Dean, standing on his toes to look over the heads of some people. He adjusted his glasses, pushing them further up the bridge of his nose, and Jess pulled her hand away from his to point at someone. He followed her finger and then he froze when Dean looked up at him, catching his eyes. His breath caught in his throat, and Dean smiled that wolfish smile of his.

"Cas-"

He didn't hear the rest of what Jess had said because he was already pushing past people, apologizing to a couple of them as he made his way toward Dean, stopping in front of him when he reached him.

"Dean," he started, but the words got stuck halfway. Dean's smile diminished to something quieter.

"Hey," he whispered.

Cas threw himself forward and wrapped his arms around Dean's neck, and he didn't care who saw them. Actually, he wanted everyone to see them. He wanted everyone to see how much he loved Dean, and how much he missed him, and if anyone didn't like, then they could just turn the other way. He melted against Dean when he felt arms wrap around him, Dean pressing his face into his hair, fingers bunching into his sweater.

"I missed you so much," Cas sobbed, pressing closer to Dean, and Dean hushed him, held him tighter.

"It's okay. I'm home now, it's okay." He looked around at the people whispering and loosened his grip. "We probably shouldn't make a scene here," he muttered, patting Cas' back in a more platonic manner.

Cas nodded and pulled back, pulling his glasses off to wipe at his eyes, flushing. He hadn't meant to be like that. He swallowed and smiled and looked at him as Sam and Jess crept up behind him. Dean saw Sam and his face went white, as though he'd seen a ghost. He pushed Cas gently aside and grabbed his brother, pulling him into a tight hug that he seemed reluctant to let go of. Cas wrung his hands nervously, watching him kiss Sam's cheek

"Sammy," Cas heard him murmur, and Sam ducked his head, squeezing Dean tightly in his long arms, "Missed you, kid," Dean croaked, and when they had separated, Dean cuffed him lightly on the shoulder as he brushed at his eyes with the back of his hand. Sam laughed awkwardly, hugging him again, and Dean obliged, slapping his back and smiling.

"We're so glad you're home," Jess said, her voice thin, and Dean turned to her, his face splitting into a grin. Jess laughed when Dean lifted her off her feet, kissing her cheek and setting her back onto the ground.

"God, you just get prettier every time I see you," he commented and Jess shook her head.

"Did Sam not tell you? I model for Vogue now!" she teased and Dean's eyes went soft as they looked over her.

"You gonna marry her yet, Sammy?"

"Dean!" Sam protested, flushing scarlet and Jessica coughed into her hand, glancing up at Sam's face.

"I'm just sayin' – life doesn't wait," Dean finished, his voice trailing off. He looked around at their faces, a sort of distance crossing his features and Cas stepped forward, breaking the silence.

"I think Sam can handle it," he chuckled, brushing a hand over Dean's uniform, the material rough beneath his fingers. He met Dean's eyes, still marveling that he was *there*. "Speaking of, Sam and Jess want to go to dinner tomorrow. There's this new place that just opened. It's nice."

"Yeah, yeah, that sounds cool." Dean covered Cas' hand with his own, fingers rough on his skin from calluses Cas didn't recognize yet. He dropped his voice. "I just want to go home, if that's alright."

"Of course!" Jess said quickly looking between the two of them. "We'll get you home and I'll call tonight to make plans with Cas!"

Cas conveyed their gratitude, Dean having decided not to say much else, hefting his bag onto his shoulder and shifting his weight. Cas watched him out of the corner of his eye, heart hammering with excitement and anxiety and an overwhelming happiness.

It was no surprise he couldn't keep his hands off Dean in the back seat of the car, holding Dean's hand in both of his, skating his fingers over Dean's knee. Dean kept his arm around Cas' shoulders and held him close against his side, his other hand smoothing over Cas' palm, touching his wrist, his arm, everything. Cas pressed his face against shoulder a moment before he twined their fingers together, squeezing Dean's hand.

Sam parked in the parking lot outside of the apartment, and they all got out of the car. Sam helped Dean get his bag out of the trunk, and Dean threw it over his shoulder. He gave Sam a one-armed hug, patting him on the back, and then he wrapped his arm around Jess' waist, bending to kiss her on the cheek.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow?"

"Yeah, we'll see you tomorrow," Sam smiled and Jess hugged Cas and kissed him on the cheek, and Sam ruffled his hair. They stood on the street watching them drive off before Cas looked up at Dean with excitement.

"Ready?" he asked, backing towards the door, and Dean smiled, glancing up at the building and the window on the top floor. He took a small breath.

"Ready."

Dean followed him into the elevator and Cas clicked the button, the door sliding shut. He glanced at Dean expectantly, but Dean didn't move. He kept his bag in his hand, staring at the closed doors as the numbers clicked off on the dial above it, the gears grinding and rattling the lift. Concern bloomed in his stomach, but Cas pushed it down, looking up at the buzzing light instead, trying to calm himself down. He jumped as the elevator whined to a halt, bracing himself on the wall, watching as Dean stepped out first and stopping a few feet in front of the doors, waiting for him.

Cas followed, pulling his keys out, putting a hand on Dean's arm, infinitely relieved when he didn't flinch or pull away. He shook his head. Dean was fine. He was fine, he was just tired or something, and what did Cas really expect? Dean had just come home from war, there was nothing wrong with how he was being. His thoughts racing, Cas tugged him to the door at the end of the hall, stopping up short when one of the doors flung open and a little girl came out, bouncing a red ball. She stopped and stared at them, and Dean stiffened, Cas quickly dropping his hand from Dean's body.

"Molly, if your Gramma catches you out in the hall she'll be mad!" Cas said weakly and the little girl chewed on her lip, still staring at Dean. Cas glanced at Dean's face and he met his eyes and then looked back to Molly. Dean forced a smile.

"Who's that?" Molly asked, and Cas tried to think of something to say.

“Molly!” another voice surfaced and Cas waved at Mrs. Gardener. Her white hair bobbed as she hurried into the hall with her dressing gown on, grabbing Molly’s hand.

“Hello, Cas – oh, you must be Dean! Cas said you’d be coming home. I’m Emily Gardener, and this is my granddaughter, Molly!” She held out her hand for Dean to take and Dean shook it gently, nodding, still silent.

“You’re lucky to have such a decent friend to keep house for you while you’re away!” she laughed, and Cas smiled, leaning a little more towards Dean, urging him to say something.

“Thank you,” Dean answered softly, and Mrs. Gardener gave a brief goodbye, picking Molly up and hauling her back into the apartment, the door rattling shut behind her. Molly had started to cry in protest, her little white legs kicking as she squirmed, holding the ball tightly against her chest. Dean winced as the tantrum started up, her cries muffled through the walls.

“I’m so sorry,” Cas rushed. “I completely forgot about them – they moved here in July, and I just completely forgot to tell you.”

Dean cut him off, placing his hand on his waist, his touch light, just a brush of his fingers. “Cas, it’s fine,” he reassured, “but this bag is heavy.”

Cas jogged to the end of the hall, opening the door. He smiled, and Dean took it as an invitation, walking with slow steps to the apartment. He glanced around the door and saw it was basically the same. A few things had changed. There was a new afghan draped on the back of the couch, and a few dishes he wasn’t sure he recognized. It was very clean, but otherwise, the same.

“I tried to keep it as close as possible,” Cas hurried, closing the door behind Dean and rubbing his hands together. “I almost bought a new couch a few weeks ago, and there’s a new rug in the bedroom, but everything else is the same. Except the plants I guess, those are new,” he laughed sheepishly, walking around Dean’s side, surveying the spotless apartment. “I killed the last ones unfortunately – I got swamped with school, and I kept forgetting to water them,” Dean’s bag hit the floor and he turned, grabbing Cas’ chin, tilting his head, pressing their mouths together.

Cas stood, frozen, for a moment as Dean pulled gently away, still holding Cas’ face in his hands.

“You still talk too much,” he murmured, searching Cas’ eyes, the lids pulled wide and his pupils dilated from surprise.

Without any warning, Cas surged forward, knocking Dean over the bag. Dean’s back hit the counter but he barely felt it – Cas clung to him, kissing him hard, using any opportunity to lick into his mouth. His hands raked at Dean’s uniform, pulling it open, desperate to get to the skin underneath. He settled for the undershirt, touching Dean’s stomach as he groaned against him.

“I missed you, I missed you,” he chanted against Dean’s lips, kissing his chin, his jaw, his neck, anywhere he could get to. Dean’s hands scrambled over his back, fingers tightening in the fabric of his sweater, clenching and releasing, kissing Cas back, giving into the fever.

Dean didn’t know what to say, so he held him, and they panted against each other, Cas so flush against him he couldn’t tell where he ended. Dean shuddered, bending forward over Cas’ shoulder, the small of his back still digging in to the countertop. Cas held the back of his neck and kissed the side of his face over and over, his other hand clutching as it wound around his back.

“Oh god,” Cas said after a moment, after they had quieted. “Oh god you’re finally here, you’re home – you’re *here*.”

Dean breathed against him, tightening his arms. He was there. He was there, he just had to keep

telling himself that. He was *there*, and the war was far away, not Cas. He was home. His eyes fluttered shut as Cas pressed his face into his neck, kissing him there.

“I love you,” Dean exhaled and Cas stilled and a shiver ran through him, passing into Dean’s body as well.

“Are you hungry?” he said suddenly, pulling away, turning to wipe his eyes so Dean wouldn’t see. Dean let his arms drop when Cas busied himself with the refrigerator, his glasses bumping as he pushed his fingers under them, sniffing sharply.

“I’ll fix you whatever you want, do you want something? I can make you whatever you want!” he bleated, gesturing at the open door. Dean watched him paw at his face, swallowing thickly.

“Anything is fine,” Dean told him and Cas nodded, chewing the inside of his cheek.

“I’ll make chicken or something, is that ok? Do you want that? Or soup? Do you want soup? I have some left over soup. It was—” he cleared his throat, “it was really good, or I can just make chicken salad if you want that; I’ll make whatever you want.”

When he looked at Dean, his green eyes were so gentle.

“I don’t care,” he murmured. “I really don’t care. You can make me a peanut butter sandwich if you want. I don’t care.”

“I’ll make chicken then,” Cas affirmed, nodding to himself, pulling things out. Dean stepped out of his way, and picked up his neglected bag, carrying it to the bedroom. The mattress sank under his weight when he sat on it, untying his shoes and pulling them off. He padded to the closet and clicked on the light – his clothes were in the exact same place as when he left. He could hear Cas in the kitchen: the slight rumble of pots being pulled out and the stove being lit. He blinked, the tears rolling down his face. He wiped them away, and changed his clothes, shrugging into his shirt and a pair of jeans that were baggier than they used to be. He twitched, feeling a phantom mosquito that turned out to be nothing more than a speck of dust from his shirt. He must have lost track of time, standing there, and he shook himself out, walking back into the living room. He didn’t know what to do so he sat on the couch. When he glanced into the kitchen he saw Cas standing there, like he didn’t know what to do either.

Dean got up and turned on the TV. He sat with his legs slightly apart, hands resting between, watching the news, trying to reset his mind.

Cas appeared a few seconds later holding two plates.

“I kept getting distracted,” he said hoarsely, and Dean smiled, taking the peanut butter sandwich from Cas’ hand. Cas sat beside him, and set his plate on his lap. He didn’t eat, but ran a hand through Dean’s hair instead.

“It’s a little longer than it was,” he commented and Dean smiled around his sandwich, unused to the way the peanut butter stuck to the roof of his mouth. He finished chewing and swallowed, staring at Cas with tired eyes.

“Yeah, they don’t hound you so much to cut it when you’re out there because you’re moving all the time.”

Cas nodded.

“I can imagine,” he continued, and Dean leaned into the touch, the slight drag of Cas’ fingers. Cas trailed his hand over Dean’s face, thumb smudging at the corner of his mouth, and Dean slid his

plate onto the floor.

“I’m not hungry,” he whispered, and Cas’ eyes fluttered, Dean’s mouth descending on his neck. He gasped, holding Dean’s head to him, Dean’s arms, thicker than he remembered, stronger, hauling him towards him. His knees parted, Dean settling between them, kissing his neck and his jaw, Cas breathing heavily, at a loss for words, fingers scratching into Dean’s hair and his shoulders.

Cas’ skin was so smooth and white, not nicked up like Dean’s, or dark.

He brushed his hand down over Cas’ stomach, and something in him lurched.

“What?” Cas breathed, eyes dazed “What’s wrong?”

Dean stared at his hand, sitting back, away from Cas. He stared at his palm and curled his fingers over it. He could have sworn – but there was nothing there. It was dry.

“It’s alright,” Cas soothed. “We’ll take it slow.” He placed his hand in Dean’s and Dean gripped it tightly, twisting his fingers over Cas’.

Dean nodded vacantly.

“I’m tired,” he muttered, touching his forehead and slowly standing. “I’m just tired.”

Cas watched him step over his plate and go to the bedroom, jumping up from the couch to follow him. Dean stripped down in a way that was nearly mechanical, and Cas figured it was, to some extent. Cas stood off to the side, watching Dean pull the blankets back, playing with the sleeve of his shirt. It was only eight o’clock at night.

“Oh, that’s good,” Dean moaned, sinking into the mattress, looking around for his pillow; it was under Cas’.

“Sorry,” Cas said quietly as Dean pulled it out from beneath the other. “It smelled like you.”

Dean smiled and put it back on his side, throwing the other pillow off the bed. He looked up at Cas, his bare chest rising and falling. Cas twisted his hands, halting the movement when Dean sat up, throwing the blankets off of his legs.

“C’mere,” Dean began and Cas walked to him, Dean un-tucking his shirt, kissing his chest through it as he did so. He rolled the sweater up, tossing it to the floor and Cas sighed, holding Dean’s wrists as he undid the buttons, slowly peeling the shirt from his body. Dean ran his fingers over Cas’ abdomen, shyly pressing his thumbs over the V of his hipbones.

Cas bent down, pushing him against the pillows, hands splayed on his chest. He undid his belt with a quick tug and his pants fell, though he had to pull them off his feet along with his socks. He kicked them away and threw his leg over Dean’s waist, settling onto his hips. He took his glasses off and put them on the night table, Dean skimming his palm over his side and bumping his fingers over his ribs and around his back, stroking down in broad sweeps.

He rocked up and Cas moaned softly, curling over Dean, rolling his hips and seaming their mouths together. Dean’s hand trailed to his ass, kneading slightly and Cas sighed again, eyes closing.

“We don’t have to,” he murmured, and Dean kissed him.

“I want to now,” he replied, and he did. He wanted to. He ached for him; he ached for his skin

sliding slick against his, for the ocean-like wave of his body. He didn't know what to do with his hands though, and Cas didn't mind, kissing the worries from his brow as he slicked his cock for him, leaning back and taking him slowly. Cas' throat hitched a little, but it was nice, he reminded himself. It was nice to feel whole again.

Dean was home, and he was there, and he was touching him from the inside out and it was all Cas could ever ask for.

Dean dug his fingers into the tops of Cas' thighs, and Cas covered them, rocking back, fucking himself down on his dick, head thrown back.

"Oh, Dean," he said breathily, Dean watching him, watching him because he was beautiful, and because he was too afraid to do anything else. He kept his hands planted, eyes half open while Cas fluttered his hands over his chest and his neck, moving steadily, obviously trying to reestablish their old rhythm.

Cas watched Dean's eyes fall all the way shut, face calm, hips moving slightly to push up into him, but nothing too urgent. It was slow and shy, and Cas touched his face, but Dean still didn't open his eyes.

When he came, Cas held him against his chest, carding his fingers through his hair with one hand, the other smoothing up and down his arm and over his chest. Dean cried against his neck, and Cas hushed him, holding him closer, covering him with his body.

"You're home," he whispered, kissing Dean's temple. "It's okay, you're home."

After, he smoothed Dean's hair from his face and trailed his fingers down to his chest, noticing the thin gold chain that had fallen behind his neck while they fucked.

"What's this?" he asked and Dean caught his hand as he reached for it.

"S'nothin," he slurred, obviously slipping into sleep. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

Cas withdrew his hand and laid down against Dean's shoulder. It was warm and harder than it used to be because of the corded muscle he'd gained, but it was him. He pressed his nose into Dean's collarbone, letting the realness of him set in.

Cas awoke later in the night, blearily feeling around. Delirious from sleep he felt for one heartbreaking moment that Dean was gone, that he had merely dreamed everything. The soreness between his legs told him otherwise, but he got up anyway, tripping towards the sliver of light under the bathroom door as he pulled his boxers on.

"Dean?" he rasped, pushing it gently aside, and Dean looked up from the where he sat on the closed toilet seat, his eyes red rimmed. Cas opened the door further and Dean held up his hand.

"Go back to bed," he said quietly, and Cas stared at him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, go back to bed."

Cas stared at him. It was obviously not nothing, but he didn't want to press. Dean would come round, wouldn't he? He was tired. He was just a little off. He just need time to sort himself out, and eventually, he would talk about it, and things would be worked through, and it would all be understood.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Cas asked, and Dean shook his head, the gold chain glittering over his chest, a little gold oval hanging from it. A medallion, like the ones his grandmother wore. Cas wanted to ask but he remembered Dean’s hand darting out to stop him when he’d tried earlier.

Time. He just needed time.

“Come back to bed with me,” Cas requested and Dean sighed.

“I just need a few minutes.”

Cas’ heart sank a little.

“Ok,” he whispered, slowly closing the bathroom door and then going to lie down again. Out of habit he pulled Dean’s pillow towards him. It smelled different.

---

Dean, Cas quickly figured out, didn’t need the time. If he did, something would have changed.

But nothing changed. Dean refused to talk about the medal. He refused to talk about a lot of things, and he refused to do even more. It had started out alright. They went to dinner, Dean went to the garage, but there came a day where Dean didn’t get out of bed one morning, and then the next, and then the next.

Day after day Cas would get home from school or his job, and Dean would be facing the wall, eyes closed, but not sleeping, just breathing, his arms curled around his pillow.

He hardly ate, and he hardly slept, spending most of his nights in front of the television, or in the bathroom, crying where he wouldn’t wake Cas up. On the rare nights he fell asleep, he often woke up screaming, twisting himself into a frenzy, and when Cas reached out a hand to touch him, to get him to calm down, he’d flinch away and moan something he didn’t understand.

Cas didn’t give up. There had to be something he could do, something that would snap Dean out of his stupor, he just hadn’t found it yet. He had to keep trying.

So he filled the silences. He talked endlessly about school, about the friends he’d made during the anti-war movements. Balthazar, an anthropology major, and his small circle of friends had helped organize protests. Dean would smile softly, going along with it. He’d sit at the table, staring out the window while Cas talked, like he was unable to look at him. Cas talked to Sam about it, and Sam said it was shell shock. They’d just have to wait it out, be patient, keep trying to coax Dean out it. Cas left these conversations feeling like a failure. He knew Dean best, didn’t he? He loved him. He had fucked him; he had kissed him; he had waited for him.

He had been lonely and distraught, he had pined and waited, and cried with worry. He should have been able to do something. There had to be something, he just had to find it. Something to bring him back, to make him realize he was there. He was sharing the bed with two people: Dean and the war, and he was fiercely jealous and even more desperate to rid himself of the home wrecker, the one who was keeping his Dean from him.

He only knew he couldn’t give up. He refused to.

Cas sat on the edge of the bed, touching Dean’s shoulder.

“I called Bobby. He’s got your old racing bike tuned for you – I thought you might like to go down and ride it,” Cas tried, trying not to let his impatience show. Dean stared at the wall, not

moving.

“I’m tired,” he whispered, and Cas faltered a little, glad Dean’s back was to him.

“Baby, please,” he pleaded. “Once you get out there it will be fun. It will be so easy, you’ll see. You’ll get into the groove again.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Dean said sharply, drawing the covers more closely over his body. “I’m just tired.”

“But if you get out there you won’t be,” Cas said, smoothing his hand over Dean’s back, “and if you like it, next weekend, we could go to the countryside. You know, like we used to? We could pack a lunch and spend the day out there, just you and I.”

Dean didn’t respond and Cas slid his hand up to Dean’s shoulder.

“Dean?”

“Hmm.”

Cas sighed.

“Please just give it a chance? I know – I know it must be hard, but if you went out again, you’ll see. Just try it. For me, please.”

“I can’t,” Dean muttered. “I just can’t.”

“But you *can*. I know you can,” Cas tried to laugh, “There are twenty trophies staring right at me that say otherwise!”

“Maybe.”

Cas knew that maybe was no, but he played along.

“I’ll tell Bobby maybe.”

Cas didn’t know that when Dean went to sleep Cas coughed up blood. That his body was covered in scabs and bruises that split when Dean passed a hand over him, and all the while he smiled, and all the while he told Dean it was ok, silent mouth moving, mocking the real Cas who was desperate to be heard. They would get through it, his dreams said, and sometimes, most frightening of all, Adam would stand behind Cas and stare at Dean’s face with his glass eyes and his stomach barely held in.

*He trusts you.*

When he was awake, he could hear Cas’ voice growing thinner and thinner, and he was ashamed, and he was broken.

He was afraid.

Afraid that he would hurt him, afraid that he would break him too, that one day he’d go too far and the weight of the war would fashion itself into a knife and slice Cas open. He couldn’t move, couldn’t make himself turn around. He was no better than the lazy mother fuckers in his platoon, the men he had wanted to spit on, the men that had killed Adam because they weren’t watching close enough.

Cas left for school one day and Dean got up. He got dressed. Took a shower, the whole nine

yards, but when he stood in front of the mirror he could barely place himself; he was gaunt and drawn in, and there were lines in his brow that refused to straighten, and all at once, with disgust, he realized that this was the face Cas saw, and it was nothing. It was nothing – not a man, not a lover. Nothing. It was the face of a soldier who couldn't fight anymore. Dead weight, pulling Cas under with him. Drowning him.

It wasn't long after that it happened.

Cas had come home and at first he had been so glad – Dean wasn't in bed and he was so glad – but then he'd looked, and seen him collapsed against the couch, and he was so drunk he couldn't stand. As soon as he saw Cas he started to cry, and he couldn't stop.

“They shot him!” he yelled, Cas holding him up to keep him from slumping any further, where he might pass out. “They shot him – they killed him. One of their fuckin' own, they killed him!”

“Dean, who are you talking about?”

Dean shook his head, gasping, snot and tears running down his face.

“I can't! I can't!” he screamed. “I couldn't save him!” He scratched at his own face and hair, unable to control himself.

“Dean, shhh,” Cas tried, trying to keep him from flailing. “Dean, please, it's alright,” he soothed, but Dean struggled, prying himself out of Cas' hands. He stood and fell to his knees, dropping to all fours, and Cas stepped forward to help him up.

Dean didn't know how hard he pushed him, but books fell off the shelf and landed at Cas' feet as he slammed against it. Dean, too drunk to realize, sat back, still moaning into the floor.

“Her boy's dead. He's dead – we killed him. We killed him...” he gasped, curling in on himself.

Cas, his head buzzing and starting to tingle where it had cracked against the bookcase, stared down at him, paralyzed. Dean sobbed, dry-heaving, and Cas staggered forward, dropping down to pull him into his arms.

“It's alright,” he murmured, voice trembling. “It's alright, shhh....shhh,” Dean quieted, clinging to him, and Cas buried his face in his hair.

“What's happened to you?” Cas whimpered, “What did they do to you?”

“They killed him,” Dean slurred, “and all they've got to show are pieces of shit.”

“How do I help you? Tell me, Dean, just tell me,” Cas whispered frantically and Dean shook his head.

“I'm poison,” he muttered. “It'll get you.”

Cas cried, shaking as he held Dean's limp form against him, Dean sagging further against his shoulder, not sober enough to hold himself up.

“Come back to me,” Cas begged, but Dean didn't know who he was addressing.

Cas touched him after he'd understood what he'd done. When he'd figured out that he was the reason Cas had a bruise on his back and a welt on the back of his head.

“I'm okay,” Cas had insisted, voice reedy with need. Dean had shook his head. Cas had made

some indignant noise, crawling closer to Dean on the bed, forcing his attention, kissing him, even when he didn't respond.

"I'm fine, it's not your fault," he continued. "It's not your fault – I'm alright."

Dean stared at the ceiling and Cas sobbed as he picked up Dean's hand and put it against his chest.

"Please. We both feel better after, please." Cas tipped his head forward, and Dean knew he was trying not to break. He was trying so hard. Dean didn't know why he tried. He couldn't get it up. Hadn't for weeks; every time he tried he wanted to throw up. He could only see Cas' skin as a blank canvas for him to destroy.

"Touch me!" he yelled, "touch me, because I don't know... Dean, please, *please*." He trailed off, and Dean could feel his heart slamming against his ribs, his hands white knuckled and trembling.

"Please," he nearly sobbed. "I'm alright, I'm alright, so please, just hold me. You don't even have to do anything – we don't have to, just let me feel you, so I know, so I can know..." he paused, stopping himself, watching Dean's face, but it was impassive. Dean slowly pulled his hand out from under Cas' and turned over, facing the wall.

The bed squeaked as Cas got up.

The dishes broke when Cas threw them.

The record that was playing wasn't loud enough to cover his screams.

Dean stared at the wall, and the picture nailed to it rattled as Cas slammed a chair in frustration.

Cas kept trying because he wouldn't give up. He would never give up on Dean. He would try to get him out of bed during the day, get him to go outside and get some fresh air, but Dean wouldn't budge. He would just pull the covers tighter around himself, mumbling something about '*going out later*'. It never happened though, of course, because Dean never left the apartment until Cas was gone, and then it was only to walk down to the liquor store.

There were countless times when Cas returned home to Dean sprawled out over the couch, on the verge of passing out, an empty bottle dangling limply from his fingers. Cas would touch his face, smooth his fingers through his hair and kiss his forehead, sweet-talking him up and helping him into the bedroom. Cas thought he could have hated Dean then; he wanted to hate him. He wanted to hit him, to knock some sense into him, but Dean's face was lax, and his eyes were dull and disinterested.

Cas couldn't hate Dean. He was gone.

He moved like a corpse from one place to the next, letting Cas undress him when he was too drunk to do it himself, so quiet, rolling onto the mattress and falling asleep or staring at the wall. At least, when he yelled, Cas was able to glean something from him.

But there was some detail he just couldn't get Dean to expel no matter what he did. The key to unlock the rest and understand it all, the reason he kept that terrible medal around his neck like a noose, suffocating him slowly.

Cas consoled himself because he was desperate. Dean just needed time. He just needed to forget; Cas would finally find the words that would wake him up, that would show him he was here and the terrible reminders would dissolve. Like a spell, Cas fantasized; the medal would simply fall from his neck and shatter into a million pieces and *Dean* would be there instead. Wild and looking

at him, not through him.

But Cas was tired of waiting.

The weight was crippling. He ached. There were circles under his eyes and his voice was wrung out, twisted over and over even though he hardly ever raised it. When he tried to answer questions prompted by professors he was tongue-tied and shy and words swam on the pages of his textbooks, blurring together, shimmering like waves. He'd drift through the day, and then suddenly find himself sitting on the edge of the bed, crying his eyes out, Dean asleep beside him, and he was lost as to how he had ended up that way. He didn't know why he bothered to muffle himself. Dean wasn't going to wake up anytime soon. The brown bag crumpled by the couch had assured that.

How petrifying it was to know he was crying out of relief. Dean was so still beside him, his chest rising and falling so evenly, his face calm and unmarred by the coarse anger of night terrors.

The months dragged themselves along, scraping at the walls and the floors and at the inside of Cas' chest. Nothing worked. Cas wasn't entirely alone. Sam did what he could; he attempted reason and calm argument. Dean needed to get back on his feet, he needed to start feeling worthwhile again. Get back his sense of self. Start small, go on a vacation, anything.

He'd leave, hugging Cas, his mouth pressed tightly together with a thousand apologies.

"It's okay," Cas forced a smile, touched Sam's arm. He was getting so good at lying.

"It's not," Sam replied. "What he's doing – what he's putting you through, it's wrong. I want to fix it, but I can't. He has to do this, and I'll be there for him the whole time, but..."

"It's okay, we're gonna get through this," Cas assured, and he didn't know who he was talking to anymore. "One way or another, we will. Even if it takes a while."

But Sam was gone, and Dean was still in bed, covers pulled tight around himself, facing the wall and ignoring the world around him.

It was so strange. It was so unreal at times. Like walking into some bizarre painting, some caricature of life, because how else did he explain it? How did Dean go from laughing, and smiling to this? When did it happen? When did he cleave straight down the middle, a broken shell, something unformed and unfinished lying there, letting the sea knock it around

Dean gave up on himself long before Cas did.

They were watching TV together, an old episode of Star Trek or something, and neither of them were paying attention. Cas was rubbing Dean's neck, glad that he was out of the bedroom and they were spending time together. It was almost like they were falling back into their old routine, watching television before they went to bed.

Cas kissed his cheek, the corner of his mouth, anywhere that he could reach, and Dean gently squeezed his thigh where his hand was resting. Cas smiled softly.

"I love you," he laughed sadly, pressing his face into Dean's neck, wrapping his arms around him.

Dean tensed and pulled back, grabbing Cas by the shoulders when he tried to move forward again. His eyes were blank, and his mouth was a flat line. Dean shook his head and gently pushed him away.

"I'm sorry."

"Come on," Cas said weakly, another awkward laugh bubbling up from him. "Say you love me too."

Dean stared at him.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. He covered Cas' hands with his own.

Cas shook his head.

"You don't mean that," he mumbled, smiling. "Don't play around like that."

Dean looked at where his fingers touched Cas' rubbing them softly.

"I love you," he conceded, and Cas felt the flood of relief swell over him. He could breathe again.

"Do you want to go to that Italian place? We haven't been in so long, so I thought we could go."

"It's over, Cas."

"They have that chicken marsala you like. Or I could pick some up and bring it home? We could have a night in, I thought. We could try a night in, and then maybe, later we could actually go." Cas' voice caught at the end, but he didn't know why. It seemed like a good idea. To tease Dean towards the outside again.

Dean didn't say anything else and Cas didn't really...he didn't understand.

Cas fell back against the couch when Dean stood up, walking back into the bedroom to collapse onto the bed, pulling the covers over himself and rolling over to face the wall. He pulled the covers tighter and squeezed his eyes shut. Cas appeared in the doorway, his shadow cast over him.

"So should I go get the chicken tomorrow?"

Dean waited a moment.

"Sure, Cas," he whispered, and Cas backed out of the room again, going to sit on the couch.

He didn't come to bed.

---

Dean woke up alone, and Cas had left for school. He pulled his duffel bag out of the bottom of the closet and began to shove his clothes into it, the motions mechanical and soothing. He liked it – packing things up, putting them away. The duffel was so tidy and when he zipped it up it was neat and evenly packed and had a familiar weight to it. The girl from before -*Molly?* - was in the hallway, and she waved to him; he waved back before stepping into the elevator.

He took a cab to Bobby's garage, and he could see his bike around the side of building, looking as good as the day he left. The garage was closed, but Bobby's truck was parked outside, so Dean tried the handle, not surprised when he found it unlocked. The door to Bobby's office was open, and he walked inside. Bobby looked up, startled, his face brightening when he realized who it was.

"Dean! Boy where the hell have you been? You look like shit...which is better than what I thought."

"I came for my bike," Dean said thickly, swaying a little to let loose some of his nervous energy.

Bobby glanced at the bag thrown over his shoulder.

"You goin' somewhere?" he said slowly and Dean hardened his eyes. He wasn't there to answer questions. He was just there to get his bike. He just wanted the bike, nothing else, and he could see Bobby gearing up to give him some kind of lecture

"Let me rephrase: are you leaving?"

Dean didn't say anything.

"What about-"

"Please don't tell him," he whimpered.

Dean rubbed at his face, and Bobby stood, crossing the room to pull Dean against his chest. Dean cried against his shoulder, and Bobby gently rubbed his back before pulling away, holding him at arm's length.

"You can't do this to him."

"I'm not good for him, Bobby," Dean croaked, swiping at his nose. "I'm hurting him, killing him. I swear I'm killing him."

"Dean, please-"

"You can't talk me out of it!" Dean pulled away, rubbing at his eyes with one hand and adjusting the bag over his shoulder with the other. "Where are the keys to my bike? I need to get out of here."

Bobby pulled the keys out of the bottom drawer of his desk and handed them over to Dean, catching him a hug before he got a chance to turn around and dart off.

He held Dean's chin still, keeping him from looking away.

"You need to come back, you can come back. Anytime," he insisted.

Dean nodded and returned the hug, squeezing his hand around the keys before he extracted himself and pushed through the door, heading straight toward his bike. He loved Cas, he kept telling himself, and that was why.

It was a coward's prize.

---

Cas returned home later in the evening, unsurprised by the silence of the apartment since it was mostly silent when he returned home. Either Dean was still in bed or he was out. His heart sank; if Dean was out there was no point buying dinner. He set his bag down by the floor with a heavy thud, the books weighing it down, and he rubbed the back of his neck, rolling his shoulders. The bedroom was empty when he looked in it, the blankets thrown back from the bed, and he kept rubbing at his neck tiredly, moving back into the living room to turn the television on and sit on the couch.

He stared at the screen, the actors, and sighed heavily, tilting his head back. Just five minutes.

Then he'd get up again. Just five minutes, and he'd be fine. He was so tired, and it was so quiet. It was so still and his head was pounding. His bones seemed to sink into the cushions, and when he woke up later in the night, he noticed that Dean still wasn't home. He blearily looked around the apartment, adjusting to the dark as he got off of the couch and went into the bedroom, only to find the light he had followed was coming from the closet. The door was halfway open, the light left on, and when he peered inside, he noticed that most of Dean's shirts were gone. The duffel was gone. His shoes. Cas stepped back until he felt the edge of the bed dig into the backs of his knees, dropping down onto it, his legs no longer holding him up.

"No," he said evenly. The tears burned at the backs of his eyes and he shook his head, touching his hair in disbelief. "No, no, no."

He stood up suddenly, moving back to the closet. Maybe Dean had just moved his things, he thought as he searched, pulling his own things out and throwing them onto the floor. He moved to the dresser next, rifling through the half empty drawers. He stood in the middle of the bedroom, his clothes at his feet, and he instinctively pressed his hands to his eyes.

"Wake up," he whispered. "Wake *up*. This is a nightmare.

His chest felt like it was about to collapse, his throat too tight to let anything pass.

A strange broken cry wrestled its way up, and Cas dizzily bent forward, his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

"You don't mean it," he said to no one. "Don't do this. Dean, please,"

He waited for the door to open, for Dean's boots to stumble heavily in, to hear him rustle through the cabinets for a glass of water, but there was nothing. The silence ate up his voice and Cas clutched at his own body, biting his tongue as the sobs shook through him.

Cas had tried so hard to keep Dean from becoming someone that he wasn't, and he had failed. He pushed his glasses off of his face and screamed into his hands. He had failed and he had lost Dean to the war, the home wrecker that was always looming over their heads, slowly picking Dean apart until he finally broke. Some part of Cas knew that it was going to happen, but he didn't think it was going to happen so soon. He didn't think – he thought they had time. He thought that was what he was given in exchange for letting Dean go, for trusting something to bring him back. That was the price, wasn't it? Time to fix him. Time to piece him back up, to sew him back together.

Time hadn't kept its half of the deal, and Cas wondered with sudden fear if this was the real fairytale. The frightening ones where children got eaten by wolves and witches and no one lived happily ever after. There were no magic spells. There were no words he could say. Dean was gone.

Slowly, floor, chest stuttering, and stumbled back to the bed, dropping down onto it. He didn't even bother to properly pull the blankets or undress. He laid his body on Dean's pillow and faced the wall that Dean had spent most of his days staring at, eyes roaming for answers.

There were no answers there. It was only a wall; blank and unforgiving.

He closed his eyes, the anger making him cry.

He didn't want to cry anymore, because crying wasn't going to bring Dean back. But the bed felt so empty without him, and the apartment was so quiet without his screams, without the constant reminder that Dean was right *there*. Cas laughed bitterly, shaking his head, because it was pathetic, thinking that he would much rather have Dean beside him, thrashing in his sleep, than to

be in bed alone.

But it was true, because at least Dean would be with him.

## Chapter 8

Late February, 1981

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“Dean, you’ve got a call!” Dean looked up from the bike he was refitting and stood, walking to where Bobby hung out of his office, holding the phone out for him to take. He nodded, wiping his face with his rag, propping the receiver up to his ear with his shoulder as he tried to smudge some of the grease off of his fingers. Bobby pushed past him, shutting the office door halfway and giving him some privacy.

“Dean Winchester,” he began, glancing at the sliver of smoothed poured floor of the garage right outside the office. A crack had started to run across from the baseboard at the end of the wall and extended a decent amount, disappearing under a Harley. “Hello?” Dean tried again after he was met with silence.

“Sorry,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Sorry to bother you at work..”

Dean’s eyes narrowed and he squinted at the crack in the floor, trying to place the voice but coming up with nothing.

“Who is this?” he proceeded, adjusting the phone with his hand, turning away from the office and the rest of the crew on the floor. “Do I know you?”

The person on the other end seemed to hesitate, but eventually drew a deep breath.

“We’ve never met in person. I’m Gabriel Novak.” Gabriel Novak took another breath. “Castiel Novak’s older brother?” As if Dean could have ever forgotten that name.

Dean said nothing.

“...I was told I could reach you at this number, or that, if you weren’t in the city, Bobby Singer would know how to reach you,” Gabriel continued, his voice sounding spread thin. “Castiel wanted me to call you for him.”

“Is this a joke?” Dean said softly, the stupor surrounding that name slowly lifting. He could feel himself becoming more self-conscious. “Who the fuck is this?”

There was a weighted pause and Gabriel – if that even was who he claimed to be – cleared his throat.

“Castiel wanted – look, I know you two haven’t spoken to each other in years. He told me that. He told me you’d probably be angry when I called, but, I *had* to call. I would never have bothered you unless he’d asked me.”

Dean leaned against the near wall, crossing his arm over his chest.

“Make it quick, I’m on the clock,” he said harshly, ducking his head so the sound of an engine being tested wouldn’t cloud his ear.

“He wants to see you,” Gabriel said simply. “That’s all.”

“He should understand I can’t do that,” Dean replied.

“He’s sick.”

“Listen, I don’t know why you think you can just call me about this –!” Dean said angrily, looking around for the phone cradle so he could hang up.

“He’s dying.”

“ – but I don’t have time to worry about whenever Cas gets a cold, alright? We ended it. Years ago. Now get off my phone,” Dean snarled, but he found that he couldn’t move.

“I know how difficult that must be for you to hear,” Gabriel said, “and I know that you don’t want to hear it from someone like me, but he really wants to see you.”

Dean stopped, his face still screwed up in anger.

“What did you say?”

“He’s dying, Dean.” There was a break in Gabriel’s voice. “He’s very sick.”

“You’re lying,” he hissed, “You’re lying. You’re pissed at me because we were lovers – that I was queer for your brother, and now you’re trying to punish me, aren’t you? Listen, I don’t have the time for these sick pranks. I’ve got work to do, so fuck off!”

Gabriel didn’t say anything for several seconds.

“I’m so sorry, Dean.”

“I’m fucking sorry too! That you think you have to call me in the middle of work to tell me some bullshit lie about Cas to make me feel like shit. To make me feel like shit because you can’t stand that I fucked him! Bullshit, this is fucking bullshit!”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Stop telling me that!” Dean roared. “Stop telling me you’re sorry about a fucking lie!”

His skin was itching; he felt like it was stretched too tightly over him, like he was going to burst out of it at any second. His face felt hot and red.

“You need to understand!” Gabriel said loudly, and Dean could feel more words bottle-necking in his throat, pushing up, attempting to get out of his mouth as he swallowed them down.

Dean raised a shaking hand to his mouth, running his fingers over his jaw.

“He wants to see you. He hasn’t asked for anyone else outside of the family.”

Dean’s hand curled into a fist, his tongue felt thick and heavy and everything tasted like pennies.

“Why does he want to see me?” Dean asked, shaking his head. “We...we ended it. We haven’t spoken since.”

“He’s dying, Dean,” Gabriel repeated.

“Where is he?”

“San Francisco General.”

His heart dropped; he hadn’t known Cas was in San Francisco.

“He’s been living in the bay area for a few years now,” Gabriel explained. “We didn’t know where he was for a long time, either. We finally got a hold of him when Rachel got married – he came for the wedding. He looked good then, a little thin, but now...” Gabriel trailed off.

“How much time?” Dean said suddenly, not knowing where the question had come from. But there it was. The words burned as they moved past his lips, dark and bitter. “Don’t bullshit me.”

“They wouldn’t tell me for sure.”

“*Don’t* bullshit me,” Dean repeated, his voice a tired whisper.

“A few weeks. Probably less.”

“No,” Dean said automatically. “No, that can’t be right.”

“I’m sorry,” Gabriel said, again.

Dean didn’t know what exactly Gabriel was sorry for. He and Cas had ended so long ago. He didn’t know what to say. His brain felt soft in his skull and the words wouldn’t process. They kept twisting themselves up and getting tangled the more he tried to understand exactly what they meant. A few weeks. Probably less. He felt like he should laugh.

“I have to go...” Dean said vaguely, and he pulled the phone away from his ear.

His hands were shaking, and if it was out of anger or out of fear, he didn’t know. He felt almost sick, lightheaded, and he leaned against the wall behind him, running a shaky hand through his hair.

This had to be a prank, a cruel prank that Castiel and his brother were playing on him; revenge for Dean leaving Castiel when he had. Revenge for just up and leaving without so much as a warning, and really, Dean believed that this was something that he deserved. What he had done was really shitty of him, but Castiel’s brother telling him that the man that he loved more than anything in the world was dying - *why?*

Maybe he didn’t deserve this.

Maybe.

He breathed, his hands still shaking, and he pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. He pressed his back against the wall, pressed the heels of his hands harder against his eyes, and there was a little voice in the back of his head telling to let it out, to scream, to cry, to just let it out. But he couldn’t.

He needed to get home. He needed to get home right now.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Dean pulled his hands away to see Bobby standing in the doorway. He was frowning, and he looked worried; he had probably heard Dean shouting just moments before.

"It's nothing, Bobby."

His eyes felt sore, and his cheeks felt wet, so he rubbed at them with the backs of his hands, wiping his palms against his thighs afterward. He tried to breathe but his throat felt tight, and he didn’t realize that Bobby had entered the room until he felt the familiar weight of Bobby’s hand on his shoulder.

His fingers squeezed tightly, and Dean leaned into the touch, sighing softly and closing his eyes.

"Go home, get some rest."

Dean was about to protest, because he couldn't go home right now. He was working on a bike, and he had planned to finish that day, but Bobby squeezed his shoulder tighter, fixing him with a look that told Dean that he was not going to take no for an answer.

All he could do was nod and agree. Yeah. He needed to go home and get some rest; he needed to go home and collect his thoughts. He walked towards the door, opening it, and as he did, he turned.

"Did you know Cas was in San Francisco?" he asked.

Bobby sat heavily in his chair.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Dean persisted, facing Bobby more fully, "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"You were gone!" Bobby hissed. "He left a year or two after you took off. He asked me for weeks where you were and I had to tell him you didn't want to be found!"

Guilt was like having your clothes wet. It was an even weight over all of you, and it was sloppy and dragged along with you wherever you went, clinging to your skin, never letting you forget it was there. That damp oppressiveness.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Dean said, and Bobby shook his head indignantly.

"You didn't ask!"

Dean knew he was wrong to be angry, but he didn't know what he was.

"He's sick," he continued and Bobby's face fell into confusion.

"Sick? Who was that on the phone?"

Dean stared at the wall, trying to piece it together in his own head.

"His brother," he answered. "He said he was sick."

"What about it? Is he alright?"

Dean shrugged listlessly.

"He wants to see me," his voice trailed off. "Me, of all people."

"You're going to go, right?"

"I don't know yet," Dean finished, raking a hand through his hair, "I don't know if that's a good idea."

Bobby thought for a moment, seaming his mouth shut, tapping his finger against the arm of the chair.

"I ain't gonna ask for details, but when someone is sick, and they want to see you, you don't say no." Dean didn't reply. He went down to the bar and had a drink and then wandered back to his apartment. He hadn't asked for Gabriel's number to call back, he'd just hung up. He stared at the

phone for a long time before picking it up.

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“You’ll never believe who called me today,” Dean said to Sam, sinking down into his recliner, rubbing his forehead tiredly.

“The Queen of England,” Sam said with a laugh, and there was a metallic clang in the background.

“No,” Dean said softly, his hand no longer moving. “No.”

There was a pause and the line crackled with static.

“Ok,” Sam began slowly. “I’ll bite. Who was it?”

“Gabriel Novak.”

“Do I know him?”

“He’s Cas’ older brother,” Dean finished, hand dropping down to the plush softness of the chair. Sam was silent. “He called to tell me that he wants to see me.”

“Seems a little third grade, doesn’t it? Asking your older brother to tell you,” Sam said, and Dean’s fingers twitched.

“He called because Cas is sick. He’s dying.”

The line went quiet again.

“He wants to see me Sammy,” Dean mumbled, and he laughed a little, awkward and jilted. “I keep thinking it’s a joke, but who would joke about something like that?”

“I’m so sorry, Dean,” Sam replied.

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Dean said loudly, shifting uncomfortably in his chair, “Why does everyone keep apologizing to me? It’s not like we’re anything anymore. We ended it.”

Sam sighed, and Dean knew that there was a puss on his face, even if he couldn’t see it.

“*You* ended it,” Sam amended, and Dean knew he was right, but he wasn’t in the mood to argue.

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t feel like I have the right to go,” Dean said. “I shouldn’t go.”

“Then don’t go,” Sam breathed. “Jess and I will try and go up and see him. Where is he?”

“San Francisco General.”

“You should go,” Sam’s voice was persuasive. “Take some of that time off. You’ve been hoarding it for years. Bobby will understand. If anything, maybe he just wants an explanation.”

“I don’t have anything to tell him, Sam. I really don’t. I’m just as lost to why as he probably is. What would I tell him?”

“Listen, you weren’t here, so you didn’t see him, but Dean...” Sam paused, and Dean held his breath. It was the first time they had talked about Cas in years. He couldn’t even remember the last

time. Had there even been a last time? He hadn't talked to anyone in those first months. It wasn't till he moved back to California that he had even really contacted Sam again. He hadn't gone anywhere special; Oregon to stay with an old racing buddy, a vet like him. They'd worked odd jobs in Portland and then in 'seventy-five Dean had moved back to Sacramento. Bobby had kept his promise, and he'd been back in the garage the next day.

Bobby hadn't asked many questions. Dean hadn't either.

"...he was really wrecked," Sam finished.

"Why should I go see him? If he's about to die, why should he see me?"

"Probably because he wants closure, Dean. And you can give him that."

Dean flexed his hand into a fist and then spread it again.

"I'll go. For a few days at least. Maybe it will help."

Sam assured him it was the right thing to do and he hung up. He was totally aware how both of them had glossed over the reality that Cas was dying. It was unspoken between them that Dean might never get the chance to see Cas again. Closure – it was bullshit.

*A few weeks, maybe less.*

Dean sat with the phone in his lap, the words stamped on the inside of his head. Weeks. *Weeks*. How did that happen? How did someone have weeks? He tried to reason it into days or minutes because the numbers were bigger, but it all fell back to *a few weeks*.

He picked up the phone again.

"Operator, how may I assist you?"

He cleared his throat.

"I need the phone number for San Francisco General Hospital."

"One moment, we'll connect you."

The line crackled and then a reedy woman's voice came through.

"San Francisco General, Reception speaking."

"I need to know if you've admitted someone," Dean said coarsely, his voice thick.

"Patient's name?"

"Castiel Novak."

There was a long pause, and the woman breathed against the receiver.

"Yes, we admitted him on February 2<sup>nd</sup>."

"February 2<sup>nd</sup>?"

"That's correct. Can I assist you in some other way?"

"No," Dean croaked.

February 2<sup>nd</sup>. He'd been there for three weeks already. Dean leaned back in his chair.

Three weeks?

Three weeks and he was dying?

Dean didn't understand. Cas had never been ill when they were together – but it had been years. It had been so long.

Dean borrowed a friend's touring bike for the trip. He packed light; he figured he wouldn't be staying long. A quick visit, that was all, he told himself.

A quick visit for a dying ex. To give him closure. Give them both some closure.

The drive was beautiful and the weather was perfect – sun and blue sky all the way to San Francisco. He put himself up in a hotel and called the hospital again, just to be sure. Cas was still there. No, they couldn't release any more information until they had proof of relation, and he'd have to come down himself to prove it. Dean considered turning around, but he had already made the drive and booked the room.

He got a directions from the front desk of the hotel and within the hour he was staring at the concrete colored building, the sandy browner ones rising behind. He walked under the main hospital entrance sign, its cheerful turquoise color making his stomach turn. He had to turn around and walk back to where he had parked, smoking a cigarette to calm himself down and could try again. He glanced at himself in the mirror of his bike and wondered if he looked as old as he felt. He was only thirty four.

He went to the reception desk and the nurse seated there looked up at him from under the chain of her glasses.

"I'm here to see Castiel Novak?" he tried, and the woman flipped through her records, issuing the room number and the visitation hours.

Dean thanked her and followed her directions to the elevators. He stared at his empty hands, clicking the button for the fourth floor. He should have brought something. But what would he have brought? He shook his head. It didn't matter.

The elevator doors slid open and Dean stepped out into the long white hallway. He didn't see any signs, and went to the nurse's station in front of him, leaning against the counter. A dark haired woman was sitting behind the desk, flipping through a magazine, idly touching her lip as she read.

"Excuse me," Dean approached and she glanced up, putting the magazine down and smiling at him. He noticed the bags under her eyes, but they didn't seem to detract from her prettiness. Her name badge, when Dean looked at it, read "*Tessa*" in careful, neat, letters.

"I'm looking for Castiel Novak? I can't – I can't remember his exact room number."

Something twitched across her face and her mouth looked like it was going to open.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh, you're here to see Cas?"

"Yes," Dean answered, fidgeting. "Do I need to," he coughed, "do I need to sign in anywhere?"

She watched him cough and then met his eyes again.

“Have you had the flu or a cold or any upper respiratory infection within the last few weeks?”

Dean shook his head.

“No.”

She nodded and got up from her chair and before she had moved around the desk she paused, glancing at Dean one more time.

“Do you mind if I see some ID?”

Dean pulled his wallet out, fishing his driver’s license from one of the folds, sliding it across the desk. She took it and inspected it before handing it back.

“So you’re Dean,” she said, and Dean swallowed thickly. Had Cas been talking about him? The nurse – Tessa – didn’t look mad when she looked at him.

She looked happy. She was smiling. Her eyes were glowing.

“Hold on, I’ll take you! I want to see the look on his face...” she trailed off and walked around the counter, straightening her white starched uniform as she did so, beckoning Dean down the hall. Dean walked past the closed doors on either side, his heart beginning to pound in his chest.

“Today is a good day,” Tessa said conversationally, and Dean didn’t understand what that meant. “He slept well last night and he’s been so chatty this morning.” Tessa laughed. “But when does he ever be quiet, right?”

Dean stared at the side of her face.

*He leaned in to kiss him – “you never fucking shut up”...*

“What’s wrong with him?” Dean asked all of a sudden and Tessa did a double take, slowing her walk.

Dean stared into her surprised eyes.

“What’s the matter with him?”

Tessa’s brow furrowed.

“You’re Dean, right?”

“You’re not answering my question.”

Tessa looked him up and down and turned more fully to him.

“Cas said Gabriel had called you.”

“Please, just answer the question,” Dean pleaded and Tessa’s face darkened.

“I think a better question is what’s not wrong with him,” she began, but when Dean didn’t understand, her eyes softened and were sad. “He has what we call PCP, but to you it would just be a very bad case of pneumonia.”

“Pneumonia?” Dean stuttered, “Cas has never had a problem with that. He’s only a few months older than I am.”

Tessa's mouth was a straight line.

"It's...it's more than that. But that's the bottom line. We're doing everything we can."

Dean nodded and Tessa began walking again before she stopped, Dean almost bumping into her.

"I feel like I should warn you," she whispered, and Dean's palms were beginning to get clammy. Tessa wouldn't meet his eyes. "He's very ill, and it shows."

"I want to see him," Dean rushed, and Tessa nodded.

"Ok."

Dean realized the reason she had stopped was because they were in front of what he presumed to be Cas' room. He could hear a radio playing, the sound bleeding under the door. Tessa knocked on the door and then opened it, her face bright, all traces of discomfort erased for a sweet smile.

"How's my favorite patient?" she grinned, walking in. Dean stalled at the doorway, his chest tight. If Cas replied, he couldn't hear it very well.

"Why are you hiding out there?" Tessa called and Dean jerked, taking a step forward into the room.

He swept his eyes over it and caught the bed, starting at the feet, two small hills under the blanket, and traveled upwards to two skeletal hands resting on a small lap. Two matchstick arms.

A thin chest bundled in a cardigan the color of terracotta pots, hanging so loosely off of the sharp shoulders it swallowed up the bulk of the body it contained. A pale green, transparent tube snaked up the fragile neck and ended in a mask.

A crop of unruly black hair, duller than he remembered –

"Dean?"

Dean's eyes snapped to Cas'. They were bright and glassy and from the sunken shadows of his face, shimmering like two blue flames on his pale skin.

It was silent except for the soft sighing sound of a machine.

Cas lifted his hand from his lap and held it out, hovering it a few inches from the blankets. Dean watched it shake and he rested it again, the action having exhausted itself. He heard the slightly wet sound of him breathing, and his mouth curled into a huge smile under the mask, though it trembled.

"I've... been waiting," he said slowly, having to pause to breathe between, "for you...I told Tessa...I told her..."

He rolled his head, looking at Tessa and Tessa smiled down at him. "He did, he told me you'd come. I didn't believe him at first, but here you are!"

The pillowcase rustled as Cas moved his head again, fixated on Dean.

Dean stared at Cas' feeble form on the bed and he – he didn't believe it.

That wasn't Cas.

Cas was white, but not like that.

Cas had thighs that gave when you squeezed them, he had cheeks that flushed easily. He never stopped talking, and his hands were warm and still and stronger than they looked, not limp like two dead birds on the blankets.

“Come here,” Cas said, and his voice begged. “Come here...”

Dean moved, eyes never leaving him, still trying to comprehend. Cas reached for his hand and Dean took it, staring down at it – it was so light. A palm full of spare change, and so thin, the skin nearly translucent. He could see the blue veins on his wrist. Cas squeezed it, and Dean realized it was still warm. Dean watched tears drip onto the back of his own hand.

“I’m so glad...” Cas said softly, his voice nothing more than a sigh. His chest rose and struggled, and then fell. “I’m so glad. I’m so glad you came...”

Dean blinked, but the tears kept coming.

He didn’t know. He hadn’t known. No one had told him.

“I should have come sooner,” he said shakily.

Cas squeezed weakly again.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered. “I’m so happy... don’t cry...I don’t want you to cry.”

Tessa had left the room, and Dean pulled his hand from Cas’, pawing at his face. Cas’ glasses sat on the night table beside a pitcher of water and a glass with a long straw and the remains of some kind of lunch. Dean wanted to reach out and touch the little gold frames he hadn’t seen in so long, but he refrained for now, keeping his hands to himself.

“Gabriel,” Dean cleared his throat, attempting to be professional. “Gabriel said you wanted to see me. Do you want to tell me something?”

He glanced at Cas and Cas was still smiling at him, hand resting near the edge of the bed.

“Gabe... is not very good at following... directions,” he laughed weakly, and the laugh turned into a horrid coughing fit. He raised his fist to his mouth, shaking, unable to turn his head away from Dean. When he was done, flecks of spittle were stuck to the corner of his mouth and the inside of his mask. He looked up at Dean with watery eyes.

“Could you?” he wheezed, gesturing vaguely towards the night stand. Dean picked up a small cloth and leaned forward, hand going out to touch his mask.

“Is it ok?”

Cas nodded, eyes fluttering shut as Dean’s free hand took his chin to keep him steady. Dean lifted it from his face and dabbed gently at his chapped lips and wiped at the inside of the plastic, replaced it, and made sure the little green elastic bands weren’t twisted as he situated it over Cas’ nose again.

Cas’ grinned, his teeth mottled by the plastic, and his breath fogged the inside of the mask.

“You’re... a natural.” He smiled and Dean couldn’t help it. He brushed his hand through Cas’ hair. It was long and coarse, and a strand came away on his hand, but he couldn’t find a single atom to care about it. It flopped over Cas’ forehead and Dean combed it away again, staring at his ashen face, watching the smile grow with each motion.

Dean realized Cas' hand was stroking his wrist, and his eyes slowly opened again.

"I told...Gabe...that I wanted, to tell you something," Cas said quietly, his voice muffled but Dean was close enough to hear. Dean opened his mouth to ask what it was but Cas smiled secretly.

"I think I'll wait," he teased, "Don't want you... running away ...on me."

"Does it hurt?" Dean asked, ignoring Cas' last comment and Cas tilted his head. "When you breathe?"

"Not...so much...anymore," Cas answered after a moment of pause. He waved his hand weakly at the IV above him.

"Morphine," he explained. So that was why his eyes were so glassy. "S'hell...of a drug," he rushed at the end, and Dean looked down at his feet. He chewed on his tongue, trying not to dwell on the congested sound of Cas' breathing.

"You know..." Cas broke the silence. "...you know..." he trailed off and Dean looked up. He caught his breath, and there was stitch of pain in his brow. His hand fluttered on the blanket – a tan colored, heavy, thing that had obviously been brought from home. Same as his shirt and the sweater, and Dean assumed his pants.

"You didn't think I would come," Dean finished for him, and Cas nodded, cracking his lids.

"I was...afraid."

"I almost didn't," Dean confided, his voice a low, shamed whisper. Cas nodded again in understanding.

"...don't blame you."

"You should," Dean said. "You should blame me."

"I did," Cas began, interrupting Dean before he could star., "At first...I blamed a lot...of things."

Dean wiped at his eyes, and Cas pulled the mask down from his mouth slowly.

"Look at me."

"I can't," Dean choked, his hand covering his eyes, his other resting on his knees.

"I blamed...the war...the president..." Cas continued and Dean shook his head. "...myself. For... a long time...but..."

Dean searched blindly for his hand and Cas took it.

"...I don't want...to be angry anymore," Cas murmured. "...I'm so tired...of being angry...and sad ... I'm so *tired*, Dean." he squeezed Dean's hand, "...I want ...to be happy. Let's...let's be happy.

"What is there to be happy about?" Dean said, finally lifting his head, eyes furious, "What is there to be happy about, because I shouldn't even be here!" he sobbed, reaching forward, putting Cas' mask back in place. "Wear your mask, goddammit!"

Cas stroked the back of Dean's hand with his thumb.

“...I’m happy...because you kept your promise.”

“I haven’t kept anything, Cas, I let you go. I let this happen to you – I...” His mouth wouldn’t make words anymore.

“...oh, Dean,” he began, “...you ...finally came home...to me.”

The broken noise that tore out of Dean bounced around the small shoebox of a room. He slid forward on the low chair till his head was resting on the bed. Cas touched his hair, his hand trembling.

“It was...a long time,” he soothed, “...and it was...hard...but...it’s alright now. It’s alright. We... can rest.”

“You’re dying!” Dean hissed, lifting his head, his face crumpling when Cas looked down on him, his eyes so wide and sad. “Christ Cas, you’re dying right in front of me – oh, Jesus...”

“I know,” he whispered back, his hand stalling on Dean’s hair and moving to his face, “...but you came. You came...and I’m...”

He touched Dean’s cheek and then cupped it with his slender fingers.

“...I missed you.”

Dean closed his eyes, face screwed up. Who the fuck had he been kidding? One look – one look. He was undone. He knew the moment he walked into that room that he was going to stay. There was no other option. He would be there till the end. He was so stupid – every time he thought he could beat it, life showed him what a fool he was. He would stay ‘til the end.

He wouldn’t leave him. He couldn’t leave him. Not this time.

“I missed you too,” he said wetly, “I missed you too.”

Cas smiled, thumb smudging a tear or two away. Dean took a moment to look at him.

“If you want to be happy,” he said softly, “we can be happy.”

Cas nodded with as much enthusiasm as his body would allow, gasping. He gasped hard and his eyes flew open and he touched his chest through his sweater, his lips going pale.

“Cas?” Dean said frantically, straightening, and Cas gripped his arm hard as he reached for the call button.

“I’m – alright!” he insisted, “I’m – alright –!”

His gasping subsided and he quieted, his body relaxing so deeply Dean thought he might sink through the bed. His fingers loosened on Dean’s arm and he closed his eyes, trying to regulate himself again.

“If you call...they’ll give me more...” he moved his head towards the IV.

“You’ll get sleepy?” Dean said quietly and Cas nodded. Dean frowned. “You should rest. You need that.”

Cas opened his eyes and glared.

“What’s...the point?” he whispered and Dean matched his stare.

“The point is that you can’t do this to yourself or it’ll just happen faster!” Dean bit, “I’m not arguing about this.”

Cas blinked and his face relaxed, his shoulders making a more comfortable groove in the pillows.

“If you need to rest, you can rest,” Dean assured him, and Cas fought to keep his eyes open, the exhaustion suddenly pulling him away. His legs twitched under the covers.

“...you...just got here.”

“This isn’t about me.”

Cas wrestled his tiredness. Just this once he wished it would leave him alone. Just this one time, because if he closed his eyes Dean would be gone again, wouldn’t he? He shook his head, but his body betrayed him. He didn’t know why that still surprised him at this point.

His face went lax and Dean watched him fall. His hands were folded on his lap and Dean reached up and brushed an eyelash off of his cheek with his thumb. He breathed and his chest hitched, the low gurgle of fluid in his lung never leaving completely. It was a terrible, frightening, sound. Dean rubbed his own arm, chilled in the room despite his jacket.

He wanted to ask how it had gotten to this. There had to be something – somewhere the universe had caught up with them. Was it punishment? Dean scrubbed at his face.

He didn’t know. He only knew that when Cas woke up, he’d be there.

He wouldn’t make the same mistake this time.

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By the fifth day, Dean was on a first name basis with nearly all the nurses on the floor, but he couldn’t charm them like Cas did.

Cas knew every one of them and he knew the little things too. Their husbands, their kids, what they were planning on doing for Easter.

They all looked happy when they came in, but none so happy as Tessa. He was her favorite patient, and that wasn’t her opinion, it was the truth. Every few hours she’d come into take his blood pressure or change his IV. Sometimes she’d frown, but she didn’t let it show for long, instead helping with a crossword puzzle answer or asking Cas some silly question to make him smile.

“Now that you’re here, he doesn’t have anything to talk about!” she laughed one morning, bringing Dean a cup of coffee as she made her rounds. Cas had smiled, patting Dean’s hand. Dean had been reluctant to show affection in front of the others, but Tessa seemed to be the exception.

“She...doesn’t mind,” Cas had assured him.

“All day long it was Dean this, Dean that!” she continued jovially, patting Cas’ shoulder when she was done with her work. Cas would stare up at her with adoration.

“Tessa...is a gem...” he would say when she was gone.

“She’s really something.”

Cas nodded.

“She...would talk to me...Gabriel only...came once, so...”

“What about the rest?” Dean asked, even though he already knew the answer. Cas had looked out the window instead, his face steeped in the striped sunlight caused by the blinds.

“Rachel...couldn't stay...and Michael never...came in...”

“What about your dad?”

“Stroke,” Cas whispered, “While...you were...over there.”

Dean's eyes widened.

“Cas, why didn't you tell me?” he implored.

Cas turned to him, eyes sad, smile small. “You weren't...listening.”

Dean glanced away in shame. Those days were such a mess in his head. Often he believed he had dreamed half the things that happened. The war, too, had faded. It no longer struck at him like a viper, and when it did, he had grown tolerant to its venom. The wounds had scarred over, acting up like some trick knee when it rained. What he had done to Cas, though ...Dean took a deep breath.

“What happened to us?” he asked, and for the first time he was being genuine with himself. “Cas, what happened?”

Cas looked at the window a moment longer, considering his answer, Dean supposed. He turned back to Dean, the light from the window haloing the back of his head. “We... grew up...” he sighed, shrugging weakly. It was an excusal for both of them. “We were...very young, Dean... and the world...asked a lot of us.”

Dean chewed the inside of his cheek.

“It was really hard when I came home,” he tried. “I knew I was hurting you. It was – it was so hard to watch, and I guess, I guess I just decided you were better off without me. I was too much for you. If I had known...”

“You didn't,” Cas interjected. “...Neither of us did.”

Dean nodded, and Cas situated himself a little more, leaning towards Dean.

“What...are you doing...now?”

Dean tried to put a smile on, scooting closer to Cas' bed. He stroked his hair, watching his eyes flutter with the motion.

“I've been working with Bobby again. I train too. Young, bull-headed boys just like me. And a girl. She's very good.”

Cas laughed a little, the sound breathy and faint.

“Do you...ride?”

Dean scratched Cas' head a little and Cas pressed into the touch.

“All the time.”

Cas made a small sound of satisfaction, pleased by this.

“I know, when I came home, I know you tried, but it wasn’t your fault. You know it wasn’t your fault, right?”

“I understand...there wasn’t...much I could do.”

“It was never your fault, Cas,” Dean repeated, and Cas stared at him, eyes foggy with medication. “What were you doing here? In San Francisco?” Dean said lightly after clearing his throat, trying to change the subject.

Cas stiffened, visibly, and wiggled a little, one hand fiddling with the tube connecting his oxygen.

“...That’s....complicated.”

Dean tried to follow.

“Cas?”

“You...need to know...that...when you left...” he trailed off, “it was...hard for me.”

Dean knew he was using his own words to help him understand. He looked at the ceiling, and then back down to the bed choosing his words. He had to be careful with them now. He was also trying to remember, as he always did when the memories forced themselves up, where exactly everything really changed. He never could. It shifted every time he thought about it, some new event that must have held all the answers, but he could never pin it down the way he wanted to. Today, for some reason, it was harder than ever and his head began to ache with the exhaustion of it.

“Cas?” Dean said, pausing his hand in his hair to touch his shoulder. Cas’ eyes were unfocused and far away, his whole expression going blank.

Cas shook himself back into the room, feeling the anchoring weight of Dean’s hand on his arm.

“Sorry...” he wheezed. “...I...don’t remember...so well...”

“It’s ok,” Dean soothed, still worriedly looking over Cas’ face. “Maybe it’s just the medicine.”

Cas didn’t say anything, and his hand twitched on the cover, a silent signal he wanted Dean to hold it.

“Sorry, am I interrupting?”

Dean snapped his head up, yanking their hands apart and stared at the blonde man hovering in the door. His English accent had cut through the room and Dean found he was standing, his chair shooting back away from him.

The man stared at him for a long time.

“Hello,” he said stiffly, and Dean looked at Cas. He was smiling, and before Dean knew it, he had crossed into the room, coming to the other side of the bed, leaning down to kiss Cas’ forehead. He stared at Dean, and Dean knew that look.

It was a challenge.

“Balthazar,” Cas sighed, taking his hand, and Balthazar kissed that too, looking down at Cas with startled eyes. Dean knew that look as well - he made it every time he came into Cas’ room. It was the one that still couldn’t believe what it was seeing.

“Hello, love,” he said softly, still stroking Cas’ hand. Dean sank down into his chair again, watching closely as the two interacted. “I brought you a deck of cards.” His eyes slid to Dean as he extracted them from his pocket, pressing them into Cas’ palm. “Did Cassy tell you he’s got an incredible poker face?”

“Balthazar...please...” Cas insisted, his voice only a fraction tighter than it usually was. Dean narrowed his eyes at Balthazar and Balthazar tossed his head indignantly, rubbing Cas’ arm.

“What? Am I not allowed to be angry with him? After all he’s done?”

Dean’s face flushed with shame and Cas glared, pulling his hand away from Balthazar’s, clutching the cards to himself.

“Enough,” he whispered, and Balthazar snapped back to him, his body sagging with apology.

“I’m sorry,” Balthazar rushed. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have lost my temper like that.”

Cas patted his hand and Balthazar met eyes with Dean again, obviously surprised by his silence.

“If you have anything you want to say to me,” Dean began, “you can say it to me.”

“Dean,” Cas scolded. “...the two of you...honestly.”

“I’m serious. You won’t. If he will, then I want to hear it.”

Balthazar’s mouth was about to open, when Tessa rapped on the door.

“Oh, wow, full house today!” she exclaimed and Cas’ relief was nearly palpable. Dean saw she was carrying a small tub and stood, moving to get out of her way.

“Bath time,” Cas said to Balthazar and Balthazar walked to the door, Dean staring at him.

“Perhaps I can take you to lunch?” Balthazar asked and Dean glanced at Cas.

He nodded, eyes closed, body limp as Tessa helped to remove his sweater, leaning him forward gently.

Dean sighed, turning back to the British man.

“Sure,” he shrugged, following him out into the hall.

They walked in silence to the elevator, but when they waited there, Dean could feel the appraising stare.

“You are very good looking,” Balthazar began, “but you look like you haven’t eaten an actual meal in days.”

“That’d be because I haven’t,” Dean said shortly. “I’ve been here for almost a week.” He eyed Balthazar in the break between speaking. “I don’t plan on going anywhere either.”

Balthazar said nothing, pressing the button again nervously, his hand in his pocket rattling what sounded like keys.

“He didn’t tell you about me then. Though, how could he, really,” Balthazar continued.

“He mentioned you at some point when we were together. I’m guessing you’re part of the reason he came here.”

They stepped into the elevator, their conversation cutting off. They stood in awkward silence, Balthazar still rattling his pocket, not stopping till they’d gotten to the main floor. Dean automatically veered off to the cafeteria but Balthazar snagged his arm.

“No hospital food,” he said primly, and Dean reluctantly followed him towards the exit.

## Chapter 9

### A Few Weeks, Probably Less

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They were seated at a small, crowded, Mexican restaurant, Dean debating on what to get. He wasn't especially hungry, and nothing looked especially good. He rubbed his eye and stared at the same thing over and over, rereading the same sentence by accident.

"I'd like to tell you we dated, but I'm not sure that was really what it was," Balthazar said suddenly, throwing his menu down, disgusted. Dean put his down as well, leaning back in his seat.

"You mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all."

Dean pulled a cigarette out of the pack and lit it, watching the blue smoke dissipate.

"I think he used me. To get over you," he said, barking a laugh. "How absurd that I should be telling you any of this."

"I appreciate it," Dean shrugged, "He can't tell me anything. Or he doesn't want to. I can't tell." He took a pull, and shook his head, exhaling rapidly. "I don't want to press him for anything anyway. Sometimes he coughs and..." He cut himself off, Balthazar fidgeting.

"I'm the one who made him go to the hospital," Balthazar said softly, "It was like one day he woke up and... I don't know. He called me at work and I came over, and he said he had thrown up and he didn't know how it happened. He was in the middle of his living room, and there was..." Balthazar stopped and took a breath, "He'd gotten sick everywhere and he was in the middle of it – I thought he was dead. I really did. Wasn't the first time I'd thought that, either."

Dean tapped his ash into the tray, his stomach clenching and twisting itself into a fist.

"He'd been getting so thin; I thought it was stress, and then they started saying things around, you know, I had heard them saying something was going around, but I just waved it off. It was just stress, or something, but then I went in, and he said he couldn't breathe and he'd fainted. They diagnosed him with an upper respiratory infection, but it wasn't just that. He was hospitalized practically overnight with pneumonia. And then it all sort of fell apart so quickly."

"Was he sick before?"

"Not for years – not like that. There was one time, a year or two after we came, but that was just the 'flu.'"

The waitress interrupted them but Dean ended up only ordering more coffee, and Balthazar got some kind of combo.

"You can peck off it if you like," he'd said and Dean hadn't said anything in return.

"Did they tell you? About that pneumonia he has?"

"PCP."

“PCP,” Balthazar said with a small laugh, “I looked it up at the reference library. It’s nearly nonexistent. It’s caused by a fungus that’s everywhere and from what I gleaned, it never happens. We breathe the bacteria in every day and don’t know it.”

Dean tried not to think about it too much.

“What happened to him?” he asked after a long silence.

Balthazar shifted in his seat, sipping his water delicately. He set the glass back down and wiped the condensation it left on the table away.

“You,” he said frankly.

Dean nodded.

“That’s not fair though. I don’t want to give you all the credit. A lot of things happened to him, but you, you were always *it*.”

“If I had known...”

“But you didn’t, and it’s happening,” Balthazar snapped, shaking his head, “I shouldn’t be mean to you. You weren’t there. You...you didn’t see it.”

“Please,” Dean pleaded. “I want to help him. I want to fix it.”

Balthazar fixed his gaze on him.

“Do you really, though?”

Dean stared back, refusing to look away.

“I would give anything to change it.”

Balthazar took another drink of water and frowned.

“I’m going to need something stronger than this,” he commented, waving their waitress down, asking for a shot of tequila. She brought it promptly and Balthazar sucked it down, not batting an eyelash.

He settled himself and took a deep breath.

“I think it was ‘73.”

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Castiel had more and more trouble focusing in class. The words in his books jumbled on the page and reformed themselves every time he tried to read them, so eventually he just quit trying altogether. He would return home to an empty, dark apartment; the shades always drawn, little slivers of light leaking through onto the hardwood floor. He would make dinner for himself, sit in front of the television on the couch, watching whatever was on. ‘*Watching*’ was a loose term. It was more like avoiding Star Trek and the Twilight Zone. They were dumb shows anyway.

Sometimes he would get phone calls, and every time the phone rang, he prayed that it was Dean telling him that he was coming home. Apologizing to him over and over again, telling that he was stupid for leaving, that he was a jackass, and that he still loved Cas.

Cas was used to not getting what he wanted.

Balthazar, his friend from school, would call to check up on him. It was sporadic at first, just a casual chat to make sure that he was doing okay. Eventually, their conversations start to last, sometimes stretching on for hours, and, sometimes, Balthazar could even make him laugh. Cas would hang up the phone and realize his face ached with a smile. But it wasn't the same as when Dean made him laugh or smile. Nothing was the same. Dean had been gone for nearly a year, and everything was different.

Cas tried to quit thinking about him altogether, but it was difficult because every time that he looked around the apartment, there was another reminder ready and waiting. When he'd left, they'd changed the lease to his name; technically the apartment was his on the papers. Nearly everything belonged to him, but Cas couldn't escape the idea of him. Sometimes he would forget that he left the bedroom light on, and he would catch himself thinking that maybe Dean was back, maybe Dean was in the bedroom putting his clothes back into the closet and dresser. It always ended in disappointment though, because Dean wasn't coming back. Cas *knew* that he was never coming back.

"You should move out of there."

They were at the small cafe down the street from his apartment, he and Balthazar, sitting inside and having lunch together. Cas shook his head and took a bite of his sandwich, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with the back of his hand. He could feel Balthazar's eyes on him, and he swallowed, still shaking his head.

"I can't do that. What if he comes back and I'm not there?"

"Darling," Balthazar started, reaching across the table, fingers gently resting against his wrist. "You know he's not coming back. That place is dragging you down, you need to get out of there. Very bad vibes."

"I can't," Cas sighed, pulling his hand away and setting it in his lap, and Balthazar retracted his arm, playing with the corner of a napkin. "Where will I go?"

"You can move in with me. I've got plenty of room at my place. I've been looking for someone ever since Dylan broke up with me." Balthazar shrugged with one shoulder, and Cas considered it for a moment. Balthazar lived closer to campus, and he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his school days alone, sulking around his apartment. A roommate would be nice, someone to talk to and spend time with. He wouldn't have to eat dinner by himself, or watch television by himself. He wouldn't have to be alone anymore.

"Yes," he nodded, smiling softly. "Yes, that would be nice."

The following weekend, Balthazar was at his apartment, helping him box up his things. They listened to records as they worked, and Cas made sandwiches for them when they decided to take a break. They sat on the floor in the living room and laughed lightly about empty things, easy things. ..

"What are you going to do with all of the furniture?"

Cas chewed on the sandwich, peanut butter sticking to the roof of his mouth, and he swallowed thickly. "Sell it, I guess."

"Money for new books, huh?"

"Or new records." Cas chuckled, and it was such a foreign feeling. He hadn't laughed and meant it in so long, and it was so different. He stopped and set his sandwich on the plate in his lap, pulling his glasses off to rub at his eyes.

"Cassy?"

"It's just-" he breathed, laughing wetly. "It's just so weird. I didn't think I would ever leave this place, that we would be here forever." He laughed again, and Balthazar moved forward, reaching out and pulling Cas toward him. Cas acknowledged the touch, his hand brushing over Balthazar's leg. "I just thought things wouldn't end, and here I am, packing up my things and leaving."

"It's alright," Balthazar soothed, rubbing Cas' back gently, and Cas shook his head, laughing again and rubbing his eyes.

"It's just so weird." He shrugged and swiped at his nose, smiling slightly. "Dumb though. Why am I getting all emotional? I'm moving on, right?"

Balthazar nodded and took Cas' plate from him, setting it onto the coffee table along with his own. He gently ruffled Cas' hair with a smile, and Cas leaned into the touch, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Well, let's finish packing, hm?" he suggested softly and stood, and Castiel looked up at him, taking his hand when it was offered. Balthazar hauled him to his feet, and he smiled, adjusting his glasses.

They packed the turntable and the records last, Cas carefully putting them into boxes and placing them in the trunk of Balthazar's car.

"Darling are you ready?"

Cas stood, the box under his arm, an album in his hand – one of the first he'd ever owned.

"Just a second!" he called, staring at the Hawaiian print on Elvis Presley's shirt. He looked up, and he swore, for a moment, he could see it all the way it had been, but with a blink it was gone. He stared at the emptiness, wondering if that was how Dean had felt when he first moved in. Blank.

How could Dean have known? How could either of them have known -- He licked his lips.

"Darling!" Balthazar's voice jerked him back into reality.

"Coming!" he answered, slipping the record back in among the others, walking to the door. He fitted his hand over the knob and opened it, but just as he was leaving he hesitated, turning back one more time.

Soft silence and shadows occupied the room, and it was surreal to think it was the last time he would see that apartment. It was the last time he would be in that space they had shared for so long, and he wondered what the walls would say if they could speak. What they would choose to tell him.

He swept his eyes over the kitchen and the living room. They'd left the kitchen table and the chairs. The bed in the back room, past the hall. The bare floors were duller than he remembered them being with the rugs gone. A little more scuffed, a little more worse for wear, but he still loved them. He would always love them. The same way he loved –

He stopped himself before he started.

It didn't seem right, he thought, even after all that time. After everything.

No, it never did seem right.

"See you then," he said quietly, and shut the door behind him.

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Cas had only been to Balthazar's apartment a few times, but it seemed different than the last time that he was there. He had to stop thinking of it as 'Balthazar's', like Balthazar himself was constantly reminding him. It was his home now; it was where he was living.

It was smaller than his old one, but it was fine. . He put the rest of the clothes into the dresser and sat down on the edge of the bed. He had to buy new sheets, he realized, because this bed was smaller than the one back at the other apartment, which really wasn't a problem. He wasn't going to be sharing this bed with anyone else. He laughed a little bitterly and shook his head, moving off of the bed to the last boxes on the floor.

There was a small table in the room and he put his turntable on it, leaning his records on the wall beside it, putting everything into order, and when he was done, he put Elvis on. The volume wasn't loud - he didn't want to disturb Balthazar- but it was loud enough to be heard in the small room. He laid on the bare mattress, hand behind his head, and closed his eyes.

Dean could dig Elvis...

He pushed himself off of the bed and moved across the room, pulling the record off of the turntable and pushing it back down into its sleeve. It went back in its spot with the rest of the records, and Cas stood in his bare feet with his face in his hands, but, for the first time in a long time, he didn't cry. He stood there, waiting, but the tears never came. It was unsettling, but when he finally decided to get off of the floor and go into the living room, Balthazar was seated on the couch, watching something on television, and he sat up straighter when he saw Cas.

It had been a long time since someone had done that.

"I didn't want to bother you," Balthazar said, his accent, for some reason, sweet and refreshing and new, "but I made dinner if you're hungry."

"Thank you." Cas smiled and walked into the kitchen, getting a plate out of the cabinet. He sat at the kitchen table and ate in silence, and before he finished, Balthazar joined him.

"So I know that you don't have class tomorrow, and neither do I, so did you want to do anything?"

"Get settled." Cas took a bite of the pasta, staring down at the plate. He didn't see Balthazar nod, but he heard the squeak of the chair against the hardwood, and felt a hand on the back of his neck and lips against his hair.

"Take as long as you need, Cassy,

Balthazar hesitated a moment, and then without a word, dropped another kiss on the top of his head and went back into the living room. Cas' fork hovered for a moment.

He closed his eyes and kept eating.

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By the time the summer of '75 rolled around, Balthazar could tell that Castiel was becoming more comfortable with the fact that Dean was gone and he wasn't coming back. He smiled more and laughed more, and he spent more time with Balthazar. They spent their nights together watching television and making dinner, and sometimes on the weekends, they would even go out together. He knew though, that heartbreak wasn't an easy problem to fix, but he was trying every day that he spent with Cas.

Dean still came up. Mentioned in passing, or what Cas would probably deem by accident, but Balthazar never complained about it. It wasn't like they had long, drawn out conversations about Dean. They never talked about him leaving; just that he had left. That he was there and then he hadn't. Sometimes they would watch TV, and the Twilight Zone would come on and Cas would stand up and change the channel wordlessly. Balthazar would only nod, understanding, and curl his arm around Cas' shoulder when he sat back down beside him.

Othertimes, Cas would lock himself in his room for hours, and there was nothing that Balthazar could do to coax him out. It was difficult, but days like that became less and less as time passed, and most times, Cas spent his time in the living room reading or watching TV. It was so domestic, the way that they lived, and Balthazar thought it was funny. He had mentioned it to Castiel, how they had fallen into a sort of routine with each other, how they had become so used to each other so quickly, and Cas only smiled softly and muttered even more softly, "It is funny, how that happens to people."

School was finished in no time for both of them, but Cas had told Balthazar that he had wanted to take a year off before going to med school. That he just needed some time off from everything.

"Where are you planning on going?"

"I don't know."

Cas pushed the pasta around on his plate, and Balthazar watched him for a moment before looking down at his plate and taking a bite. He gently kicked at Cas' shin beneath the table, and Cas looked up at him.

"You have the applications, right?" Balthazar looked up at him again, and Cas nodded.

"I've had them. Just never got the chance to fill them out."

He left it at that, and they both finished their dinner in silence.

The next morning, Cas wasn't in the apartment when Balthazar woke up, and he didn't think anything of it. Maybe he had gone out to get some fresh air, which was great because he had been really down recently. Neither of them had much to do since they didn't have classes anymore, and Balthazar could tell that it was getting to Cas. He didn't have anything to occupy his mind, keep his thoughts off of Dean, and he had been falling back into the state that he was in before.

He didn't hear from Cas for the rest of the day.

The door slammed open at around eleven at night, and Balthazar jumped, sitting up on the couch, alarmed.. Cas was slumped against the doorframe, rubbing at his face, glasses askew and hair a mess. He stumbled inside and closed the door, and Balthazar was off of the couch, moving toward him, catching him by the shoulders when he slumped forward.

"Cassy?"

"I saw-" he paused, fingers digging into Balthazar's shoulders. "I thought I saw him." Cas sank to the floor and Balthazar moved with him, wincing when Cas pulled him down hard, knees hitting the floor.

"It's okay," Balthazar hushed as Cas' hands moved, clinging to the front of his shirt.

"I thought I saw him, and it-" he sobbed, pressing his face against Balthazar's chest. "It hurt so bad. I didn't know what to do."

He smelled of alcohol, and Balthazar held him tighter, carding his fingers through his hair.

"I went...I walked, and I tried, but I can't forget! I can't forget him!"

Balthazar pulled Cas away from him and held his face in his hands, poor Cas, god he looked pathetic. Eyes red rimmed and wet, glasses askew on his face and hair wild. He had spilled something on himself, liquor or something, and Balthazar frowned in concern.

"It's okay," he repeated, kissing Cas' forehead until Cas relaxed against him, drunk.. He hauled Cas to his feet and helped him walk to his bedroom, sitting him on the bed and helping him pull his shoes off. Cas pulled the rest of his clothes off himself, and when Balthazar went to leave, Cas grabbed him by the sleeve, glancing up through his wet lashes. "Don't go." His voice was hoarse.

Balthazar stared down at him, heat pooling in his stomach.

"You're drunk," he whispered, and Cas stood, pulling at Balthazar's hands.

"Touch me," he said, dropping his head to Balthazar's neck, moving Balthazar's palms to his sides, pressing Balthazar's fingers into his skin. "Touch me," he breathed, kissing Balthazar's mouth.

Balthazar couldn't say no.

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The next morning, Balthazar woke to Cas staring at his clothes on the floor, face apologetic.

"It's fine," Balthazar said sleepily, stroking Cas' bare shoulder. "This is a good thing – I mean, if it weren't me, somebody else, right? Eventually?"

Cas' face crumpled for a moment and then recovered, under control.

"Eventually," Cas repeated, forcing himself to lay back down, his legs tangling with Balthazar's.

Balthazar looked at the dark circles under Cas' eyes; the tired lines of his mouth. He looked so much older than he was. Wrung out. He hesitantly touched Cas' face and Cas' eyes opened; blue and doll-like.

"How about a change of scenery?" Balthazar smiled, and Castiel looked taken for a moment.

"I just moved," he said softly, distantly.

"Yes, sweet, almost a year and a half ago," Balthazar reminded, and Cas shook his head against the pillow. Had it really been that long? "Anyway," Balthazar continued, stroking Cas' eyebrow, "they say the scene in San Francisco is amazing. Really lively and lots of people like us. They have a whole neighborhood practically and there are people opening stores all over. Just a really

good vibe. A really good one.” Cas remained quiet for a while, thinking, fiddling with the edge of the sheet.

Balthazar breathed softly and tilted his head, “tell me what you’re thinking,” he said lightly and Cas flashed a smile.

"A change of scenery would be nice," Cas said finally. “We can look for somewhere bigger.”

Balthazar took Cas' hand in his own, twining their fingers together, glad when Cas didn't pull his hand away. “Anything you want, Cas.”

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Back at the restaurant, Balthazar’s food had arrived and the blonde man was hovering a bite in his mouth, pausing his story.

“That can’t be the end of it,” Dean said, shifting in the booth.

“Hardly,” Balthazar managed after some chewing. He looked up at Dean. “We hadn’t met *her* yet.”

“Her?”

Her name was Meg, and, when she talked, her voice was a slow southern drawl, like syrup being poured out of a creamy white pitcher. They met her at a club after they’d moved, and Cas had taken to her like a moth to a flame.

“I think she reminded him of you,” he said, crunching a tortilla chip, and clearing his throat. “There was something very reckless about her. Of course, we didn’t know then what it was. We just thought she had no qualms about risks.”

By the time they had met Meg, Balthazar and Cas had been sleeping together regularly enough to be called a couple. It didn’t surprise Dean in the least. Balthazar kidded himself at first – Cas was really moving on. People were right, and they were both thriving in San Francisco. They could kiss each other in public, hold hands, and it seemed to be alright if you were chaste enough about it. The bay was a harbor. In the safety net of their community, love was the economy. They went to bars, clubs, went dancing, met people. They heard things, but they hovered on the edge. Cas was too monogamous for bath houses, and he didn’t want to catch anything.

“We hadn’t planned on staying forever. The Davis Medical school had opened in ‘66 and Cas wanted to go back eventually, but that’s not really how it turned out, I guess.”

Dean nodded vaguely. ‘66. He remembered something about that in the paper. Cas had entertained the idea of going more seriously than the other medical schools, despite it not having the privilege of age or esteem. Dean had wanted him to go somewhere better.

They started running into Meg more and more; she was part of those lost flower children, the left-overs of the dwindling peace movement who had drifted to San Francisco like the rest of the outcasts. Her crowd was wild and unpredictable, but Cas had been intrigued by her. She was so beautiful, he’d say, under it all. She knew how to live. Balthazar wouldn’t lie; she charmed him too. She charmed everyone. Seduced them with her pretty dimpled smile and long wavy brown hair and a voice as sweet as a Georgia peach. It was Cas who she could get to do anything.

“You take a city full of young men and ask how much sex can they have, they’ll have quite a bit of sex. That’s why we had the bath houses, you know? All that. We were all about freedom, we

were all about breaking the system. We fancied ourselves outside of it.” He ran a hand through his groomed hair. “Meg was just the drugs version, and Cas – I don’t know. Went after it like some kind of man possessed. At the time I didn’t realize it was to black you out, but it was obvious that’s what he was trying to do.”

They both did it. The drugs. In the back rooms and small, cramped houses where Meg would stay. Huddled shoulder to shoulder with Ruby or the like. Meg only had to get Cas drunk enough and he’d do anything she liked.

“I had done it in college, during the protests, but Cas hadn’t, and I should have watched him,” Balthazar said.

Dean was stunned. Positively stunned.

“The heroin was bad, but it was the cocaine that got him.”

“Coke?” Dean rasped and Balthazar nodded.

He let it get out of hand, but Cas smiled when he was high, and he said he loved Balthazar when he was high, which he never did sober, but like all things, it went too far. He disappeared for days, and when Balthazar showed up at the hotel they had all been partying at he couldn’t find him anywhere.

They were sprawled around, and two of them, Meg’s unnamed shadows, were having sex on the couch while Meg helped Ruby shoot up, licking her neck as she did so. When Balthazar asked for Cas she had laughed and pointed to the hallway.

“Shhhhh! Baby is sleeping!” she’d giggled into her hand, holding the tip of her tongue between her teeth when she’d removed it.

Cas wasn’t asleep.

“I thought he was going to die, I really did. I don’t know how I got him to the car, honestly,” Balthazar said, staring out the window. “I dragged him out, I don’t know....” He folded his hands together and tucked them under his chin.

They had left him in there, sweating and thrashing on the bed, out of his mind. He’d thrown up twice in the grass on the way to the parking lot, his body buckling in on itself, but Balthazar had managed to get him in somehow. He’d started to babble, and Balthazar was trying to shush him, and in anger or fear, he’d grabbed Cas’ shoulders and pinned him to the seat.

“You’re going to kill yourself!” he’d cried. “She left you in there, and you could have died!”

Cas’ eyes had been glazed and shimmering as he smiled up at Balthazar.

“That was the point,” he slurred, and Balthazar wanted to throw him out of the car. He’d wanted to beat the shit out of him.

Cas had laughed, the sound chaotic, just like Meg’s, his eyes rolling skyward.

“This is about him, isn’t it?” Balthazar hissed. “It’s always *fucking* about him! I’m tired of it, Cas!”

Cas kept laughing, choking and coughing as he did, his head tossing about on the seat.

“He left you! He left you – and I didn’t! I love you! Why can’t you just love me back? I thought we were starting over! We had forgotten him!”

Cas' laughter had changed. It was bitter and dark.

"You want to know...a secret?" he'd gasped, pulling Balthazar closer, right against his ear. "He wouldn't touch me...he wouldn't...he wouldn't touch me."

"Cas, stop," Balthazar said, Cas' hand wandering over his own chest up to his neck, touching his mouth.

"...It must have been me, why else? Why wouldn't he touch me? He wouldn't touch me...I'm disgusting..."

He looked up at Balthazar, chapped lips mumbling together.

*"You won't ever be him,"* he whispered. *"You can't be him. You try, but you won't ever be him."*

"I took him home, helped him throw up, got the ice when he came down. His fever broke sometime the next night. He was so apologetic," Balthazar sipped the last of his water, shaking his head, "but I never forgot what he said.

He hooded his eyes, glancing at Dean.

"I would never be you."

Dean's eyes were closed. He didn't know when he had closed them.

"He cleaned up after that; got a job working at a department store. He decided he didn't want to be a doctor anymore. It sort of faded out of him, just like everything else. He was still him, but, it was all just a game. I was the bookmark; and I knew I was. It didn't bother me anymore. I made him happy as much as I could, and he loved me, even if that love was just some reflection of what he always had for you.

"He gave up," Dean said and Balthazar hummed in agreement.

"Just a bookmark. Something to keep his mind busy."

"When do you think he started getting sick? He's so thin...that doesn't happen overnight."

Balthazar shrugged, shaking his head, at a loss.

"It must have been after Rachel's wedding," he smiled, "He was so excited for that. I hadn't seen him that happy in years."

"His sister Rachel?"

Balthazar put his napkin over his half eaten food, nodding.

"Yes, it must have been after the wedding, because I remember he had bought a suit and mentioning he had dropped quite a few sizes. I told him to stop working so hard, but he was getting promoted at the store and he was so happy because things were starting to feel a little more real. He must have called the house at some point and given them the address. Maybe Gabriel or something, I don't know. He never talked about them, but the invitation came and he was – he was really beside himself."

Balthazar squirmed, pulling his wallet out, "I think I have a picture in here..." he flipped through the wallet and tugged a photograph from it, folded once in half. He slid it across the table and Dean hesitated before looking. He kept his fingers on it, face down, for a while and then lifted it.

Cas was beaming; and the suit looked fine, but now it would drown him. He had easily lost half the weight he had in the picture, and even then he was thinner than he'd ever been with Dean. He stood beside the bride, his arm around her.

She was lovely. Fair haired and weepy-eyed, but smiling just the same. Rachel. He had never seen a picture of her past the age of fourteen.

“He started complaining about chest pains in January, and kept brushing it off as a cold because he hadn't had the 'flu in years. He said he was about due, but then...he just got sick, like I said.”

Dean realized he had finished his second cigarette and ground it out in the ashtray.

“Thank you. For telling me,” he said, and Balthazar remained silent for a while.

“I still hate you. For what you did to him, but,” he laughed self-deprecatingly, “just in the room with him, I could tell. The way he was looking at you before I came in? It was all there.”

Dean nodded, because he didn't know what to say. He hated himself for what he had done too, because Cas was dying now, and it was all because he had left him. But Cas didn't blame him, which hurt more than anything. Across from him, Balthazar fished a few bills out of his wallet and dropped them onto the table, pushing back. Dean followed suit and they left the restaurant to return to the hospital.

Before they went in, Balthazar stopped Dean, pulling his key ring out and fiddling with it, both of them standing near his car, the sun beating down on the parking lot.

“I'm going to England for a while,” he said softly, and Dean could see the wetness of his eyes, Balthazar blinking in excess to keep it from spilling over. “I can't -.” He paused, fighting with the key he was trying to pry off, “- I, I can't be here. I can't watch him like that.” He tried to say something more, failing. The key finally came loose and he held it out to Dean for him to take, and when Dean did he pulled out his wallet, digging for something.

“If it's because of me,” Dean began and Balthazar cut him off.

“It is, and it isn't.” He pulled a card from his wallet and handed it to Dean as well, an address scrawled on the back of it. Balthazar stared at the key and pushed Dean's fingers to close around it. “I'm just the bookmark, remember? He doesn't need me here anymore, and I don't want to be here.”

“That's not true,” Dean said, putting the two items in his pocket.

“When it's done, you can take that and go to our flat – his things are there, and I'm sure you'll want to sort through them...we drew up the will last week and all that. That's his brother's card. He's a lawyer and he's taking care of the arrangements for everything. His suit's in the closet. The one he wore to Rachel's wedding...”

“It won't fit,” Dean murmured, staring at a crack in the concrete.

“I suppose it won't matter,” Balthazar whispered, turning his head away to wipe his face.

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When they returned, the television in the room was on, playing some old movie, and Tessa was seated in one of the chairs beside the bed. She had Cas' hand in her own, and Cas appeared to be asleep. She set his hand down onto the bed when the door opened, and she stood.

"Didn't want him getting lonely while you two were gone." She smiled, and Cas stirred, cracking his eyes open. He smiled behind the mask, the new sweater he had on bringing the blue of his eyes out just a little, and Balthazar moved to the other side of the bed, gently taking Cas' hand.

"I'll see you around, sweetheart."

"You're... leaving?" he breathed and Balthazar answered,

"Oh, just for a holiday, darling," Balthazar croaked, bending to kiss his forehead, lips pressed to his skin for a long while. Cas closed his eyes and squeezed his hand. "I'll come back and tell you all about it."

Dean looked away, and Tessa slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Balthazar smoothed his hair back with his other hand, and Cas smiled sadly when Balthazar pulled away, moving around to the other side of the bed to pat Dean on the shoulder.

"Take care of him, Dean."

"Of course."

Balthazar took his leave and Dean sat in the chair Tessa had been sitting in. Cas' hand drifted toward him and Dean took it, bringing it up to mouth to kiss his fingers.

"He's not...coming...back," Cas said sadly, and Dean shook his head, squeezing his hand. Cas breathed, his chest rattling, and he closed his eyes for a moment, opening them to look at the television mounted in the corner of the room.

Dean followed his gaze, watching the television for a moment. He couldn't place the name of the movie, but it looked like some old sci-fi film. Cas laughed softly, and it almost sounded like a hushed whisper. Dean shook his head and looked back at Cas.

"He told me what happened to you."

Cas stilled briefly and then relaxed against the bed, frowning, pulling his hand from Dean's to rest it on the bed.

"I'm sorry..."

"Hey, it's not your fault," Dean moved closer, pushing Cas' hair from his face and scratching lightly. Cas closed his eyes and leaned into his touch.

"It...was so stupid of me..." Cas breathed, letting Dean massage his scalp. "...what if I had... forgotten you?...so childish."

Dean paused.

"That...that... would have broken...my heart," Cas murmured.

Dean leaned in, pulling the mask aside and Cas' eyes opened, watery and confused. He gasped, fingers closing weakly around Dean's wrist.

Dean pulled back from his mouth, and Cas gasped again, his hand shaking where it held onto Dean.

"I never stopped loving you," Dean said. "Even – even when..."

Cas sobbed.

Dean kissed him, and kissed him, and kissed him.

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Dean didn't know how exactly someone was supposed to check off the days of "a few weeks". Hour by hour he didn't really notice the fact that Cas was dying. He was just Cas; a tired, tired, Cas who couldn't breathe.

At the moment they were playing Crazy Eights over Cas' lap; the fog of the morning hadn't burned off, and a dull rain was starting to pelt the windows. The bedside lamp made Cas' skin look sallow, but he was having a good day, and was smiling more and able to sit up. He'd even had a bit of an appetite, which was uncommon.

"...you are still terrible... at cards..." Cas said, and Dean managed to laugh, watching Cas put down another card and then pull it back, staring at it.

"...am I allowed to do this?" he asked, and Dean squinted at him, Cas heisting with the card.

"Yeah, baby, you just did that a few turns ago."

Cas stared at it and nodded, laying it on the pile, smiling at Dean.

"You ok?" Dean said, rubbing Cas' arm through his sweater.

"Yes," Cas said distantly, settling his hand together, running his finger on the edges of the cards.

Tessa poked her head through and smiled, and Cas adjusted himself, sitting up straighter, breaking out of his momentary stupor.

"You've got more visitors, Cas." She pushed the door open and Sam walked into the room, followed by Jess, and Dean could hear the sharp intake of breath from Cas, laying his cards down.

Dean knew that Cas was grinning behind his mask, and when he turned to look at him, his eyes were wet, and Dean reached out to thumb his tears away before he stood and headed toward his brother and sister in law. He grabbed hold of Sam and pulled him to his chest in a tight hug before releasing him, and then he moved to Jess, kissing her cheek before he looked down.

"You brought her?" he reached for the small bundle in her arms, pushing the blanket away to reveal their daughter. Fine blonde hair and hazel eyes. Dean smiled down at her and she reached out her tiny hand, curling her fingers around one of his.

"Of course," Jess laughed softly. "We wanted him to see her before..." she trailed off, smiling sadly. "I'm so sorry, Dean."

"It's okay," he smoothed his thumb over the baby's cheek, and she squirmed. "Everything's gonna be okay."

Jess pressed closer to Sam, and he curled his arm around her shoulders, and she held her daughter closer to herself as she cried. She couldn't hold it in anymore. Dean could tell that she was trying to be strong in front of Cas, but some things just couldn't be helped, and he understood that Cas was sometimes very hard to look at.

"Jess..." Cas said from the bed, and Jess laughed softly, wiping at her face.

"I'm fine, Cas. I'm fine."

"It's just a lot to take in," Sam murmured, and Dean nodded. Sam gripped his shoulder with his free hand and kissed Jess' temple as he pulled away, moving to sit on the opposite side of Cas' bed. Cas grinned and reached for Sam's hand, and it looked so small in Sam's giant palm.

"Sam..."

"Hey, Cas," he smiled and covered Cas' hand with his other hand, and Cas laughed softly.

"You...grew." He couldn't stop smiling, and Dean was glad that they had come and visited. Jess tugged at his sleeve and he turned his attention to her.

"How long does he have?" she whispered, and Dean shook his head, brushing a strand of hair from her face and tucking it behind her ear.

"Not too long."

He could hear Sam and Cas talking to each other, about how Sam went to Stanford and became a lawyer, and he heard Cas saying how proud of Sam he was. It was quiet for a moment, and then Cas spoke again.

"What's...their...name?"

"Abigail," Sam answered, and Cas nodded, turning to look at Dean and Jess near the door. They both turned their attention to them, and Sam motioned for Jess to come closer. She walked toward the bed, and Abigail cooed in her arms, little hands reaching up to tug at the ends of her blonde hair.

Jess was wary though, and didn't get too close. Dean knew that Cas would understand.

"Dean..."

Dean turned his attention to Cas, moving closer to him, but Cas just smiled and squeezed Sam' hand. Sam watched him, watched the way that his chest fell and rose with each, rattling breath that he took.

"Can...you...hold her?"

Jess nodded and turned to Dean, gently placing Abigail into his arms, and he held her so close to him. She was so small and fragile, like a baby bird, blinking up at him and reaching for his face, tiny fingers opening and closing in the air so close to his chin. He bent down, and she grabbed at him, small hands rubbing at the stubble, making her little sounds

Cas laughed and lifted his other hand to his face, shakily wiping at his eyes before he returned it to the bed.

"She's...beautiful."

Jess took the other seat beside him now that her arms were free, and she grabbed Cas' hand and twined their fingers together. He smiled as she smoothed her hand through his hair.

"It's so good to see you, Cas," she whispered. He nodded slightly and leaned into her touch. Abigail was still grabbing at Dean's face, and Dean bent to kiss her cheek, making her squeal. Cas watched him the whole time, his face wet with tears, and for a moment, Dean felt like everything was going to be okay. That Cas was going to get through it. They would be together

again. Cas would watch Abigail grow, and maybe sometimes he would even take her to school. They would have a home together and Sam and Jess could visit them on the weekends with their daughter.

But then reality set in , and Dean knew that none of those things were going to be possible.

Sam looked to Jess and she nodded slightly, leaning forward to kiss Cas' forehead, and he smiled. Sam squeezed his hand before he stood and pulled away. Jess didn't want to seem to let go, and she kissed Cas' cheek, laughing softly.

"We need to go, but we'll be back. I promise, Cas."

He nodded and she pulled away, moving to Dean to take Abigail from him. His arms felt empty and heavy when he dropped them to his sides, and he kissed the baby again, then Jess, and hugged Sam. They said their goodbyes , and Dean returned to his seat beside Cas, taking his hand. He wiped at Cas' cheeks with his thumbs, drying them as best he could, and Cas just closed his eyes and sighed, but the tears just kept coming.

"Cas, hey. It's okay," Dean tried, but Cas shook his head.

"Promise me.." he whispered, and Dean nodded, leaning closer. "You'll...live...your life."

"Don't talk like that, please," he pleaded. He didn't want to hear it right now. He didn't want Cas to lecture him on how he should live his life after he died. He just didn't want to think about how, maybe, in the next few days, that Cas wouldn't be here anymore and Dean would have to return back home without him.

Cas breathed and the corner of his lips curled up in a grimace; he grabbed at Dean's wrist, pulling his hand away from his face.

"You...need to."

"What am I going to do though?"

"What...you've been...doing." He paused for a moment, squeezing his eyes closed, hand fluttering to his chest as he gasped. Dean moved closer to him and Cas opened his eyes to look at him. They were the soft color of corn flowers; glassy, like the glossed sheen on Dutch porcelain. Dean didn't like looking into them anymore. They weren't the eyes that he remembered, so vibrant and bright, the bluest blue that he had ever seen.

"Okay"

Cas smiled, and close his eyes, turning his face to relax against the bed.

"I'm...tired."

Dean took his hand and set it onto the bed beside him and leaned forward to kiss his forehead, brushing his hair away from his face.

"Get some rest."

## Chapter 10

### Probably Less

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There was a knock at the door and Dean jumped, sitting up in the chair. He hadn't realized that he had fallen asleep. He stayed up most nights, watching Cas, hoping that maybe if he looked at him hard enough that he would get at least one more day. Dean tried not to get his hopes up. He rubbed at his eyes and looked back toward the door. Tessa was pushing it open, her smile turning into a frown.

"Did I wake you?"

"It's okay," Dean laughed softly, looking back to Cas to make sure that he was still sleeping. It was getting harder to wake him up, and Dean didn't know what the reason was; maybe it was because he was getting so close. He shook his head, rubbing his hand down his face; he didn't want to think about that.

"I just came to check up on him," she smiled and moved toward him, checking Cas' IV and his oxygen. Dean leaned back in the chair and watched Cas as he slept, watched when Tessa smoothed her hand across his forehead in a loving gesture. He knew that Cas meant so much to her, that the two of them had grown incredibly close during his time here.

"He would talk about you like you hung the moon," she laughed softly, looking up at Dean as she straightened out the blanket on Cas' bed, pulling it closer to his chest. "And he never spoke bad about you. You mean so much to him, Dean."

"I know," Dean leaned forward and smoothed his fingers over the back of Cas' hand where it sat on the bed, his fingers twitching against the blanket as he dreamed.

"He's something else. You try to shake him and he sticks in the back of your head.," Dean laughed and shook his head, thumb tracing over the knob of his wrist, more pronounced than he remembered. Tessa pulled her sweater around herself and rocked on her heels.

"Even after everything that he's been through, he still talked about you like you were his world."

She sat down in the opposite chair, groaning slightly, exhausted from her shift.. She smiled, reaching over to adjust the strap of the mask against Cas' cheek, straightening it out and smoothing it down.

"I wish I could have known him before this."

"It would've been nice for him to have a friend like you, so he wouldn't have had to put up with me all day," he said to himself, and Cas stirred on the bed, but he didn't wake up. " God knows I wasn't much of one sometimes." Dean's voice dropped, a hush in the room, "You know – it's so easy to forget how much we'd fight." Dean rubbed his own forehead, legs splayed in the chair, back aching. ". We used to get so mad at each other; I knew exactly what buttons to press, and now it seems like wasted time."

"That's part of being in love with someone," Tessa said after a moment, staring at the wall just beyond Cas' head. "You fight them and you hurt them, but the whole time you're trying." She looked back at Dean "As long as you're willing to fight *for* them, it all balances out, I think."

Another silence stretched.

“He talks about the beach a lot,” Tessa continued, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. “I think that’s a good memory for him. He talked about it most on the bad days.”

Dean rubbed at his face. The beach. He could remember it so clearly, Cas in his boots and jacket, Dean in his red mackinaw. The way that the waves crashed against the shore and gulls cried above their heads; how Cas was so excited, and Dean had gotten it all on film. The way that Cas had told him that he loved him over the sound of the waves, shouting across the beach, grinning. He remembered how they shared a small bed in their hotel room, and how every time they moved, it groaned beneath them. The memories were so clear, like they had only happened just yesterday.

"We had fun," he managed, his voice tight with emotion when he spoke. His sadness melted into a laugh as he remembered, holding up his hands to gesture, " He had an absolute *brick* of a camera. This old 65' Polaroid I'd gotten for cheap at a pawn shop. I spent so much money on film for it, but I don't know what happened to the pictures."

"I'm sure he still has them," Tessa smiled again and brushed Cas' hair from his face.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed.

Tessa hummed softly as he stroked her fingers through Cas' hair, Cas' chest rattling as he breathed, still deep in sleep.

"I've never seen another living human being love someone as much as he loves you," she whispered. “He was so certain you’d come; we tried to tell him not to have expectations but he was so sure. *‘He’ll come. Dean keeps his promises’.*” She pursed her lips. “I wanted to hate you. I wanted to be angry you’d left him, but it was impossible not to buy in to the person Cas describes when he talks about you.”

“I wish he wouldn’t,” Dean said. “I wish he hadn’t fought so hard; look where it landed him.”

"He’s tough,” Tessa added, eyes soft. “ We didn't think he would make it this long, you know. But, I think, he knew he had to wait for you..”

Dean squeezed Cas’ warm fingers.. Cas had been holding out for him. The thought of it hurt more than he thought it should. That Cas had waited – and what if he had never come? Cas was just barely hanging on now, and it was all because of Dean.

"I don’t understand why it has to be him," Dean said brokenly. “Why couldn’t it have been me? All those times – every time and I never bit it. Why him? He hasn’t hurt anybody. He hasn’t done anything to hurt anyone!”

“I wish I could tell you,” Tessa whispered. He felt Cas' hand pull out from beneath his own, and then it was resting against the back of his wrist, fingers moving sluggishly.

"Dean...?"

Cas looked at him blearily, and Dean leaned forward taking Cas’ hand and kissing his brittle fingers. He held his hand and smoothed it down Cas’ arm, bumping over the IV and back again. Cas smiled, in a daze.

"Hey, baby” Dean said, “Everything’s fine. Go back to sleep, okay?”

"We were just talking." Tessa added as she stood and leaned over the bed to smile at him. "But I should be going. I have other patients to check on."

Cas nodded and smiled at her.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Cas."

Tessa left and Cas turned back to Dean, thin fingers ghosting over his wrist. He looked like he was getting thinner by the day, but Dean tried to ignore the fact. Instead he focused on the way that Cas moved his fingers over his skin, the way that he curled his fingers around his hand, blunt nails digging into the flesh of his palm. He was still Cas. He was still his Cas.

"What...were...you...talking about?" The last words came out in a rush, like he was trying to get them to come out as fast as he could.

"You." Dean smiled and rubbed his thumb along the back of Cas' hand, and Cas breathed a short laugh. "Tessa was telling you what a big mouth you are...like I didn't know that already."

Cas nodded and smiled, but he didn't say anything else for a moment. He just watched Dean, smiling shyly behind his mask, and for a moment Dean was thrown back to the first moment he had laid eyes on him. His hair was neat, combed back and styled, and his glasses were sitting straight on his face. His sweater was buttoned and his slacks were pressed, tie a little askew from the party, and the very first thing Dean had thought was he should go and fix it for him. Lean in to whisper into his ear and Cas would lean back, bringing their faces closer.

"I...love...you," Cas said suddenly, and Dean laughed. He laughed and rubbed at his eyes, unaware that he had even started crying again.

"God, Cas," he kissed his fingers, his wrist. "I love you too."

The words still felt so foreign on his tongue. He had gone so many years without saying them, and he didn't think that he would be able to ever use them again. But Cas was here, and he was looking at Dean like the first time that Dean had ever said those words to him.

"I'm... tired," he mumbled after a long while, pulling his hand away from Dean's to gently touch his face. Dean held his hand against his cheek, turning his face to kiss his palm.

"Okay," Dean assured, watching his eyes slip shut. "I'll see you in the morning."

Cas nodded and dropped his hand, turning his face back against the pillow.

Cas fell asleep shortly after that, and Dean scratched at his hair before leaning back in the chair, trying to sleep himself. He was woken up a few hours later by a soft sound.

"What is it?" he said, blinking blearily around. Cas was staring at him, his eyes huge.

"...it's you..." he whispered.

Dean's brow furrowed. He sat forward, scraping the chair on the tile to bring it closer.

"...it's you..." Cas repeated and Dean brushed the hair from his face.

"What's wrong?"

Cas' eyes were cloudy and his face was confused.

"...you're home...?" he slurred, "when...when? I wasn't...I wasn't paying attention..."

Dean didn't understand.

“Cas, what are you talking about?”

Cas looked at the far wall, moving his hands listlessly, his eyes closing.

“...I wasn't paying attention...”

He fell back asleep and Dean watched him for a long time, concerned, searching his face. He rubbed his eyes and sat up as long as he could, but eventually he couldn't fight it anymore. When he woke next it was morning; the sun was coming through the blinds and scattering across Cas' bed. Cas was awake, looking out the window; as Dean grew more awake, twisting his stiff neck, he could see that the blinds were pulled up halfway. He waited a moment before getting Cas' attention, unsettled from last night's sudden conversation. Cas stayed fixated on the outside, the sky a bright blue.

Dean wondered what to say.

“Morning,” he said, finally, and Cas turned to him, smiling faintly. Dean shifted, his legs aching, “So, did you have a bad dream last night?”

Cas tilted his head slightly on the pillow.

“Hmm?”

Dean looked at his face: it was clear he didn't know what he was talking about.

“Must have been the medicine,” Dean whispered to himself.

Cas stared blankly at him.

“Are you ok?” he asked, and Cas twitched a little.

“Oh...” he breathed, and then went back to looking out the window.

“We should go...to the beach...sometime,” he said and Dean's face fell.

“What do you mean?”

“We should...we should go,” he said, almost idly. Dean shook his head, touching Cas' hand, trying to get his attention. Cas' eyes were unfocused and bouncing around the room, rolling around in his head.

“Baby, we've gone. Don't you remember?”

He finally got Cas' eyes to stop moving, but when they landed on Dean they looked right through him.

“We should go...that's what...I said...” his speech was slightly slurred, and Dean reached for the call button.

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He waited outside while Doctor Ether, or so Tessa called him, administered the tests, Tessa with him. Dr. Ether left first, his coat flapping around him. He didn't stop to tell Dean anything, but Tessa came out after a moment, her face worried.

“What’s the matter with him?” Dean asked, and Tessa put her hands in the pocket of her long heather grey sweater.

“He’s...we don’t really know,” was all she could say. “I’m sorry Dean, I can’t really explain right now, I have rounds.” She trotted off down the hall, and Dean was left alone.

When he peeked into Cas’ door, he was staring out the window again and Dean slipped backwards, following where Dr. Ether had gone. When he was nowhere to be found on the floor he went down to the first floor. He needed food, he realized suddenly. He never remembered to eat these days. Cas teased he would get as thin as he did, though Dean never found those jokes especially funny.

Dean spotted the man sitting at one of the many cafeteria tables; he was poking at some kind of pasta, but mostly drinking calculated sips of steaming coffee. He was a drawn-looking man, with heavy bags under his eyes and thin, precise, hands. Though Dean had only seen him from the back before, he knew he was the person he needed to talk to.

He didn’t waste any time after that, navigating the crowded room as best he could until he was finally peering down at the doctor from the chair opposite him. The doctor nibbled on his issued breadstick, but didn’t bother to look up at Dean. From this proximity, Dean saw that beside the plate was a kind of file, the manila folder folded and the neat white stacks of paper sitting on top, attached to the inner cover.

He flipped the page over and then motioned with his free hand at the empty chair.

“Don’t hover. Sit.”

The sound of the furniture scraping away at the tile floor was drowned out by the drone of occupants; nurses, patients, but mostly the displaced friends and family of said patients – and of course, the doctor in front of him.

Dean glanced at his coat and saw the printed nametag clipped right above the pocket of his white doctor’s coat. *Dr. Ether*. He was right.

“I have some questions for you.” Dean began, glancing up from the words to the man’s sharp face. His bone structure was alarming, and his black hair made his white skin even whiter. Dean wondered how he wasn’t confused for a mortician, not a man who saved lives.

“What makes you think I will answer them?” the man drawled, and then he stopped flipping through the papers and looked squarely into Dean’s face. “Though, I admit, it’s charming how forward you are.”

“You are Cas’ doctor, and I have some questions about it.”

Dr. Ether’s face dimmed considerably as he tilted his head in recognition of the name.

“Ah, so you’re Dean.”

Dean leaned forward in the chair, his hands folded in front of him.

“So what if I am?”

Dr. Ether, surprisingly enough, cracked a smile.

“My patient’s brother warned me you might be making an appearance at some point.” He gave Dean a once over and smirked. “He also mentioned you might be *concerned*.”

“Oh, I’m a little *beyond* concerned,” Dean growled, clenching his fists. Dr. Ether took another small, calculated, bite of his breadstick and pasta and patted his mouth gently with the paper napkin from the dispenser beside him.

“You’ve earned my attention, so ask.”

Dean watched Dr. Ether take a drink of water from a glass on the tray in front of him and felt his mouth become drier than before.

“Why isn’t he getting better? I see people in there constantly, but he hasn’t changed in a week.”

Dr. Ether took a breath and looked blankly at his beige pasta and the formica table top, as if he didn’t know where exactly to start. Dean could already feel a lump forming in his throat that was becoming impossible to swallow down.

“Do you have any knowledge of what your immune system does?” the older man started, smoothing over the edge of one of his fingernails.

“It protects you – from infection.”

Dr. Ether smiled grimly and met Dean’s panicked eyes.

“Precisely. It protects the body from infection.”

He took another sip of his water and wiped the condensation on his trousers.

“Castiel Novak has no immune system,” he said calmly. Dean’s eyebrows lowered almost automatically.

“What do you mean he has *no immune system*?”

Desmond Ether looked at the ceiling, closed his eyes and then tapped a point on the papers in the manila folder. Dean realized with horror that the papers were Cas’, that the numbers and figures, the notes written in the spidery scrawl and the red underlines. They were all his.

“His T-cell count is practically non-existent.” Dr. Ether shook his head side to side, his expression perplexed. “Truly, we’ve never seen anything like it – his body is beyond compromised. Boys have been coming in with it over the past month, and nearly all of them are like you. Mid-thirties, homosexual.” He tapped his finger again. “My colleagues and I are very disturbed by it, and the numbers keep growing. They’ve had to call the contagious disease center. We’ve had an agent looking at Mr. Novak’s case for almost his entire stay. He’s just one in a string of strange occurrences we’ve had.”

Dean tried to understand exactly what he was being told. He knew Cas had pneumonia, and from what he had gleaned, it was a rare form. But that should have been treatable. Cas was young, he had always been healthy.

“So what are you going to do?” Dean blurted, watching the doctor push his pasta around with no intention of eating it anymore. His fork paused, prongs spearing a piece of vegetable, and he almost seemed to look shocked at Dean’s question.

“Do?” he responded quietly, squinting at Dean. “What am I to *do*?”

“To help him!” Dean said fiercely, sitting forward. “To help him beat this!”

Dr. Ether’s eyes narrowed further, this time in pity.

“I apologize for not making myself clear – there is nothing to be done. I thought that would be obvious when I told you that there is nothing protecting Castiel Novak from anything that would ever chance to waltz into his body. These boys are *dying*. I can’t doctor them. I am merely shuttling them along to the inevitable.”

The words seemed garbled and foreign to Dean, like he was hearing them – and he knew they were words, but he couldn’t quite make out what they meant.

“...w-what do you mean...,” he tried, shaking his head. “...There has to be something – *you’re a doctor*,” He added desperately, his anger mounting. “Don’t fucking tell me you can’t do anything, that’s bullshit!” He slammed his fist on the table, rattling the cutlery and the napkin holder. Water sloshed unevenly from the glass and fell into the tray. Dr. Ether said nothing for a long while as the stares of other people gradually busied themselves elsewhere.

“I cannot *give* him a new immune system,” Dr. Ether said quietly, “I cannot even help him grow a new one.” The doctor took a moment, perhaps to internalize. “There is nothing I can do for him. We have tried to manage his symptoms, but at this point it doesn’t matter. Do you comprehend that?”

“Please,” Dean whispered. “Please, if it’s about money, if it’s about *anything*.”

Dean stopped as a hand touched his own. He hadn’t realized he was moving it forward and reached out. Now he was grasping hopelessly at the man’s sleeve. He felt like he was already slipping to his knees to beg.

“Son,” Dr. Ether’s face was grave. “You have to understand that he is being eaten alive from the inside out. I couldn’t buy him an hour if I wanted to, even if money were no object.”

“So you’re just going to let him rot?” Dean cried. “You’re fucking just going to let him sit in there, and waste away?!”

The doctor felt Dean’s hand dig into his forearm. He winced.

“We are doing everything we can to make his transition comfortable.”

Dean looked away, at the busy cafeteria line. His grip loosened and he pulled his hands back to fall listlessly into his lap. His brain felt too soft in his skull.

“Transition,” he whispered, his voice snagging. All those times Tessa came to check on him, she was just helping him...to die? Numb him up so it didn’t hurt so badly – because they were gonna lose him.

*We’re gonna lose him.*

It was like a nightmare. The bad dreams he would have overseas. He would just have to wake up, and it would all be over. Everything. He’d wake up and he’d be in bed in the apartment, and Cas would be right next to him, one leg over, one leg under. He’d kiss him and then go back to sleep, the only thing to show for this trauma a light sweat and a shake of his head to clear it.

“We’re down to days, at this point. Respiratory and cardiac arrest are sudden. His heart could stop anytime.”

Dean tried to swallow, but the lump wouldn’t go down.

“If we are dealing strictly in terms of the pneumonia, the lack of oxygen has put his heart into an

unreasonable gear. It's doing twice the work with half the results. It's going to fail him. That is, if the fluid doesn't drown him."

There was a beat of silence before the doctor continued, his voice slow and thick, like molasses trickling through Dean's ears.

"Before then we may lose everything. His body is turning off as we speak – kidneys; liver; bowels. It's all shutting down."

Dean kept looking away, so that the doctor wouldn't see him as he bit the inside of his cheek so hard he feared he might tear through it.

"The only thing I can give him is you."

Dean snapped his head back to the Dr. He was looking out the windows over Dean's shoulder, his hands folded over one another. He nodded to himself.

"It was so hopeless," he murmured, "but when you came we saw small improvements. Minor things. Superficial things, but still, any positive results we welcomed. I've been a doctor a long time, Dean, so I don't know why I keep being surprised by what love does to people."

Dean flushed.

"I don't know what you're—" he began harshly, but the doctor's pitying smile found him again.

"There is no reason to lie," his voice was low, "It makes no difference to me. In fact, I'm glad. Dying people need a reason to wake up in the morning, or else they wouldn't."

Dean's heart was beating so fast in his chest. He felt dizzy, strange. Like he wasn't really in his body, but floating right above it, watching as all the horrible things kept getting said.

"So you'll let me stay with him?"

Dr. Ether sighed.

"If I could prescribe such a thing, I would, and if anyone has a problem with it they can see me. You...partners...or what not, you're crucial to the investigation. You can give us details about what Cas did before, what his habits were. Anything to give us some kind of foothold."

Dean looked away again.

"But, if you stay, you'll need to know what you're going to face."

Dean nodded blankly.

"We have planned for the worst, Dean. He will lose his vision. His speech. All of it. What you've seen is the just the tip of the iceberg. His brain is just like any other organ and it is just as vulnerable to whatever's swimming around in him. Even if he is conscious at the end, communication will be difficult. It will frighten him; his disease causes anxieties because of the impaired breathing."

Dean shut his eyes and then opened them, tiredly. He didn't have the energy to feel anything. He wanted to get back to the room.

"So his memory?"

"You've seen for yourself."

He wanted to go look at Cas, because he was alive, and he needed to look at him.

He didn't know if Cas knew or not.

"Just tell me what to do," he breathed, "and I'll do it."

Dr. Ether took a deep breath himself and let it out slowly.

"Talk to Tessa. She'll tell you everything. I'm afraid I need to go work."

Just like that, the conversation ended and Dr. Ether closed the cover on the file and slipped it under his arm. There was no goodbye, no real exchange. Dean knew it was because it would be redundant. There was nothing else to be said.

Dr. Ether got up and left, and Dean kept watching the line of people. After a few minutes he stood shakily and went and bought an orange and carried it back to Cas' room. He stalled in the door when he got there, watching Tessa fuss with the IV drip; Cas opened his eyes and smiled at him under his oxygen mask.

"You were gone a while," Tessa said with a smile, having returned, voicing what Cas' face could only show. She was looking up from her work, studying Dean. Dean shrugged weakly and went to the chair at the bedside. Cas felt for his hand automatically and stroked his fingers, eyeing the orange. He didn't want to watch her put more morphine in the bag.

"You want some?" Dean asked and Cas grinned. Dean licked his lips and saw to peeling it, pulling his knife from his pocket to get it started. Cas watched his hands the whole time, still smiling.

"Is orange your favorite, Cas?" Tessa asked and Dean had to crack a little at that. He heard the rustle of Cas shaking his head on the pillow.

"Blueberries," Dean answered. "He eats them by the gallon." *Ate them*, his mind corrected. His finger almost slipped while he was putting the knife away.

"They...aren't...in season," Cas said slowly, pulling his mask aside before he couldn't keep his hand up any longer. He smiled sheepishly and Tessa patted his shoulder, laughing.

"Well, maybe I can round some up for you."

Dean didn't respond, just continued peeling the orange, tossing the peels on the bedside table. He heard the door click shut as Tessa left and found his hand wasn't moving anymore.

"...Shh." He heard Cas say and it sounded like it was across the room. "Dean..."

"I'm sorry," Dean sobbed. "I'm sorry, shit – I didn't want to do this."

He pulled the orange apart, sectioning it, but he couldn't see what he was doing.

"Shit."

"Dean."

"I'm sorry."

He stared at the orange, and there was juice all over his hand. He laughed, pathetically, and threw

it with the peels, wiping his palms on his jeans, and while he was doing that his body bent forward over his knees; he just couldn't hold himself up anymore.

"I ruined it, sorry!" he sobbed into against his sticky fingers. They smelled sweet.

"It's ok," Cas said quietly. "Don't...worry about it."

"Don't tell me not to worry about it!" Dean cried. "I just – I'm really sad, ok? I'm really...I'm really sad."

"Dean?"

Dean sniffed and raised his head, hiccupping slightly.

"I...I want to tell you," Cas said, his words slow and thought out. "I want to tell you...why I wanted you to...come...and see me."

Cas held his eyes and placed both of his hands over Dean's.

"You...have to stop," he continued, voice low and gravely and faint, "...you have to stop...blaming yourself."

"We've already talked about this, Cas," he muttered.

"Well...listen."

He looked up at Dean from his pillows, his sweater all bunched around his neck, his shirt wrinkled. His face was yellowish in the light from his bedside lamp and Dean knew what he was trying to say.

"You...you...gotta promise," Cas hushed, "...look at me..."

Dean, whose eyes had wandered, returned his gaze.

"...Don't hide anymore. Don't run anymore...I want you to be happy...I want you...I want you to be happy without me."

Dean tried. He really did.

"Don't ask me that," he whimpered. "Don't ask me to do that."

"Dean," Cas said, sternly, forcing him to keep looking into his eyes. "...Dean, I'm dying...and...I..." he shook his head on the pillow, eyes closing, but he didn't cry. It was as if he refused to. "...I don't want to. I don't...but you...you aren't dying...you aren't...you aren't dead...so stop acting like you are."

"How am I supposed to be happy without you?" Dean rasped. "How do I do that? You're everything. You've always been everything."

"You...have to try," Cas replied. "You...have to...or none of...this...will be worth it."

"I'm not worth it – none of it was worth it," Dean interrupted. "Look what it did to you? Look where it got us?"

"Don't – *ever!*" Cas said fiercely, stunning Dean. His eyes were clear and furious, as coherent as they'd been in days. "Don't *ever* apologize for...us."

He had to pause to catch his breath again, and his eyes softened.

“Don’t...don’t apologize for...who we were.”

Dean shook his head and Cas brought his hand to his face.

“You made me...so happy Dean,” he breathed. “We did our best...we gave it...our best try...and it was...really beautiful.”

Dean nodded, not completely convinced, but he understood what Cas was saying. He just wished someone would explain it to his heart.

# Chapter 11

Less

-

Another nurse came in to do bed stretches with Cas and Dean excused himself, walking into the hall. He saw Tessa leaning against the nurse's station, examining some medication, and pushing her hair back. She was extremely beautiful, he thought. Even if she was tired she never showed it – and her smile always made her glow.

She looked up as he approached, smiling a little and jotting something on her clipboard.

“He doing his exercises?”

“Mhmm,” Dean said. “He doesn't like when I watch. It makes him feel weird.”

Tessa laughed lightly, shaking her head.

“Why do you like him so much?” Dean asked, and Tessa shrugged.

“I think you can tell me the answer to that, but, I guess it was because he was lonely. None of the nurses really – they didn't really talk to him. What he has, it's getting a kind of stigma and, well, people don't know what's happening here. You hear about these boys dying and they live a certain way and people get scared.”

“Yeah,” Dean rasped. “I know.”

Tessa shrugged again.

“He just wanted someone to talk to, mostly about you.”

Tessa gave him a look.

Dean smiled vaguely and fiddled with a pen on the counter.

“What's happening to him?”

“A fungus, or a tumor...we don't...” she paused, weighing her words. “Dr. Ether doesn't really know. It could be anything and at this point. He doesn't think it's worth pursuing. Any more in-depth testing could seriously stress his system.”

“It's been barely two weeks,” Dean said. “He was supposed to have more –.”

Tessa seamed her mouth shut, trying to remain professional.

“These things just happen,” she consoled as best she could, “but regardless of the timing, he's going to need you. Now more than ever. He's starting to become delirious, and his memory is coming in and out. When we were in there...”

She stopped, covering her mouth, forcing herself not to cry.

“Tessa you have to tell me.”

“Dr. Ether asked him what the last thing he remembered was, and he said he had dropped you off

at the base.”

Sweat broke out on Dean’s face, making it damp.

“That was over ten years ago.”

“It’s inconsistent. One minute he seems able to remember, the next, he isn’t. We just don’t know. Dean, you have to be able to handle it.”

Dean’s fingernails bit into his palms.

“I just want it to be over,” he found himself saying, and then immediately he was ashamed of it.

Tessa nodded.

“That’s totally natural,” she whispered, “If you want, I can give you some tips...just to, make it easier for him?”

“I would really like that,” Dean rasped.

They spent the next twenty minutes discussing it, Dean listening closely as she explained what was happening to Cas’ body, how soon he wouldn’t be sleeping as much, and eating less. She talked about the anxiety his breathing placed on him, about how important it was to keep him from overexciting himself.

By the end of it Dean felt like if anything, he could do something. He wasn’t totally powerless. He could help Cas. He could do the right thing.

“Tessa?” he said suddenly as she walked away. She turned over her shoulder and Dean licked his lips for a moment before saying it, “Do you have any way to get a hold of a projector?”

---

Cas didn’t know what was happening when they brought up the small table and set the projector on it. Dean didn’t know why he had brought the reels along. Something had just told him that he should.

*When that day comes, I’ll thank you...*

He sat up, watching as Tessa placed his glasses gently on his face, laughing when he blinked blearily in confusion. Sam and Jess were there as well, sitting side by side, Sam’s arm around Jess’s shoulder. A friend was watching the baby, they said, when Cas asked, patiently answering the question over and over as Cas asked it again and again.

“What...are you doing?” he breathed, watching Dean click one of the reels into place. He glanced at Cas as Tessa took her place by the wall, turning the lights off. They had taken the pictures off the wall and as Dean started up the projector, adjusting the lens, he leaned towards Cas’ bed.

“Taking you to the beach,” he replied.

Cas’ face took on a look of total surprise and he stared at the wall. Dean knew he hadn’t breathed for a moment because he couldn’t hear it – that telltale swollen sound.

The projector picked up, and suddenly, they were at the beach.

Dean wasn’t watching the wall though, he was watching Cas.

The shadows played over his face, gleaming off his glasses, and his eyes were wide and childlike as he watched the scene unfold. Jess gasped when Cas came into view on the wall, his hair thick and shiny, his whole body glowing in the sun under his windbreaker. The camera panned down the empty beach, looking at the water, and then up to look at the gulls.

The scenes changed. Dean was standing beside a tide pool, pointing to a sea urchin and Cas, holding the camera looked at it and then at Dean's face. Dean grinned, and said something he couldn't remember saying.

"That's you," Cas whispered, and Dean felt for his hand on the blanket, taking it. It wasn't as warm as usual, and the grip Cas had was weakly if barely there at all.

"That's me," he ascertained, and Sam glanced back at them, his smile watery, even in the dark.

They wandered over the beach, sat down on the blanket, and Cas read a paperback, trying to shove Dean away when he bothered him. Dean recorded Cas taking pictures with his Polaroid, the sun and the cliffs. Dean held the camera out as he kissed him and Jessica covered her mouth with her hands. Dean stared at Cas, watching the tears roll down his face, his chest rising and falling, his eyes fixed on the water. On Dean. On the beach. Dean knew, without a doubt, that he didn't remember most of it. His face was full of some strange, beautiful expression, eyes darting around, eating everything up.

The reel ended and Dean fed in the next one, and it was much the same for a while. Just the two of them joking around, but then the scene became far more familiar.

Cas stood and walked a little ways from the camera before turning around. He smiled, and it was so clear what he was saying.

*I love you.*

Cas marveled, his whole body tingling. He knew that. He had been there. He remembered the feeling, the way it had felt to look at Dean and say it. Like a secret he would always carry. A heart within his heart. He was looking at Dean, not the camera. *I love you.* He'd waved and laughed and smiled, but it wasn't as important as what he'd said. *I love you.* He'd shouted it.

*I love you.*

"That's me," he whispered. It was him. That was him. *I love you.* Him. He felt Dean squeeze his hand.

"That's you."

"That's us," Cas breathed, and Dean looked away for a moment to compose himself. "That's us."

It was *them*.

The waves silently slid in and out, and when Dean looked at them he could almost hear the sound they made every time Cas took another breath. Cas tossed a shell to the sea and the tide carried it away.

Three days later he was unable to form complete sentences. Whether it was his mind or his capacity to breathe, Dean would never know.

He complained about his vision as well, and Tessa told him they'd do what they could. He seemed to understand and didn't mention it again.

Dean talked to him the whole day; told him about a house on an island. A white picket fence. Two old people bickering on a front porch. Filled the endless silences with his own voice, recounting stories, telling him about anything he could think of.

Cas looked at him for a long time, breathing slowly, his skeletal arms awkwardly resting against his sides. He stared out at Dean and smiled, his eyes blue and twinkling. Dean had to wonder how much he could actually see at the time. It didn't matter, he reminded himself. Anything was always going to be better than nothing. Even if he didn't know what Dean was talking about, Cas looked happy, and that was enough. He ran out of words at some point, and Cas had moved for the first time in hours to reach out and brush his cool hand over Dean's sleeve. Dean covered the chilled fingers with his own.

"You know that medallion I had?" Dean said. "It was...it was supposed to keep me from changing. It was supposed to keep me who I was."

Cas' fingers twitched, eyes trained on the far wall.

"I guess I figured that out too late," Dean whispered, brushing his hand under his eyes. "I'm so sorry I couldn't be who you needed me to be, Cas."

Cas said something he couldn't make out, the last syllable the trailing "...x" sound of the tide pulling in over rocks.

---

Cas died on a Thursday.

It was sunny.

Late afternoon.

Beautiful California weather.

The time leading up was quiet. His glassy eyes sat sunken in his head, half open, his body limp on the bed. He made sound sometimes, or raised a hand to rake at his gown, over his chest. At some point during that night Tessa had come in to check his IV. Dean had lifted his eyes long enough to watch her touch Cas' hand, and he knew when she turned away she was wiping her face.

"Can I lie with him?" Dean said, breaking the rattling sound of Cas' breathing. Tessa nodded, still pretending to read something. Dean pushed the chair back and pulled the rail down. He eased himself into the bed, pulling Cas onto his shoulder.

"Mind his head," Tessa started, but she had to cut herself off. Dean pulled the blanket over Cas' lap, resting his cheek on Cas' dry, brittle, hair. Cas breathed, like waves crashing. Tessa ducked her head, touching the end of the bed, her white hands blending into the sheets in the dark.

"It won't be too much longer," she said brokenly, and Dean didn't say anything, but folded his hand over Cas', rubbing the papery skin with his thumb. Tessa stood at the end of the bed for a long time, and she wiped her eye with her fingertips. "I'm so sorry." Her voice was teetering, about to shatter. The professional edge had long since gone.

Dean shook his head, listening to her footsteps disappear down the hall.

In the emptiness that followed, Dean found his mouth open but no words would come out. He

stroked Cas' thin shoulder, all the way down to the sharp stab of his elbow. His fingers shook where they rested on his skin.

"It's alright," he said to the stillness. Another wave broke when Cas breathed. "It's alright. You can let go, I know – I know you're holding on, because you're worried. You're too stubborn, Cas, and I know you're holding on for me, but I'm going to do the right thing this time. I'm not – I'm not going to make you wait on me again."

Cas choked and Dean shifted him, and it seemed like something fluttered in Cas, some recognition that had been lost for hours. He watched TV 'til morning, Cas still leaning against him, until, at last, he kicked his leg restlessly, his breathing increasing to an impossible rate with the fluid that had built up in his chest.

Dean knew.

"It's ok," Dean assured him. "You know. You know I love you. You know I do, so it's ok. It's ok to let you go now."

He shook his head again, trying to clear the tears away but they wouldn't stop. Tessa had said that hearing was the last thing to go. Just keep talking to him. He could be anxious, or scared.

"Don't be scared," Dean blurted, "you're doing so good, Cas. You're doing so good." He racked his brain for something, anything, and suddenly he remembered Cas' face looking up at him.

*"So why is it your favorite song?"*

*Cas' hand padded over his chin. Dean never lost track of his eyes, even when Cas looked at his own hand, shy. He nudged at Dean's mouth with his index finger, moving so his palm was cupping his jaw. Dean grinned against Cas' skin, unable to keep his smile contained. The blue eyed boy across from him was so beautiful, and he didn't know it. He practically shone; his soul glittered with something blue and white and Dean wanted to wrap himself in it. Something like God's grace, something like the blue and green smudginess of sea shells or glass bottles.*

*"I just - I like songs about love," he breathed a laugh, and Dean wrapped that laugh around his finger like a lace ribbon. Songs about love he hadn't cared about before, but now, he wouldn't have said anything but that. He wanted another smile, he wanted another dreamy look in Cas' eyes, so he'd sang along. He had wanted him to fall more in love, because nothing was going to hurt anymore if that happened. He had convinced himself, young, and stupid. This boy was going to make this world turn and stars would fall like rain.*

Dean had heard it before, hadn't he? On the radio. Somewhere. Somewhere before, but at that moment Cas was looking at him and Dean had never loved him like he did sitting across the table, watching him drift away, listening. The one he hummed as he traced Dean's arm when the fell asleep, the one he played 'til he ruined the record.

"Remember?" he hushed. "You remember that? In that little apartment? You know I still – I still can't remember where I heard that song. I just sort of knew the words though." Cas breathed harshly again and Dean adjusted his sweater a little, smoothing it down with his palm. He watched his own hand and couldn't bring himself to do it again for a moment.

"Wise men say," he began, "only fools rush in..." He slid his hand to Cas' lap, closing it around Cas' cold fingers.

"But I can't help-" Cas jerked, gasping, hand scrambling at nothing. His eyes were wide and unseeing, and his legs twitched. Dean stared at the wall, holding him tightly, "I-I can't help,

*falling in love, with you.”*

There was a terrible sound. He sucked in air and it churned in his chest, the noise thick and wet, and when he exhaled it hissed, like waves crashing against rocks, like the tide slithering back towards the sea.

*Whenever you're scared...*

Cas stopped breathing entirely.

He could feel Cas' heart beat once, and then the grand pause. Another beat. *He raised the camera to his eye, staring through the view finder - .* The framed pictures on the wall were blurring together, spilling out of their borders and mingling on the dull wallpaper, a watercolor mess. Cas didn't move. *Cas turned towards the camera, smiling -* He had to be brave. He had to be brave – he had to be brave like he couldn't before. *He watched his mouth uncurl -* He promised he'd take care of him. *It was like watching flowers open in slow motion -* That'd he'd always take care of him. *He took a breath -* His boy. *Eyes on the camera -* His boy.

*I love you.*

Dean was trying to remember what to say.

“It's ok,” his voice cracked. “It's ok - *like a river flows, surely to the sea,*” he sang, and the monitor was screaming, and Dean had to sing louder so Cas could hear him, bending his face as close as he could, pressing it against his temple, hoping the words would go straight into him. “*Darling so it goes, some things are meant to be ...*”

*Further up the beach, laughing now, glinting like diamonds, the light bouncing off and returning to his eyes, the glare of the sun off of his glasses, making him shine, making his soul shine -*

“*So take my hand,*” he sang, and his voice was falling apart, he could barely hear himself over the wail of the machinery, “*take my whole life too...*” His fingers remained in the hollows of his cheeks, thumb brushing over his lips.

*- he'd cupped his hands and shouted -*

The noise peaked, and Dean was silent, unable to continue, tears falling into Cas' hair. His cheek was pressed into Dean's shoulder, eyes staring blankly past Dean's chest, shining out from his colorless face, two half-moons peering out from under his dark lashes.

*I love you.*

Crash.

*I love you -*

Crash.

*I love –*

Dean sat stone still. He wondered if the flat-line was something he was just making up. He wondered if it was something his mind had just conjured because that's what you always saw in movies. He couldn't remember the last part of the song. He couldn't hear anything but the monitor, still going, the noise passing through him and everywhere. He didn't move. Didn't flinch, didn't breathe. He simply waited there, waited for some tremble that would wake him up, but it never came.

He was vaguely aware of Tessa's shadow as she came into the room, the doctor following. Tessa went to the monitor and read something out, looking at her watch. She turned it off and the room was pitched into silence. Dean stared at the same spot on the wall, his arms still around Cas' body, his cheek still leaned into his hair.

Tessa came over to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Dean?"

He moved his head towards the sound of her voice, but his eyes didn't move from the wall.

She squeezed her hand on his arm

"Dean, we need you to get up now."

He nodded, slowly letting go of Cas and letting him sink into the pillows, the last warmth of his body pressed into Dean's arms. Dean stood, Tessa helping him, and once he was standing he turned.

He looked at Cas' face, and he felt his body start to fall apart.

"Oh god," he rasped. Tessa took him in her arms, trying to lead him out of the room, but Dean couldn't move.

"Come on Dean, shhh..." Tessa attempted but Dean didn't really hear it. He was watching them gently roll Cas to a more stable position. They slipped the IV out of his arm and removed the tape. A nurse unfolded a clean white sheet and began to drape it over him.

He couldn't move. He – he couldn't –

"No, I love him," he said weakly. "I love him." He pushed back against Tessa, his legs shaking. "You don't – you don't understand," he tried again, but no one was listening. "That's – that's my baby," he whimpered, "please, that's my baby."

"God, Jesus," Dean, wept, his knees buckling under him. "I love him -"

"Tessa sunk to the floor with him as Dean sobbed into her shoulder, gripping her arms so hard he could feel his thumbs pop. He screamed into her and she wrapped her arms around his back, one hand moving to the back of his head. Her cap came unpinned and fell to the floor.

"Dean, shhh, you have to get a hold of yourself!" she continued, and Dean sobbed again. She stopped talking after that. "Shh," she hushed, rocking them as the doctor and nurses left. Dean heaved for air, and everything was silent.

The reel clicked and stuttered.

Cas' shell sank to the bottom of the ocean.

---

Sam walked down the hall and stopped when he saw the back of Dean's head in a chair in the lobby. He was flipping through a magazine, turning the pages listlessly without really reading. Sam came up behind him, sitting down in a chair beside him.

"I didn't bother calling back. I left as soon as I got the message – How is he?" he asked, tucking

his long legs under the chair.

Dean didn't say anything, continuing to turn the pages, staring at the happy people and the loud advertisements for toothpaste and eye drops.

"He's fine, I guess," he said after a long moment, still not looking up.

"Can I go see him?" Sam continued and Dean shrugged.

"Probably not," he whispered. "He died over an hour ago."

Sam was about to stand, but he found his hands were glued to the arms of the chair.

"What?" he choked.

"He went into cardiac arrest about an hour ago, maybe longer. I don't really remember."

Sam looked at Dean's face, trying to gauge his reaction. He looked calm. He turned a page, glancing at the text.

"Dean?"

"What."

"...I – how are you doing?"

"I'm fine."

"Seriously, I mean –."

Dean finally lifted his eyes and then went back to looking at the magazine.

"We need to get his suit."

"We can worry about that later," Sam hushed, touching his arm. Dean jerked it away, the magazine falling to the floor. He stared at the ruffled pages, his heart speeding up.

"We need to get it – the one he wore to his sister's wedding. We've gotta get his suit."

He stood up and walked towards the elevators, Sam jogging after him, grabbing his arm.

"Dean, you need to think about yourself for just two seconds!" he pleaded. "You haven't left the hospital in weeks!"

"It doesn't matter!" Dean shouted, and the nurses at the station snapped their heads up. "None of it matters!"

"Dean –."

Dean wrestled out of Sam's grip, wiping his face, getting in the elevator. He punched the button repeatedly, and when it finally opened on the main floor he tore out of it. He got on his motorcycle and drove to the address that Balthazar had given him on their way back from the restaurant.

Dean wiped his eyes again, starting the bike up and tearing down the road. He knew he was speeding, but he hoped someone would stop him. Maybe he could make a fuss; maybe they'd shoot him. Maybe a bus would hit him if he ran the light. But it was quiet.

The world was quiet.

It just kept going, time kept going, and it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that the world got to keep turning without Cas. It wasn't right. He'd only gotten a month. Barely a month.

He was crying so hard he couldn't see, so he pulled off at a small park. He pulled into the nearest parking space and tore his helmet off, leaning against the handles of his bike. He cried in the worst way; he didn't make a sound, his mouth open and vocal chords strained, but there wasn't enough air to carry anything.

"Are you alright?"

He looked up, still sobbing, trying to mop at his face. A black woman was gazing at him evenly. He shook his head, and the woman came forward to touch his arm.

"I asked are you alright?"

He shook his head.

"I'm lost!" he cried desperately, holding out the slip. She took it from him, shuffling closer. She was wearing a little uniform and her name tag said '*Olivia*', and as she scanned the piece of paper she nodded, patting his arm again.

"Oh, honey, you're not far off!" she smiled, her curly hair bobbing in the light breeze. "You just follow this road right here, and make a right. This street should be right there. Just follow it right on down!"

Dean nodded, and he caught sight of her bracelet – a yellow snake touching its own tail. He looked back up at her face and she fished a handkerchief out of her bag, handing it to him.

"You ain't lost," she mumbled, and he took it, her fingers curling over it. He noticed small columbine flowers embroidered into it as he brought it to his face, wiping harshly at his skin.

"You be careful, alright honey?" she said, and Dean thanked her, swallowing the lump in his throat down as he held the handkerchief out to her. The woman insisted he keep it and then continued on her way, shuffling in the growing twilight down the sidewalk into a little neighborhood.

Dean followed her directions and soon he was stopped in front of a small apartment complex. He walked up the stairs to the second floor and to the door that matched the number on the card, slipping the key into the lock and opening the door with his shoulder.

It was quiet and dark. It was bigger than the apartment they'd shared in Sacramento, and the furniture was better. It was comfortable and slightly modern, no doubt more of Balthazar's influence than Cas'. He wandered in, turning the light on. The kitchen was neat; there were clean glasses in the sink. A bowl. There was a dark wood kitchen table and a small sideboard against the back wall of the living room. He walked past it and saw pictures of Cas with Balthazar. Photographs of Balthazar's family. Cas with a little terrier dog. Cas with people Dean didn't know.

Dean wiped his nose on his sleeve and walked past, stumbling into the back, into the bedroom. The clock ticked on the wall and there was a book on one of the nightstands and a little potted plant that needed to be watered. Dean continued moving into the closet, not dwelling on the bed.

He stood in front of the closet and opened the mirrored sliding doors, revealing what had to be Cas' things; the other side was empty.

He reached out and touched a shirt. A sweater. Felt the fabric under his fingers. He pulled the hangers aside, looking, and as he did, he caught sight of something he had missed coming in reflected in the mirror. In the corner of the living room, just visible through the bedroom door was Cas' turntable.

Dean let his hands fall to his sides and he turned around, walking back into the living room. He looked at the old thing, still in perfect condition, and bent down to wipe dust off of the corner with his finger, lifting the case cover up to reveal the record inside.

He saw the album and he shook his head, and without any more thought he turned it on, the needle picking up right where it had left off.

*"Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go..."*

Elvis swelled into the empty apartment and Dean stood, the last rays of the sun casting blue shadows on the white walls.

*"...you have made, my life complete, and I love you so..."*

Dean's mouth screwed up as he listened.

"I can dig Elvis," he murmured to the empty apartment. With the words still drifting on behind him, he returned to the closet, pushing clothes aside. Cas' suit was all the way at the back, and Dean had to push by all his clothes to get to it, and as he reached to pull it out, his foot knocked against something that rattled.

Testing again, Dean frowned. He pulled the suit out and laid it carefully on the bed, going back to bend down. He set a pair of Cas' shoes aside and reached around them to the back corner, his hand touching something smooth and slightly sharp. A corner of a shoe box.

Dean grabbed it and pulled it out, a flurry of dust coming with it.

*"Love me tender, love me long, take me to your heart..."*

The floor creaked as he sat back, pulling the box closer to him. It was heavy, and whatever was in it bumped around unevenly.

*"For it's there that I belong, and we'll never part..."*

He remembered Cas' sudden last word and his fingers danced over the lid's edge. Taking the flat of his hand he smoothed his palm across the top, the dust coming off to reveal the word 'Dean' written in neat script.

*"Love me tender, love me long, tell me you are mine..."*

Dean shook the dust off of his hand and carefully lifted the lid off, setting it aside.

His heart beat into his throat as he stared down at the pieces of paper folded up in it, mingled with what he could tell were photographs. Polaroids.

Dean carefully lifted the top piece of paper and held it in his hands. It was actually two pieces of paper folded together, and from the back he could see the blue pen blurred into Cas' cursive handwriting.

He unfolded it gently, and what he had suspected was confirmed.

March 1980

Dear Dean,

Dean wanted to fold it back up, but it had bloomed in his hands. His fingers shook as he held it open, unable to stop reading.

*I was thinking about shells today. I saw a woman with a shirt that had them, and I remembered the beach, and you, and this box. I went back and read through all the letters, and for the first time, in a long time, I wasn't sad about it – not in the same way.*

*I've been so tired lately. I'm so tired of being angry, and sad, because that wasn't the point. I'm sad because I'll never get to tell you certain things again. I'm sad about that, but I'm not sad like I was when you left. I think I held onto that too long. I confused it with loving you, and those aren't the same. Being sad about the things I miss isn't loving you. It never was. Loving you was so much bigger than that. .*

*I don't think I can stop loving you. I think it's a part of me now, and it's never leaving. It makes me who I am, and I used to think this crippled me, but I don't think it does anymore. Loving you has given you back to me. I've missed you. The old you. You never really came home, and I understand that now, and I know it wasn't your fault or mine or anyone's. It was just circumstances we couldn't avoid, but I've realized that just because we ended the way we did doesn't define what we were before.*

*To have those memories back is such a precious thing. To have that part of you back with me – it's unimaginable. I was thinking about shells, and I was thinking about that day at the beach and I can remember sitting on the blanket looking at the water, and you asked me what I was thinking.*

*I was thinking about how afraid I was that I was never going to love you as much as I did then. That the moment was going to get washed out, that I would never be able to experience what it was like to know that I loved you as much as I did again...*

Cas' words seemed to drop off the page before starting again.

*I'm sorry that things didn't work out the way we wanted them to. I'm sorry – I'm sorry we weren't as equipped to deal with the hand we got. The fact that we didn't get to do the little plans hurts more than the big ones, sometimes. It wouldn't have mattered about a house or the island. Sometimes I stop myself at work and realize I'm never going to sit in Van's noodle house with you, and I don't know exactly – I'm so terrible at letters, Dean. I'm glad you never had to read them when you were in Vietnam, they were all so terrible and boring and wordy.*

*I think –*

*I think that, the point of it all, is that the moment at the beach? I had never really understood who I was until then. That's who I am. That person, and there, right there, next to me, that was you. That's who you are.*

*It's so wonderful to know that I didn't lose you. That we were always right where we were supposed to be the whole time. This whole time I thought I'd lost you, and there you were...*

*Memories are good that way. I can remember us, and I can keep living. I can keep going and always know right where to find you when I miss you.*

*I miss you all the time.*

*I want you to realize this someday. All of that about us. You don't – you don't have to be guilty,*

*and I know you are, and I understand why everything happened the way it did. It just happened.  
We just – it just happened, Dean, and it's alright. I'm alright.*

*I'll be okay.*

*Once, you told me it didn't seem right to say goodbye. Not really.  
I thought I'd have to – I thought I'd have to let go of everything I loved about you, but I don't, and  
you were right, and wouldn't you be pleased with yourself to know.*

*The truth of it has never been clearer to me, my darling.*

*And you are, always, my darling.*

*Yours,*

*Cas*

Dean read past this, to the very bottom, where Cas' handwriting had changed slightly.

He read it and let the letter rest on his leg.

*"See you then"*

## Epilogue

April, 1981

-

It was the last place that Dean wanted to be, but he knew that Cas would want him be there, and he was only doing this for Cas. He had never met anyone from Cas' family, and he had only spoken to his brother, Gabriel, on the phone. There had been pictures, but mainly they were of Rachel, Cas' favorite sibling. His father was dead, and he had never heard much about his mother. He already felt out of place and they hadn't even left for the cemetery yet.

Sam was seated on the couch with Abigail, kissing her face and laughing when he went downstairs, and Jess approached, coming to rest her hand on his chest. She smiled softly and adjusted his tie, stretching to kiss his cheek.

"You look handsome." She touched his shoulder and pulled away, smoothing her hands down her dress.

He smiled at her and Sam got off of the couch, Abigail tugging at his hair as he held her. Jess took her from him, and Abigail calmed down, quieting as Jess gently swayed with her.

"Are you sure you want us to come?" Sam questioned, resting his hand on Dean's shoulder, squeezing. Dean breathed and smoothed his thumb over the collar of Sam's shirt, nodding.

"Yeah. He would've wanted it."

Jess handed Abigail back to Sam, and he smiled when he took her, nosing at her face. She squealed and patted his cheeks, and Dean smiled. Jess went upstairs, saying that she needed to make sure her hair looked nice before they left. They had time. The funeral didn't start for another hour, and the cemetery was close by.

Abigail calmed down and tugged at the collar of Sam's coat.

"It's crazy, huh?"

Dean nodded, scrubbing a hand down his face.

"He was doing so well. I just thought that maybe - *maybe*-" the last words fell offand Dean pressed his fingers against his eyes. Sam grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him toward him, and Jess appeared from the stairs to take Abigail again. Dean clutched at the lapels of his coat as Sam wrapped his arms around him, completely surrounding him and holding him against his chest.

Sam hushed him and smoothed his hand along his back. Dean knew what he wanted to say. *He's in a better place, he's not in pain anymore.* He didn't. Dean didn't believe in those sorts of things. The hopes of God and Heaven were the luxuries of men who hadn't seen boys die. Who hadn't held them and watched them suffer at the hands of a random and reckless fate. He'd buried those things with Adam, and now, more of him would be buried with Cas. Sam just hugged him close and hushed him until he knew he could control himself.

Dean pulled back and pawed at his face, rubbing the tears away.

"God." His voice broke, and he swiped at his nose with the back of his hand. "I don't know-"

"Dean." Sam stopped him before he could start, hands resting on his shoulders and holding him at arm's length. "You're going to go. You *have* to go. You know Cas would want you there."

"But his family's going to be there."

He wanted an out. He couldn't do this, he wasn't strong enough to do this. After the hospital, he wanted to give up.

"I don't care, Dean. You're stronger than this, I know you are."

Dean lifted his hands and curled his fingers around Sam's wrists, pulling his hands away and nodding. He had to do this. He didn't care if Cas' family was there, and he didn't care if they didn't want him there. He was going to go, and he was going to see Cas off. He was going to do it right.

"Yeah, yeah." He smiled weakly and rubbed at his eyes. "Let's go."

They got into Sam's car, and Dean sat in the backseat with Abigail. He tickled her toes and she squealed, kicking her feet at him. He laughed softly and stroked his hand over her head, her thin hair tickling his palm, and she cooed, yawning and closing her eyes, leaning back in the car seat. Dean smiled and shifted, turning to look out of the window. Sam and Jess' neighborhood was nice, full of large, beautiful houses. Cas would've loved them; he always enjoyed houses that looked vintage.

He patted his pocket and the paper inside made a soft crumpling sound beneath his touch. He pushed his hand into his pocket to fish it out, and when he pulled it out, he unfolded it, smoothing it against thigh. It was an old photo that he had managed to find in his stuff. He didn't remember taking it when he left, but for some reason, he felt the need to keep when he did find it. The date on the back said it was from 1969, the year that Dean was drafted and shipped out. It was a photo of him before Dean's birthday was called on the television.

It was a lazy Sunday, and Cas had gotten new film for his camera. Dean had bought it for him the previous day, surprising him with it. He was always so excited when he got new film for his camera, because he loved taking pictures of everything. It made him so happy, made him smile so wide, and Dean loved when he was able to make Cas smile. It was hot, all the windows in the apartment were open, and neither of them were wearing shirts. Cas' hair stuck to his forehead, and Dean smoothed it away every chance he got. Cas would laugh and pull away for a moment before moving back in peck Dean's lips.

They stayed in the apartment that day, and some point in the haze, Cas had snapped a photo of Dean, laughing and being happy. He hadn't had any idea that Cas had taken until he heard the camera whirr and spit the picture out, but it was a picture that he actually liked. Cas immediately wrote the year on the back of it, and after Dean was drafted, he had told Cas to keep it with him, always. To look at it every chance that he got.

He smoothed his thumbs over the edge of the photo, looking down at a much younger version of himself. The version of himself that was in love and much more happier, because he was able to wake up every morning with Cas beside him. He was able to kiss him anytime that he wanted in the comfort of their home; eat dinner together and watch television together. Laugh together. He swallowed thickly and folded the photo back up, pushing it into his pocket.

*...and there, right there beside me, that was you...*

Sam and Jess didn't say much as they drove to the cemetery. He could see Jess nervously smoothing her hands over the front of her dress, looking in the rearview mirror at him every chance that she got. He caught her eyes once, smiling softly, and she smiled back, turning her

attention away to mess with the radio, changing the station until she found a song that she liked. Dean clenched his fists and then unclenched them, smoothing his palms along his thighs, the material of his slacks coarse beneath his touch. He looked back out of the window, and he could hear Abigail stir in the car seat beside him. He turned and looked down at her, and she smiled up at him, stretching her arms up.

He touched her hand and she curled her tiny fingers around his index finger, kicking her feet.

"You look just like your mama," he whispered, to her and she blinked. The car came to a halt and he looked out of the window. There were a few cars parked near the cemetery, and he could see a small mass of people near a casket in the distance. He closed his eyes for a moment, paralyzed by the emotions welling in him. It was happening. He was actually there. They were actually burying Cas today.

He hadn't realized that Sam and Jess had gotten out of the car until the back door opened and Sam reached in. He jumped and opened his eyes, and Sam smiled at him as he helped Abigail out of her car seat. He smiled back, even if it was a little shaky, and opened the door, stepping out and walking to the other side of the car.

"You didn't have to come, y'know."

"Moral support," Jess said as she moved to stand beside him, taking his hand in her own and squeezing.

They were stopped by a blonde girl before they even made it halfway to where the ceremony was being held. She stood in front of Dean, arms crossed across her chest, narrowing her eyes. For a moment, he didn't recognize who she was, but then he remembered the photo that Balthazar had showed him.

"Rachel?"

"You must be Dean." Her whole body relaxed, and Dean saw she was clutching tissue in her hand. Her mascara was blotchy and caked at the corners of her eyes, but she didn't seem to care. "Cas told me about you at my wedding," she added, shaking her head in disbelief. She brought the tissue to her mouth, and Dean could tell she was trying not to cry as her throat bobbed.

"Did he?" Dean laughed shaking his head. God, Cas had really talked about him to his family, even after everything that he had done?

"He wouldn't shut up about you!" she laughed, the sound jerking out of her, muffled by the tissue and her hand. Dean's fingers twitched. She sounded just like Cas.

"He would never shut up about anything," Dean amended, and she laughed harder, but the sound broke into something else. Dean's smile wavered and she closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around his back, pressing her face into him. Her shoulders shook and Dean froze before he automatically lifted his hand to the back of her neck, bending his face to her hair, returning the hug. She gave him a squeeze before she pulled away, mopping her eyes with the tissue. Her cheeks were cherry red from crying and her lipstick was hazy, but she was just as beautiful as Cas had made her out to be.

"I wanted to thank you," she continued, "for...for taking care of him. I know you must think little of me." Her lip trembled, "What sister would abandon their brother to something like that, but, I took one look at him and I couldn't –" She cut herself off. "He didn't want me to see him like that," she cried, composing herself. Dean nodded, touching her shoulder.

"Cas thought the world of you," he murmured and she nodded. "And I think he really wanted you to be happy in a way he couldn't be, and if that made him stay out of your way, it wasn't because he didn't love you."

She agreed with him.

"I told him I loved him," she breathed, dabbing at her cheeks with the damp tissue. "I did. I told him I loved him before I left, so he knew."

"He knew," Dean assured her.

She was quiet again, fidgeting, and Dean knew she was about to say something else.

"Michael won't be happy to see you," she whispered, "But he promised me he wouldn't do anything inappropriate. He's all about appearances, anyway, so I don't think you have anything to worry about. I don't know about Gabriel...he's - he's very confused by all of this." She patted her skirt nervously and then glanced at Dean with an expression he recognized as shame.

Of course they wouldn't be. They were the reasons that Dean didn't want to come in the first place. He knew they weren't going to be happy. He didn't want dwell on it.

"This is my brother," he motioned to Sam, and Rachel turned to smile at him, shaking his hand. "And his wife, Jess, and my niece, Abigail." Rachel and Jess exchanged few words, and then she was leading them to where the ceremony was being held. It was small, just the five of them, Gabriel, and Michael. Of course they weren't thrilled to see Dean, but they ignored him through it for the most part.

The ceremony was short, and once it was over, Michael and Gabriel took their leave without a word. They didn't seem to want to stay long enough to watch Cas' casket get lowered into the ground, but Rachel didn't leave. She stood beside Dean as he brushed his hand over the casket, pulling it away to fish the picture out of his pocket.

"What's that?" she asked quietly, and Dean unfolded it and showed it to her.

"He kept it while I was away in 'Nam, and I just wanted him to have it now."

She smiled and nodded, gently touching his arm before turning away. He folded the photo back up and pushed it into one of the crevices of the casket before it was lowered down. Sam slipped his arm around his shoulders and pulled him back, and Dean walked back to the car with him. Jess was already situated inside, and Dean climbed into the backseat, pressing the heel of his palm against his forehead. Jess turned around in her seat and took one of his hands, holding it between both of hers.

"It'll be okay, Dean."

He wiped at his eyes with his free hand.

"Yeah. I'll be okay."

---

He hadn't known what to do with the box at first. It had sat on a shelf in his apartment for days before he finally took it down and opened it again.

He read the letters. They stretched back to 1971, most of them written in the thirteen months Dean

had been in active duty, but there were a few peppered between those and the last. It was so odd how clearly he could hear Cas' voice in his head, and, coupled with the pictures, see him, but for a long time he didn't know what to do about them other than let them sit idly on his bookshelf.

For Sam and Jess's anniversary they had asked him to come down and watch Abby while they went to La Jolla for the weekend, and Dean hadn't even hesitated, packing up bag as soon as he was off the phone. He adored his niece and he could think of nothing he wanted to do more than have her to himself for a few days. As he was packing he found his eyes kept wandering to the box, and after a half hour of glancing at it he finally took it down and placed it beside his things.

He'd bought Bobby's old truck from him after Cas' died. It just was more convenient now that he wasn't riding constantly, and he liked it.

Sam and Jess's house was in the suburbs, and passed right by the cemetery where Cas was buried, and it took no thought to decide to stop off on his way up there. He hadn't been in a few weeks with work, and he wanted to make sure the flowers he'd brought last time weren't worn out.

Hiking up the grass towards his grave, he caught site of a woman wearing a yellow Macintosh standing there already, her dark hair blowing slightly in the wind.

"Tessa?" Dean said as he came to stop and she turned, her delicate hand over her face.

"Dean!" she exclaimed, facing him, her skirt swirling around her knees in the wind.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," Dean rushed, clearing his throat and glancing at Cas' grave. "You're just the last person I'd expect to see here."

"I can't believe we ran into each other – I'm just up here for a few days. My cousin wanted me to come visit her new house, and I hadn't gotten the chance to come visit Cas yet."

She looked towards the plot, tucking a sliver of hair behind her ear.

"They keep coming in, you know," she murmured. "Boys just like him." She played with her purse absently, her voice taking a lower tone.

"We lose them every time." Her hair moved as she shook her head. "I've never seen anything like it."

Dean remained silent.

"Thank you for calling me," Dean said suddenly. "After everything."

Tessa smiled.

"I figured you could have used someone who had been there. Thank you for telling me where he was buried. You didn't have to do that."

"He adored you," Dean shrugged. "You were some heavy competition."

Tessa rolled her eyes.

"He just had something about him, I don't know what it was. Like the glory had reached out and touched him," she said after a pause. "Even when he was so sick...I don't know. You could just see it in him. There were times I thought I saw his soul."

Dean nodded.

“But you knew that,” Tessa added, and Dean laughed sadly.

“Did he tell you how it was love at first sight?”

“No!” she grinned, her hands folded into the pockets of her Macintosh.

Dean grinned back and then they both looked at Cas’ grave again when it dawned on Dean.

“Would you like to see pictures of him? Before?”

Tessa’s eyes gleamed.

“That would be absolutely lovely,” she said softly. She followed Dean down to the truck, and Dean opened the cab door, pulling the box towards him and rifling through it. He pulled out a few of the numerous photographs and moved to stand beside Tessa as he showed them.

“This is at a race...that’s him and Sam,” Dean pointed and Tessa raised a hand to her mouth, gently taking it from Dean’s hand, looking towards the next one.

“He was so cute,” she whispered and Dean smiled.

“I know.”

He insisted she take the photos with her and Tessa’s eyes welled with tears when she held them.

“I know it may not seem like much,” she said gently, wiping a few tears away, lifting her head to look at Dean, “but I don’t think people like Cas ever really say good bye.”

Dean hugged her.

“People like Cas say ‘*see you then*’,” he whispered into her ear and Tessa hugged him harder. They parted, and Dean drove on to Sam’s house. Jessica gave him the list of do’s and don’ts, but Dean knew how to handle his Abby, and Jessica thanked him approximately a thousand times as Sam dragged her out the door to the car.

Dean helped Abigail wave bye-bye at the window as Sam and Jess pulled out of the driveway, Jessica waving back at them.

He bounced Abigail against him and she laughed, hiding her face in his neck and laughing when he tickled her. She was so precious, her little blonde pigtails tied up in red ribbon, her big green eyes framed by long pretty lashes that cast shadows on her rosy cheeks.

Dean put her on the floor to play with her toys, watching her from the kitchen table while he warmed up a bit of casserole for himself, watching her go about her business.

She wiggled and jabbered at the blocks and little colored balls and soft plush lamb, sitting on her square blanket, clapping her hands every once in a while.

Dean smiled at her, and chattered back at her when she chirped, delighted when he could make her smile.

“I love you sweet Abby,” he smiled and she giggled, tapping two blocks together happily. He looked the box sitting next to his bag on the couch and tapped his fingers on the table. His eyes drifted back to Abby and he scratched a hand through his hair, thinking.

When the chair scraped across the tile, Abigail looked up and then resumed her play, talking to

herself in an unintelligible language. Dean sat back down at the table, staring at the piece of paper and the pen he had collected from Sam's desk drawer in the study, one room over.

He swallowed and heard Abby laugh again, the sound bright and good and wonderful. Later he'd feed her dinner and give her a bath and dry off her little wiggly body. He'd sing to her and put her to sleep and watch her, standing by her crib, as she slept, her dreams sweet and soft.

She would know how loved she was, even when she grew up. Even when she was older and wasn't big enough to fit in his lap or ride on his shoulders. He wanted to tell someone about all this, but he wasn't sure how to go about it. But he had promised someone he'd try.

He was going to keep his promises from now on.

Dean tapped his pencil against the table and looked down at the blank sheet. The lines waited patiently for him to fill them in. There was a lot to catch up on.

He rolled the pencil in his fingers and then carefully brought it down, hesitating a moment before he finally wrote two words on the top line.

*Dear Cas.*

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