

# SUPERNATURAL



DRIPPING WINGS & HEAVY THINGS



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# Thank You

Dear Betas and Editors,

Someone cannot finish a journey like this alone, and it is *far* from over. Throughout the course of writing this piece thus far, beta readers have been immeasurably charitable with their time and personal experiences to help enrich the story and keep it on the rails. No form of thanks I can give could be sufficient for their generosity but, I would very much like for it to be known who they are, no matter the magnitude of their contribution. It takes a special kind of person to give away their time like this. I am indescribably grateful for having known each and every one of these selfless individuals.

AmyReg  
angel\_deux | Tw |  
DestielWarmsTheCocklesOfMyHeart  
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PriestessOfGroove | FFN | Tw |  
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SoulBurn  
Udaberri  
Vero

If, somehow, I have managed to commit the near-unforgiveable sin of forgetting your kindness (or just your username) please *boop!* me and I'll sort out these credits right away! ♥

All of my Gratitude,

Pandora



For Angel.

*Ignem fero.*

# Timeline

Life in Him Yet

The Start of Something Good

Tread Softly Because You Tread on my Memories

Off The Deep End

Afterword: What Matters...





Love, as humanity knows it, is a relatively recent invention.  
Since its inception, love affairs great and small have vied for the title  
of most passionate, most pure.  
This one leaves them all behind.





# Life in Him Yet



Time will take us all, and turn us into stone. It leaves us with regrets and  
picks apart the threads, hung over fragile bones.

Let him go...

I can't let him go.

His eyes tell nothing of a soul that is spare, a heart that is longing for  
death. He's still here fighting. Better know there's life in him yet.

~ Adapted from *Life in Her Yet* by Rag n' Bone Man ~

Castiel opened his many eyes, blinking, an unnerving feeling taking hold of his heart. Floating in the Empty void, it gnawed at him constantly. A torturous, painful itch—like maggots slowly eating away dead flesh—was one of the precious few things tethering him to awareness of his own existence. He felt it every time another minuscule piece of him was devoured. Maddening eons—a seeming eternity—would pass before the Emptiness' multitude of mindlessly feeding mouths finally consumed a being of his magnitude. The terrified screams of the lost echoed in the blackness as the nothing consuming them drove each one insane in turn. Some more quickly than others.

Every once in a great while, a white-hot pain pierced the seraph's heart. The Emptiness had wanted his taking to be unwilling. It, infinite in its cruelty, had wanted to savor the taking of his soul. To relish and revel in his futile resistance. To bask in hearing his pleading to be returned to the one he loved above all others, all else. Castiel denied it the pleasure. He'd



kept his peace, determined not to add his own preternatural wailing to the miserable cacophony of those imprisoned and suffering alongside him. Discontent with his serene acceptance of his fate, It seeded among the horrendous, scattered screams, a voice—one that pierced his heart like no other. Saying things he knew Dean himself would never have said...

*You're disgusting...*

*You'll never be found...*

*You deserve oblivion...*

*You were never family...*

*I'll never love you the way you love me...*

*You're nothing to me...*

*Never come back here...*

*You don't deserve to be saved...*

On... and on... and on it went. Moments passed like centuries. Time lost meaning and became one with the nothingness, leaving Castiel only thought and feeling with which to define himself in this empty place. When all else ceases to exist, one clings to pain as desperately as any other sensation—more so, even. As one of the most potent feelings, little else serves as such a firm anchor from which to perceive existence...

The pitch-black void had long ago become a frightening, swirling mass of oily, patchwork colors—products of his mind trying to paint the canvas of non-existence with *something* when confronted with absolute darkness. As the edges of his consciousness began fraying, apparitions, more often frightening than friendly, would manifest themselves then flow away like shapes perceived in the clouds—mirages designed to kill the spirit of souls lost within the Emptiness with a thirst for those left behind.

In one awful moment, as if the Emptiness had discerned what he was seeing, the face in his mind's eye became clearer, gained proper color and form. Before long, the presence stepped through the parting darkness, alight with a glory potent enough to obscure even an angel's sight.

If Castiel had possessed a beating heart, it would have stopped the moment the boy spoke.



Disintegration © Petite-Madame | DA |

"Peace, Castiel. Do not be afraid. I am *more* now than I have ever been. I am everywhere, always. Many millennia have gone by since you sacrificed yourself to this place..."

Castiel uttered his first sound in all the thousands of years that had passed. A choked, hopeful yet broken question. "Dean...?" He couldn't see Jack's smile, but he could *feel* it.

"...Is waiting for you." Jack's laughter was subdued but everywhere, washing over his father's tortured soul like waves gently rolling in over a sandy beach.

The heart-wrenching pain wracking Castiel's being in that moment was more than he could bear. Now that It had broken into him, discovered the hope he had never allowed himself to surrender, the worst tortures would begin. Castiel was determined he would face it in the manner and form of his choosing; as the human being who had been the lens through which he experienced humanity. He laughed bitterly as a smile formed on familiar lips. It was his one act of defiance, resisting the Emptiness in a form so diminutive, whatever pride it possessed would be offended.

The insult would provoke greater torment, but, at the end of all things, there was nothing—not an angel or anything other—that he would rather be. If It would deceive his senses, construct and imprison him in a ruse that would force him to face—touch—Dean again, it was this body he would use for the purpose. No other. A body that could express—that could mourn and cry—that could breathe, speak, feel, taste and smell... that could love in the most visceral ways Castiel would ever know.

Tears began to make their winding way down his face. Whichever direction was down was in a constant state of flux. The angel held himself unmoving but quivering, afraid, still afloat in the void.

A glowing hand reached out, wrapping itself around his. Castiel recognized the feeling. It was divine—*real*—*not* an illusion. In light of the realization, he began taking in heaving breaths as he spoke, his expression awestruck. "I don't understand... *how?*"

Jack's laughter was unrestrained as he drew nearer to the beloved man he esteemed as a father, reaching out to put an arm around him. "I learned from the best."

"You spent thousands of years *annoying* It into setting me free..." Castiel's laughter mingled with sobs as a smile engaged in a tug-of-war with sadness at both corners of his lips, each winning in turns.

"Exactly," Jack replied. The warmth of his son's voice and embrace brought heat and feeling back to Castiel's frigid form. He began to shiver, not out of fear, but as one does when their senses overload, having gone without sight or sensation far too long.

"Dean, Sam... everyone. They're long dead... gone... in their hearts, they have, most likely, left me behind. Even if they are in Heaven, I can never go back..." Cas said languidly, remaining limp, his gaze vacant. All the while, his son collected him up into his arms, giving his head subtle, knowing shakes.

"It may have taken thousands of years to secure your release, but time is relative, and *I* am its master now." With shaking arms and allowing himself a few moments of relieved laughter, Castiel embraced the boy who became God. Contently resting his chin on his shoulder, smiling, he found in that moment the peace he'd been bidden to. "Hold tight to me," Jack instructed. "The Emptiness agreed to release you from perdition, not facilitate it. Our escape will be... energetic." Jack smiled, chuckling impishly as he and the angel in his arms disappeared into a fissure of light that existed for no more than the barest instant. A thunderous crack resonated throughout the Emptiness in its wake...





# The Start of Something Good



Dean lay asleep against the couch's high arm, a liquor bottle nestled into the crook of his arm, the rims of his eyelids swollen, irritated, and red thanks to salty tears cried unconsciously while he slept...



Memories © ancient-fangirl | T |



At first, he kept moving through the days—one foot in front of the other. Until one day, he couldn't take another step without the weight of



what was missing from his life crushing him down to the bunker hallway floor.

He sobbed, leaning heavily into the wall, sliding down, legs crumpling under him, one arm curled over his roiling stomach, the other narrowly preventing him from faceplanting on the marble floor. Every memory he held onto, everything he missed, and newfound want for things he could never have, devastated him anew, crashing over him in waves. Each one elicited a sob and tears enough to completely blur his vision, unadulterated sadness twisting his expression at the crest of each wave while he only scarcely managed to straighten it in the troughs between. Sam had been out with Eileen. For that, he was grateful. He managed to find his feet, get to his room and his bed where he lay, one hand clasped over his mouth. Each sob was a puppeteer pulling every string of muscle down the front of him tight, involuntarily lifting his knees up off the covers.

He had no idea how long it took, but the storm's onslaught eventually subsided. When he could finally spare some awareness, he found himself drained and adrift on the sea of an emotion so vast he knew there was no end to it. He was off the edge of the map he used to define himself. Like every explorer throughout history, he discovered the world doesn't end where the maps say it does. That consolation, however, did nothing to take the edge off the ominous olde-tyme mapmaker's warning:

**Here, there be monsters.**



A metallic crash in the deafening silence pulled Dean out of sleep in an instant. Eyes wide open and tense, he carefully set his beer down beside the couch, making his way into the Library, where Sam sat at a massive mahogany table surrounded by stacks of old books and manuscripts. God had been forced to give over his mantle. However, while an otherworldly ecosystem of wild, restless spirits and supernatural creatures still existed alongside the mundane, a hunter's work would never be done.

"Hey. Did you hear—?" Dean began.

“Relax, Dean. This place ‘goes bump in the night’ every now and then,” Sam replied patiently, looking up from what he was doing with a partial smile on. It lessened when he took in the sight of his brother’s face—eyes tell-tale red and swollen. A pang in his heart wouldn’t let him send Dean back to sleep right then. “I could use a drink. You?”

Dean half-smiled as he let out a chuckle and nodded. “Yeah.” The one he’d been holding had gone warm anyhow. He turned toward the galley, freezing in place when another chorus of metallic clatters sounded from the direction of the infirmary. Glaring back over his shoulder at his brother, Dean’s expression went cold, the muscle wrapped over his jaw visibly winding itself down tight under the skin. Sam took a steadying breath as he slowly stood, wordlessly falling in behind Dean as he headed to the galley for the concealed weapons they kept there. Sam’s handgun was loaded with silver bullets, Dean’s with ammunition able to kill anything divine.

Keeping one shoulder to the near wall, Dean stepped out into the hall bringing his weapon up as Sam hugged the far wall. A thunderclap sounded from inside the infirmary that left the brothers disoriented and cringing, deafened. The lights in the hallway went out, slowly flickering back on as the emergency generator kicked in. Sam had witnessed the instant the heavy metal door heaved outward, and it set his heart racing. The two were strung high and tight as they closed in. Sam stepped to the far side of the door with quick, practiced ease, resting one hand on the door’s handle. He looked to his brother and waited for his nod before wrenching the door open wide. Sam cleared the space he could see, signaling Dean forward.

Stepping into the room, visually sweeping the space, Dean shouted, “*Show yourse—!*” The last of the word was strangled out as his throat seized. Gurneys lay overturned, drawers and cabinet doors all ajar and smashed. Everything on the counters and standalone cabinets had been thrown about, now strewn haphazardly on the floor. Acrid ozone fumes stung his nostrils. Shattered glass and shards of burst light bulbs littered the floor, crunching under his boots.

In the center of the carnage lay a limp, naked human being, fetally curled up on his side, back toward the brothers. Dean lowered the gun in hand, he made it safe, tucking it into the back of his jean’s waistband, recognizing who lay on the frigid tile floor the moment light from a light fixture sparking overhead revealed an angry red handprint seared onto

the man's back below the shoulder blade. Taking in stilted breaths, he swept aside as much glass as he could with his foot before kneeling and clearing away more with his hands. Rolling Castiel back by the shoulder, Dean lifted his torso up off the floor, wrapping both his shaking arms around him.

Dean swallowed to loosen up his closed throat. "Cas...?" Gently shaking the angel laying limp in his arms to wake him, he queried him again. "Cas?" He could feel Castiel's laughter move his chest before he could hear it. Moving his palm to rest under the crux of Cas' collarbones, Dean let himself breathe out in relief. "That's my name," Castiel growled, sarcastic affection evident in his tone. Weakly, he turned his face upward, a groggy smile on his lips. Dean took in and let out a breath through a shaky smile. *His lips...*

"Cas..." Dean whispered, undeniably taken. A swell in his newfound ocean expanse washed over him from behind, folding him over forward. Before Dean could think a single thing other, his lips were pressed to Cas', and he was breathing in the scent of him and the faint, intoxicating cologne of ozone on his skin like a man starved of air.

Sam stood in the doorway, overjoyed yet stunned speechless, discretely turning his gaze away when the kiss started. He took in a slow, deep, relieved breath as a smile formed on his face, water welling up in his eyes. After everything his brother had suffered and survived, he knew *no one* more deserving of the happiness inherent to true, profound love. When the kiss didn't stop, Sam silently released the hammer of his gun, and engaged the safety. He retreated to the galley, returning the firearm to its hiding place. There would be an opportunity to welcome his angelic brother back all in good time.

"Dea... mmn—!?" Castiel tried to speak when he began to taste briny tears, but yet another kiss stifled him. Dean's joyous laugh forced him to break away. Resting his forehead against Cas', eyes closed and breathing hard, he tried to recall the last time his body had gone into overdrive just holding and kissing someone... *never*.

"Is something wrong?" Cas asked innocently, still somewhat breathless. "Your heart..." Dean laughed again, taking in an uneasy breath. It was jackhammering away in his chest, pounding in his ears, and on its way to drowning out the sound of everything else. Leaving his hand hanging from the nape of Dean's neck, Cas brought around his other hand, covering the hand Dean kept pressed against his chest. Something

in him instinctively recognized that Dean wasn't shaking out of fear or sadness. A drive much more carnal was in play.

"Gave the ol' ticker a jumpstart, there," Dean said, still light on breath.

"Your definition of 'personal space' has changed considerably," Cas observed, teasing. Dean's smile grew for a moment alongside a slight nod; his only response. "How long was I gone?"

"Way too damned long," Dean managed to say between a laugh and a snuffle, his tone taking a decidedly stern turn. "Don't do that to me again, you hear?"

Cas' expression turned remorseful. "I'm sorry, Dean. There was no other choice. I thought—"

"I know damned well what you thought, and you were right. That didn't make the pill easier to swallow."

Pained, Cas sighed and let his eyelids fall closed as he placed a kiss on Dean's cheek, fitting the curvatures of their faces together and resting that way. "I am sorry." The two remained entwined until Dean's shaking subsided enough for him to realize Castiel was trembling as well.

"Cas..."

"I find myself wanting for a pair of pants," Cas said, wearing an affectionate smirk.

Smiling and laughing, Dean collected himself. Nothing too sexy was going to go down on a floor littered with glass shrapnel. "For now, a sheet'll have to do." Dean carefully let Cas out of his grasp, making certain the seraph could hold himself up out of the glass before he stepped away to an overturned cabinet lying face-up in the aftermath of Cas' deliverance. He wrenched open the stainless-steel door with some difficulty, finding clean linens inside.

Unfolding the sheet to half-width, he looked up, the sight of Castiel standing there naked as the day Jimmy Novak was born sending a surprising pang straight through his heart. Heat permeated him, flushing his cheeks. Dean averted his eyes momentarily before getting a grip. Forcing himself to meet Cas' gaze as he stepped closer, Dean handed him the bedsheet. An electric sensation arced between them when Cas' hand touched his during the exchange, giving Dean a start that went straight to his belly, sending a flock of butterflies into flight.

Cas wove involuntarily as he tried to secure the bedsheet around his waist, letting out a pained hiss as his step strayed onto broken glass. Dean

closed in instantly to hold him steady. Leaning heavily into him, Castiel lifted his foot off the floor gingerly, fumbling at holding the sheet in place when it wouldn't stay put on its own. Dean closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. Opening them, he stared heavenward, uncertain, and at an agonizing loss.

Already, he could feel himself going cold, putting distance between himself and the angel in his arms. In an eerily tangible way, he saw himself standing at a crossroads. The Road to the Rubicon to the right and A Thousand Miles of Nowhere to the left.

*God himself had literally placed the gift of something transcendent in his hands.* All that was needed of him was the courage to let it be. Warmth flooded through him on the heels of the thought. The moment it did, Cas wrapped his free arm around him. Dean smiled, realizing he hadn't been standing at that crossroads in his mind alone.

"You don't mind?" Cas asked, his tone regretful. He straightened up, looking Dean in the eye from what would have been much too close once upon a time.

Dean shook his head almost imperceptibly, his gaze darting to Cas' lips and back. "No." Cas, smiling subtly, and having been the audience to more than the momentary indecision, knew what was coming next. He limped, turning his bad leg away from Dean, putting an arm over his shoulder and around the back of his neck. A short hop with his good leg, and he was up in Dean's arms, resting his forehead against the side of his neck. Taking his first steps carefully, Dean backed toward the infirmary door, glass chips under his bootheels snapping deeper and sharper under the weight of two men.

Out in the hall, safely outside the debris field, Dean let Cas set foot down on the floor, conscious of keeping the splinter-ridden one from making contact. Keeping Cas' one arm slung around his neck, Dean wrapped his other arm tightly around the angel's ribcage to leverage him up every time they took another hop-step toward Dean's room. They made the trip without uttering a word. How weakened Cas seemed set Dean's every nerve on edge.

Letting Cas down onto the near side of the bed with care, Dean found himself disliking the physical distance between them. Cas took in a sharp breath, shifting to hold his entire right side off the bed. He let the sheet fall away from his hip and leg, keeping the remainder of his modesty. Blood had soaked into the sheet from wounds at the hip all the



way down the side of his leg. When Dean looked back, drops of blood marked a trail behind them. There were shards of glass lodged in the angel's side from his shoulder to his feet. Angry-looking welts all over Cas' body were much more apparent under the white light of a battery-powered lantern.

"Cas... what is all this?" Dean asked, reaching out, unthinking, to assess the wounds.

Cas took in an uncomfortable breath at the contact. "It's... complicated. The Emptiness gnawed off its pound of flesh. Leave it at that."

Dean withdrew his hand, blinking and retaking the focus touching Cas had hijacked. "You're not healing..." he observed as he helped Castiel maneuver himself into a position where he didn't have to lie on his injured side.

"No. I can't."

Nodding, Dean accepted the fact without question. There was an unmistakable tenderness to it when he spoke. "We gotta get this shit outta you. I'll be *right back*."

Letting his head softly rest on the pillow once Dean was out of sight, Castiel felt the tension he carried in his upper back, shoulders, and neck dissipate, though he still found himself shivering occasionally. Turning to lie on his side, Cas' eyelids fell closed.

He took steady, deep breaths in, until his lungs strained, the air inhaled telling him more than Dean could possibly bring himself to speak to. Fear isn't the only emotion with a scent. Tears soaked into pillows, anguish, sweat, release, joy and relief, shame and confusion, longing, guilt, and regret. Of course, there was also the olfactory cocktail of cologne, soaps, pheromones, and everything else that differentiated one human body from another. Something he never thought to note before. He did so now. The sound of Dean's hurried footfalls in the hallway brought Cas' attention back to the present, away from the otherworldly collage of moments in time in his mind's eye, made up of the reasons behind what his sense of smell showed him.

Dean walked back into the room, first aid kit, fifth of vodka, and liquor glass in hand. He closed the door behind him, the scuffing sound of the door latching into the frame giving off the prescient impression of a pressure-release hiss preceding a freight train's departure from station.

Cas had to speak through his chuckling. "It's going to take a lot more than that to anesthetize me."

"Yeah... not much I can do about that. Just lookin' to steady up my hands, and I'm guessing you're thirsty," Dean replied. Cas' smile and appreciative laughter told him he'd guessed right.

"That's putting it mildly," Cas replied, his voice suddenly rolling out over gravel much courser than usual.

Pouring the shot for Cas, he handed it over with a subdued smile. Dean took a long swallow from the bottle himself as he pulled his desk chair over to the bedside. The bleeding from Cas' foot was the worst by far. Dean capped the vodka and set himself up to begin work there.

Gauze pads, a scalpel, needle-nose tweezers, penlight, peroxide, alcohol, saline flush syringe, ointment... Dean's hovering hand settled on the tweezers.

The biggest pieces were the nastiest. More than once, Dean had to go looking through a considerable amount of blood for a small shard that stayed behind after a larger chunk was removed from the pad of Cas' foot. Except for the longer, deeper ones, he let the wounds bleed when he was done and carried on. At one particularly jagged piece of glass and a sharp, pained inhale from Cas, Dean's hand moved with a mind of its own to rest over Cas' shin bone—a comforting, calming touch.

The longer he left it there, the warmer his palm became. He left it in place long past the point it was possible to deny the nature of his want for the contact.

"Dean..."

"This is going to take a while," was Dean's curt but unmistakably caring reply. Castiel nodded and settled back, letting himself melt into the mattress, giving himself permission to enjoy the sensation of Dean's examining touch. The endorphins flooding his vessel took the edge off all but the sharpest spikes of pain. Having run his fingertips across something he thought was glass but unable to see it very well, Dean picked up the penlight from the cheap, faux wood finished tee vee tray. Clicking it on, looking for a glint off the tiny splinter of glass, he grazed the blade of the scalpel across Cas' skin, steadily, surgically probing for the slightest catch to locate it.

Having found what he was trawling for, Dean opened the skin up around the puncture wound ever so slightly. Enough to get fine-point tweezers around the foreign debris without forcing it further in. Depositing

the glass on gauze along with a speck of blood, he dipped the tweezers into a dixie cup of alcohol before moving on to the next apparent extraction site—a piece that wound up lodged in Cas' skin at the hip joint.

Based on how deeply it was lodged, Dean figured it a reasonable assumption that Castiel had outright landed on it. With so many large, visible blood vessels nearby, it was going to bleed quite a bit. Reaching for extra absorbent pads, gauze, and the syringe to flush it, he prepared to pull the piece and cover the wound with something immediately. The glass chip, one of the largest so far, hit the stainless-steel collection tray. His outspread fingers anchored his hand on Cas' hip, his thumb lightly pulling back on the skin to keep it open while the saline worked its way in. Dean let the water and blood run, his thumb lightly weighing down an absorbent pad. Soon, the muscle under Dean's hand contracted in a few jittery spurts.

"Feeling something in there still?" Dean asked, looking up to meet Cas' unwavering gaze.

"No."

Blood rushed to his ears and cheeks when he realized the shape of the sheet over Cas' hip was changing; a distinctly outlined, warm ridge slowly growing his way. Returning his focus to his own hand, he was pretty sure of where the nerve he was tagging was. "Oh." Dean was about to pull his hand away when Cas quickly reached out, resting his hand over Dean's. Lightly at first, then with certainty when it became clear Dean no longer looked like he was itching to take flight. Cas curled his fingers around to the underside of Dean's hand. The two stayed that way until the bleeding eased enough to take pressure off the wound.

Dean blinked hard a few times and took in a deep breath, leaning back in his chair, bringing the soiled gauze with him, and tossing it into the surgical tray. He was shivering and he wasn't cold. Running his hands over his closed eyes, he reached for the vodka bottle, pouring a shot for Cas and taking another swig himself. Cas set the glass down on the bedside table when Dean stood, taking a few paces around the room to stretch the tension out of his upper back, shoulders, and neck.

"I'll leave most of the cuts undressed. Clean the blood up after it dries. They're better off being open to the air to heal."

"Are stitches needed?"

"No. Stitching'll only do more damage. Good, sticky bandages and staying off your foot will do the trick. I guarantee you there are crutches here somewhere," Dean said, walking back to the bedside, picking up the bottle of vodka en route. He cocked it to one side in Cas' direction to wordlessly ask the question.

Castiel glanced at the bottle and laughed. "You think I'd say no?" Cas asked rhetorically, one eyebrow going up. Dean smiled, shaking his head. *No. No, he didn't.* He poured the shot, waiting to take the glass back...



Dean put the last bandage in place on Cas' shoulder, taking in a deep breath and smiling, as appreciative of his own handiwork as the angel he'd patched up.

"I've done all I can, for now, I think," Dean said, relaxing back into his chair. He was up and rifling through his footlocker the moment the thought occurred to him. He came away with a cotton thermal blanket in hand. "Better get you off that bloody sheet and tucked in." He blinked, feeling a tad fuzzy. The liquor was finally going to his head. "Lift your legs."

Cas did as asked, and Dean rolled up the bloody hospital sheet, careful to keep any glass debris off his bed. He handed Cas the blanket to safeguard the angel's modesty and his fraying nerves. Cas lifted his backside to free the rest of the sheet. Brushing a few flecks of glass off Castiel's skin, Dean pulled the sheet and made for the door to drop it in the laundry.

Resting his hand on the doorknob, Dean had the distinct impression that if he walked out the door, he wouldn't walk back in.

The bedsheet hit the floor beside his feet, as he braced his palm against the edge of the door, keeping it closed. Each breath that ticked by, Dean became more and more keenly aware he was with someone now, without whom every breath taken since the Empty snatched him away had been hollow—an imitation of life.

Boots, socks, shirts... and jeans. Each, in turn, joined the bloody bedsheet on the floor by the door. Dean turned to face Castiel, unable to bring himself to look up at first.

"Dean, don't do this if—"

“‘If I don’t want it’? That’s just it, Cas. I do want... *this*. But it feels like someone’s trying to smash through the back of my head with a sledgehammer... and no, it’s not the vodka,” Dean said, wincing and bringing his gaze up to meet Castiel’s. A momentary frown contracted the angel’s facial features before returning to the serene expression and keen look that gave the distinct impression he was sensing—seeing—more. Cas sat up with a touch of difficulty, resting his elbow on his bent knee, offering an upturned hand. Dean couldn’t help the hint of a smile that turned up one corner of his lips.

A twist of sad relief moved Dean’s features, his eyelids beginning to fall closed as a pull took hold of him. Summoning the will to open them, Dean asked the pointed question: “This feeling... is this you?”

Castiel let out a sigh, slightly shaking his head. “No. You’re exhausted, Dean.”

Immediately regretting the suspicion, Dean nodded. He was. Walking up to the foot of the bed, Dean rested his hand in Cas’. Meeting Castiel’s gaze with his, at once seductive and stoic, Dean moved to the open side of the bed remaining hand in hand. The two centered themselves on the mattress as Dean laid on his side, retaking Cas’ hand and coming to rest with his other hand over the angel’s shoulder. Sleep did not come quickly. Eventually, though, Dean was laying slack against the seraph’s side, one of his legs unconsciously venturing to rest over Cas’, pulling him a little closer.

Smiling and letting his eyes fall closed, Castiel focused his attention on the rhythm of the heartbeat next to him, gladly abandoning himself to a place where the only thing that anchored him was the sound.







The Sound of Your Heart © LicieOIC | DA | T | P |



Taking in a heaving breath, Dean shot up in bed, wide awake, skin slick and shining with sweat. He was still shuddering and twitching, the spark of each spasm eliciting a guttural, pleased noise that started out in the center of his chest and sounded aloud through clenched teeth. There was a hard, heavy weight over his right leg and warm fluid running across his skin between it and the fabric of his briefs. His heart was beating as if it was trying to break through the ribs caging it. Taking in breath whenever he could get it, Dean swung his legs off the bedside and sat, head bowed and wide-eyed, one hand to where his heart was pounding against his ribs.

A snicker from Cas ended the silence. "It was a good dream, then?"

Smiling and laughing at the reference but still uneasy, Dean asked, "Could you... see?"

Cas answered his fears with patient, hopeful affection. "No. I'd... uh, rather not spoil anything for myself."

Dean scoffed, shaking his head. Dreaming about it was one thing; doing was a hurdle of another order of magnitude entirely. "Cas... I'm way off the reservation, here." Sadness dangerously colored his tone. He just... didn't *know*. The inner tug-of-war threatening to tear him apart stood perilously close to deciding against going any further. Silence stretched on between them until Cas' tentative fingertips made contact with the skin of his back by his tailbone then turned over. Castiel ran his fingernails over his skin until his hand came to rest comfortably on Dean's hip.

That simple touch started his heart racing again, had Dean sitting up straight, arching back, working one shoulder, and staying that way until the shaking moving the whole of him faded. Before long, the tension in his back released enough that he could sit forward. The two sat in silence, connected by touch, but his breathing stayed uneven and deep.

Cas, firm but gentle, pressed his fingers into Dean's hip, wanting more. "May I?"

Tense moments of consideration passed, then Dean replied, "Yeah."

Ditching any form of cover, Castiel crossed the bed, his expression nothing less than predatory. He fitted himself against Dean, knees sliding out to the sides, pressing flush against him from stem to sternum, his bone-stiff organ rested against the spinal groove in the small of Dean's back. Cas' quick, fluid movement left Dean no more time to react than it took to stiffen in shock from head to toe. Dean's raised hands stayed in the air. Fingertips at his hairline on the back of his neck smoothly traveled up onto the crown of his head, taking hold of him by the hair. A hand firmly pressed to his breastbone pulled him back to rest on Cas' chest, a gentle tug on his hair coming into play once Castiel deemed Dean was in place to lay his head back on his shoulder.

Rigid but poseable, Dean let himself be moved, recognizing, in the moment the back of his head rested on Cas' shoulder, that what he was feeling wasn't revulsion. It was potent fear.

Castiel's voice took on an unsettling, hypnotic tone, falling to a register deeper than usual. "I know I haven't hurt you, Dean. Trust that I never will unless you ask me to."

Dean blinked a few times. Having been told to believe it, he simply *did*. He barely managed his reproach. "I thought you were stayin' outta my head."

Sighing, Cas hoped the adage “forgiveness rather than permission” proved true. “I hope you can forgive me. I thought it prudent to keep an ear to the ground. All that just went through your head, and you couldn’t bring yourself to do anything other than breathe.” The hand Cas had placed on Dean’s chest relaxed, heading slowly and steadily southward, settling onto the ridge held up and to the side by his briefs. “As you can’t read my mind, I feel I should caution you before you decide to shut me out: everything I’ve seen you feel so far is little more than the flame of a candle next to the forest fire I’m keeping in check. I don’t want to hurt you, but you don’t say enough to ensure that won’t happen.”

“I thought angels don’t feel...” Dean teased uneasily. Cas’ grip on his hair tightened out of amused irritation, though not nearly enough to inflict pain.

The statement caused Castiel to look back on his infinite lifetime through a lens that suddenly seemed clearer. He explained himself, his tone falling into seductive menace by the end. “It seems more accurate to think of angels as being taught—programmed—to distance ourselves from a dangerously deep reservoir of emotion. We exist, harnessed by yokes of rigorous mental discipline that have never been truly broken before. Be warned, Dean: mine has now. Ask what you will of me accordingly.”

Dean managed a slight, shivering nod. Not that he wasn’t, apparently, *up* for this, but things were getting freaky.

Castiel smiled, chuckling, appreciative of how torqued tight the body in his hands was, though also aware that Dean wasn’t perfectly comfortable. “Relax, Dean.” Again, having heard the words, he just *did*. His arms dropped, legs slacked, torso fell back, and his head fell to rest comfortably on the plane of Cas’ shoulder. His falling arm had moved the hand Cas had laid on his groin, and even this slight movement was enough to cause him to twitch. Thankfully, the suggestion hadn’t affected *everything*.

Having less breath to work with than usual, Dean asked, “Where *the hell* did you pick this stuff up?”





WINCHESTER-reload.TUMBLR

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"Seems I'm a quick study." In the back of his mind, Castiel still harbored a touch of doubt this was real. Cas used his grip on Dean's hair to suggest turning to face him. Once Dean was, Cas released him only to put his hand over Dean's eyes. Being sightless ratcheted Dean's nerves up another notch.

Suddenly, Cas' lips were close enough to feel them brush against his, to feel his breath, when he murmured, "If only once..." The entirety of it played out in his mind; *if you were given the chance to kiss the person you love more than your own existence only once, how would you do it?* Castiel's kiss answered the question *in spades* as his hand slid back into Dean's hair, his fingerpads pressed into his scalp, hips bucking hard into Dean's back. The seraph's other hand ventured underneath the waistband of his briefs, fingertips finding and kneading around his cum-slick penis...

An undefinable length of time passed before Dean found his way back to his senses enough to take in the air required to form the whisper of a three-letter name in the space between kisses. "Cas...?" The confusion in it was the only thing that slowed, then stopped Castiel. He realized Dean was shaking his head, not just shaking. "Can't think," was the next thing Dean blurted out. The only thing he coherently knew was that his heart was jumping like it was being electrocuted and needed to slow down. Cas chuckled and smiled, resting his cheek against Dean's, satisfied the depth of his affection was clear. The angel realized Dean had been in a state where he couldn't form a coherent thought or emotion to protest, even if he wanted to.

Castiel decided reining things in was for the best. He helped Dean right himself, having to take a firm hold of his shoulder again when it became apparent Dean wasn't going to stop falling over forward. It seemed the suggestion that he relax hadn't worn off quite yet. Cas, amused, placing a reverent butterfly kiss on Dean's shoulder, waited patiently until he stayed upright of his own volition.

"Don't know what you're selling, bub, but whatever it is, it's primo shit," Dean quipped, having re-collected enough of his wits to pull it off. Cas laughed and smiled, smoothly backing away. Bringing the cotton thermal blanket back up, he laid down, folding the bed's single pillow underneath his head and neck to prop himself up somewhat. Dean slid himself backward to sit cross-legged, back-to-side with the angel in his

bed. When he finally turned to look at Castiel, there was a quizzical look on the angel's face.

"What's up?" Dean asked.

"Is there something wrong with me? I don't recall being... uncomfortable after the last time I was intimate with someone," Cas wondered, confused.

"What d'you mean?"

"I feel... bruised, down south..."

Dean couldn't help laughing and smiling. "No. There's nothing wrong with you. Congratulations. Your first case of blue balls. Happens when you don't get off."

"I see. A rather... *inconvenient* design choice," Cas grouched.

Finding himself chuckling again, Dean sighed. "Oh yeah, the feeling sucks. Not the finest example of intelligent design." Having already popped his cork dreaming, it was safe to bet he was in nowhere near as dire straits as Cas. Dean looked to where his forearm rested on his knee. Turning his palm up, his gaze locked on it. It occurred to him Cas had possibly never had reason to give himself a hand. Dean wasn't overly keen on the idea of... taking care of the problem, but he was even less keen on lying beside the seraph who'd just made him feel the way he did and telling him to take care of it himself. Problem was, the idea of doing so had his body winding itself up into uncomfortable rigidity again.

Then, Cas' hand crept in from the periphery of his vision, fingers trailing up the sensitive skin on the upturned underside of his arm. The tingling feeling the angel's fingernails created running over Dean's palm sparked and stoked heat between them as his fingers settled in place interwoven with Dean's. Time passed where Dean couldn't bring himself to move, his reservations getting the best of him. Then, he did, closing his relaxed fingers around Cas' hand hard enough to turn his fingers a patchwork white and red. There was water coming into his eyes and painful warmth in the center of his chest.

"Dean, what are you thinking?"

Looking up to Cas, surprised he wasn't tuning in, Dean let out a laugh, replying mischievously, "I think a little *southern courtesy* is in order. Lay back. Close your eyes. Don't look." Having been somewhat on his side, Castiel laid himself out on his back, flat and comfortable, never breaking his eyes away from Dean's gaze. Though the man's expression was stone-still, the look in his eyes burned hot as the sun. Dean's slight nod



reminded him to close his eyes. A closed smile formed on Cas' lips as he did, letting his head fall to the side, facing Dean.

Feeling safely unobserved, Dean quickly leaned over to a drawer in his bedside table. A small bottle came back to Cas' side with him. He folded one leg in as close as he could manage, the other straight out to his side. He warmed up a squeeze of lubrication, rubbing his palms together. Working a knot out of his shoulder, he rested his right elbow on his knee, resting the palm of his free hand on the space between Cas' navel and boner. Cas' stomach and hard-on jumped at the touch. Dean cocked an eyebrow up, looking north, appreciating the look on the angel's face. *All right.*

Resting his hand at the top of Cas' thigh, on the inside, he pulled it back, making contact with the skin of his sack, causing it to contract, evoking pleased twitches as he ran his slick fingers firmly up the spine and down again to find its base. Taking hold of Cas' balls, giving them a gentle but firm squeeze and pull upward, extracted a guttural keen and torso twist from the angel at his mercy. Cas struggled to keep his eyes closed, his breath turning short and shallow for a few moments. The scorching heat of Dean's palm had his nerves dancing. Of its own accord, Castiel's hand wandered across the sheets finding a welcome home on Dean's folded leg.

Dean took hold of Cas in both hands, using the lubrication on them to ensure he was covered from tip to base. Leaving his hand resting around Cas' root, his thumb and forefinger keeping his mast from moving too freely, he gave it a few slow, firm, rotating strokes, gauging where the strongest twitches in the rest of his body happened. A few quick short strokes around the seeping head... he explored the space underneath Cas' corona with thumb and fingertips. Cas twisted from head to foot, legs moving, chest contracting, pushing his hip closer to Dean. He brought his far hand to his forehead, running it back into his hair.

Satisfied he knew enough to sprint for the finish line, Dean picked up his pace. He managed a hit to the money spots he'd mapped out every stroke, turning Cas into an alternately bucking, writhing, moaning, grasping mess, the drops of precum on the flat of his stomach growing in number every few passes. Spasms of release began, and Dean slowed but kept his hand at work until what had to be the majority of the cum Cas had to give was on his stomach. He shifted back and leaned down, sealing his mouth over the string of skin in the upturned cleft of the head

in an open kiss to the hypersensitive organ twitching against his lips. Dean ran his tongue up into the vee, twanging that guitar string with the tip of his tongue until a surprising, ecstatic cry escaped from Castiel's lips. Right on its heels came, "Dean!" The angel's grip on his leg tightened, fingers digging into the skin and muscle.

Keeping the pads of his fingers pressed to and moving around Cas' head, Dean rose, looking for a kiss, his lips bringing with them a salty, metallic but far from unpleasant taste. "Cas..." he said softly, sliding his forearm under the seraph's neck. Cas' eyes shot open at another spasm of pleasure, knowing intuitively Dean had lifted the restriction, watching as Dean kissed him. He wrapped the crook of his arm over Dean's neck, his own open kisses lascivious replies in return.

Dean slowed himself, pulling away, Cas' lower lip coming with him for a split second. Smiling, his gaze met Cas' for a few wordless moments, taking in the euphoric expression he wore.

Dean stretched an arm over Cas, pulling a pair of boxers out of the bedside table, using them to wipe his hands. He picked up as much semen from the angel's still-heaving stomach as the fabric would catch. Folding the clothing in on itself, he tossed it back onto the bedside table. Giving Cas one last kiss in passing, propping himself up on his elbow, Dean let his forehead hang to rest between Castiel's shoulder and chest.

He was so strung out, he almost wanted Cas to pull his hypnotic suggestion thing again and just *tell* him to go to sleep.

"Make yourself comfortable, Dean. If you can sleep, sleep. If you can't, don't," Castiel said patiently. Dean chuckled, smiling. He sat up to retrieve the cotton blanket and pulled it over both of them, settling into the cradle of Cas' arm. Free of any external influence, Dean was swiftly dead asleep.



Cas walked into the grand Library leaning on one crutch, holding his bandaged foot up off the floor. He took in a deep breath. The smells of old paper, old leather, old wood, old knowledge, and the echoes of hearts dedicated to ensuring mankind would never devolve into ignorance of the arcane and divine imparted to him what the Men of Letters had once been. Smartly dressed once again, minus the trench coat and suit jacket, he wore his collar unbuttoned and tie relaxed. The

angel half-smiled when Sam looked up to see him. It struck Sam how much gaunter—greyer, even—the seraph looked compared to what he remembered. Castiel didn't fill out his clothing the way he used to. Whatever the angel had been through over the past months, it must've been something horrific enough to affect his vessel like this.

"Hello, Sam."

Getting up and coming over to him straight away, without so much as a moment's hesitation, Sam wrapped his arms around his *much* older brother.

Eyes watering, Sam spoke the hopes bottled up in his chest. "It's good to see you, Cas. You, uh... stickin' around this time?" he asked, having difficulty getting his words to come out steady.

"Yes, I think so," Castiel replied, a contented smile on, putting his free arm around Sam.

"Good," Sam said, taking in a sniffle, clearing his throat, and giving Castiel a firm pat on the back.

Laughing, Castiel quipped, "I missed you, too."

Sam started full-on laughing, letting go of Castiel and lifting one hand to give him a solid clap on the shoulder. When the angel twitched away, he stopped his hand just inches shy of contact. "Oh! Ah... sorry," Sam said, frowning. It was unlike the angel to carry injuries at all.

"I'm, uh, going to be convalescing for a little while. I'll spare you the gory details, but I'm not exactly in top form," Cas said, the memory casting a shadow over him. A quick, burdened smile darted across Sam's lips, and he nodded.

"Yeah, there's a fair share of that goin' around. Still, you're here. That's what matters," Sam said, tears coming to his eyes, resting his outstretched hand on top of the seraph's shoulder as though he needed the contact to believe he was actually there.

"I'm sorry, Sam. I didn't want to leave. There was no other way..."

Sam shook his head. "You've got nothin' to apologize for. Don't take this the wrong way, Cas; that day, I lost both of you. I'm *really* glad you're here." Dean had spent the last few months with his toes peeking over the edge above six feet under now and then. In the preceding couple of weeks, though, things had taken a turn for the worse; he seemed to be doing little more with his time than peering over the edge. Clearing his throat and chasing the tears out of his eyes, Sam collected himself, managing a quick smile and steadily meeting Cas' gaze. "Make yourself

at home. This is *your* home now, Cas. No matter what." Sam let his words sink in, nodded, then looked back to the literature spread out on the table. Sam's feet followed the lead, walking him back to his work.

"Thank you, Sam. For everything."

Turning back and with a subdued smile, Sam gave him a quick nod and returned to his research, unrolling a scroll that required some careful handling. Castiel made a beeline for the kitchen. He was thirsty—a symptom of his ethereal form's wellbeing that did not bode well; he was vulnerable to basic human needs. A good ten minutes later, Dean wandered in.

"Hey."

Sam looked up, his expression unreadable. "Hey. Morning."

Looking like he wanted to say something, Dean suddenly became keenly interested in the toes of his boots.

A smile crept onto Sam's lips. "You know this place is made of metal, concrete, and stone, right?"

Dean looked up, puzzled. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"*Sound carries*," Sam said, his tone as loaded as the pointed look he sent Dean's way, unable to keep his laughter in.

A scoff layered on top of a laugh escaped Dean. He nodded, smiling, running the tip of his tongue across a canine tooth. "Yeah, I, uh..." Dean cleared his throat, shuffling his feet.

Sam sighed. "Dean, I'm only going to say this once, 'cause I shouldn't have to say it at all: don't apologize. You deserve to have something good happen for you. You're my *brother*. That's never going to change."

Dean was staring at Sam wide-eyed. He nodded. As if a switch flipped, his shoulders straightened up from being hunched in, the nervous warble was gone from his voice, and the crushing sadness he'd been carrying through the months since losing Castiel didn't have the sway over him it did a moment ago. Pointing a thumb in the direction of the galley, Dean asked, "Want some coffee?"

"Sure. Thanks." Sam watched, smirking, as his brother stepped out, tracking down Cas in the galley. He wondered if the offer was made for his sake or if it served more as an excuse to be in the same room as Cas sooner rather than later. Shaking his head, Sam couldn't help quietly chuckling.

If there was only ever one place on Earth where these two didn't have to walk on eggshells—where they could just be—Sam was determined that it would be here.







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# Tread Softly Because You Tread on My Memories



"We were friends who spoke like lovers, and that seemed enough for two people scared to love one another."

~ Unknown ~



The trill of a heavy-duty zipper pulling closed a canvas duffle echoed loudly in the otherwise quiet library. Dress shoe soles clacked against marble tiles, then mahogany floorboards. The uneven cadence of the approaching sound belied injuries their wearer hadn't yet healed from.

"Cas. We, uh... we gotta talk. You're not gonna like it," Dean said. Wearing a hard, somehow vulnerable expression, he turned toward the seraph standing in the doorway.

Castiel froze on the stairs, leaning on the rail, favouring his freshly bandaged foot. Panic seized him by the heart. He could feel the organ squirming in his chest, struggling to beat steadily. Much as he tried to carry on as if completely free of the Shadow's cruelty, part of him couldn't escape waiting for the other shoe to fall—to discover this wasn't happening anywhere other than in his mind. That Dean was dust in the wind, condemned to the Pit, and they'd never had a chance in Hell at having something extraordinary with each other.

"The last conversation we had that started like this ended with evicting me from here."

"No!" Dean snapped, looking up from double-checking the contents of a side pocket. He had to take a breath to settle himself down. "No. You're stayin' right here. In fact, given the condition you're in, *do not leave*, under any circumstances, short of the whole fuckin' world coming to an end. Things have changed—a lot. It's gnarly out there." Dean started fidgeting with his bag, hesitating, leaning on his knuckles. There was nothing to do but come out and say it. "I, uh... Cas, I need some space. Some time on open roads to sort out what's goin' on in here. Away from Sam, Eileen... you. Everybody. Everything. You know, blue skies, fresh air... open roads." Dean bowed his head, shuffling uneasily for a moment, then jabbed the fingertips of one shaking hand into the center of his chest. "I need to *breathe*."

Castiel descended the steps, getting closer with every word Dean said. Stopping him from coming any closer with a raised hand, Dean reassured him. "Look, the *moment* I think I have a handle on things, or if there's something I can't straighten out *without* you, I'll get your attention. That still works, right?"

By no means happy about what was happening, intent on remaining true to his promise he wouldn't do anything to hurt Dean, Cas sighed, conceding, "Yes... it does." Castiel backed away, seating himself on the table edge opposite where Dean was packing his kit, taking all weight off his sore foot. His hand ran across his lips unconsciously. Taking a long breath to keep from losing his head, Cas clenched his jaw tightly closed for a moment. "How long?"

Dean shrugged and faced Cas, seating himself on the heavy mahogany table's edge. "A few days." Leaning across the distance between them, reaching for the hand the angel had resting on his leg, Dean watched, crestfallen when Cas pulled his hand back. Frowning, Dean retracted the gesture. "You really want to leave things like this? I just take off?"

"No." Cas's expression wavered between despondency, doubt, hurt, and some sort of composure.

Sighing, Dean tapped his temple with a pair of fingers. "Cas, *look*. Go ahead. Am I tellin' the truth?" he asked, his expression saddened. He liked seeing what this was doing to Cas as little as the angel liked facing it

down, but he had to get out. If he didn't, he would crawl right out of his own skin.

Castiel's gaze suddenly snapped up to meet his. Dean held himself immobile, gaze locked to the angel's, even as those piercing, unsettling eyes looked into him and unabashedly extracted what he wanted to know through his eyeballs. Cas blinked, looking away as though the effort hurt his eyes. His expression lost its edge. "Yes," Cas answered, breathing easier and looking apologetic.



You Can't Stay Here © JJPADTK | [In](#) | [R](#) | [T](#) | [Tw](#) |

Dean stood, walking over to Castiel, who remained seated precisely where he was, turning his head away. Dean left no space between them, his thighs leaning into the table's edge between Castiel's legs. Cas gave a little. Sighing heavily, he bowed the side of his head into Dean's chest. "I still don't like this."

There was no doubt Dean regretted leaving. Despite this, there were questions to reckon with he couldn't get a clear view of down in the Bunker. "I don't either. If there was another choice, I'd make it. I keep runnin' the same lap in my head, hoping somethin' will change, and endin' up at the same place..." Dean shook his head, knowing full well nothing would change unless he introduced some form of catalyst into the mix. "A few days, Cas, to figure this out and get things sorted." Castiel tentatively lifted a hand, resting it in the middle of Dean's back, resting his forearm on his hip and holding him closer.

Smiling, Dean put both arms around the seraph, pulling him in and standing in silence until he felt the need to speak. The heat between them was something else. "Whenever you're ready." Dean's tone made it crystal clear he was in no rush; he'd stand there until Cas let him go. Truth be told, he enjoyed the fact that his heart seemed to be doing goofy little somersaults in his chest simply because he could *hold* Cas.

Several minutes more went by before Castiel relaxed to pull away. Cracking a partial smile as he spoke, his cheek stayed at rest in the folds of Dean's shirt. "Don't do anything stupid," Cas said, a tinge of humour in his tone, looking unwaveringly up to Dean.

Laughing with a smirk on his face, Dean backed away, winking as he went. He picked up the duffle bag off the other table. "If I do, you'll be the first to know."

The angel bowed his head, chuckling quietly, his jaw clenching as Dean's bootfalls sounded further and further away.

Raising his gaze, Castiel's intense, knowing eyes watched Dean sling the duffle over his shoulder, skirt the map table, scale the stairway two steps at a time, and go.



See the stone set in your eyes,  
See the thorn twist in your side.  
I'll wait for you.  
Sleight of hand and twist of fate.  
On a bed of nails, he makes me wait,  
And I wait without you...

~ Adapted from U2's "With or Without You" ~



Tapping his palm against Baby's premium leather-wrapped steering wheel, twanging out in his throat the last harmonica refrains of a Zepp tune he'd listened to more in the last few days than in ten years gone by. It was always one of his favourites, but it'd, uh... taken on new meaning. He ran appreciative hands over the steering wheel's arc, one over the other, as he rounded the corner at a T-junction. High-grade leather wrap—one of the few improvements he'd splurged on over the years. As much time as he spent with his hands on this ol' girl's—Lady's, sorry, Lady's—helm, it was a luxury he'd deemed justified long ago.

The next track's smooth bass beats and strummed guitar strings met his ear, putting a warm, fond smile on his face.

*"I was walkin', by the river. I held my hand out, to feel the rain. Just a light rain..."*

Sioux Falls, Big Sioux River - Summer, 1990

Bobby looked on as the boys in his charge played, bringing the mouth of his beer up to his lips, sipping only enough to ease the dryness in his mouth and throat. He settled down into leaning his elbows on the aluminum fold-out chair's sun-bleached plastic armrests, finding a way to get comfortable on woven seat mesh accustomed to his backside from having been a faithful fishing companion for many years. Sunny summer afternoon. Hot but dry, and a cool breeze comin' up off the water.

Out at the end of the pier, Dean cozied up behind his brother, no doubt with one of the tadpoles he'd caught and pocketed in the shallows, wriggling in hand. The smile on Bobby's face grew as Dean executed his plan perfectly. A hand on Sam's opposite shoulder to distract him, an imperceptible lift of the younger boy's swim trunks' waistband and *fwip!* Dean slipped the little critter into his brother's shorts. All while keeping up the ruse of marvelling over a fossil picked up from the riverbank on the walk here. A natural-born prankster if he ever saw one.

In seconds, Sam dropped his fishing pole, shot straight up, patting his swim trunks in panic and stumbled backward off the pier into chilly river water. He surfaced, pale and shivering with shock at the cold, swim trunks shucked off and in hand. After a thorough search of himself and the sopping wet shorts turned up nothing, Sam ducked under the water again and came back up with a handful of river mud destined for his cackling older brother's arms, raised in half-hearted self-defence. Diving into the water over his brother's head, Dean surfaced behind him, yanking Sammy into a noogie. He released his struggling sibling from it in the nick of time, before Sam would resent him for it. Dean backed away and ducked a couple more mudballs slung his way, sending a splash of water back at Sam for both of them.

Bobby chuckled, feeling the vicarious joy and mischief of watching over these two just being boys for an afternoon. Dean sat low in the water, ready to go under at a moment's notice to avoid a projectile, taunting his younger brother with a pair of waggling eyebrows. He crept up on Sam, who was resisting the urge to smile, only to have his face shoved aside playfully as Sam broke away and went to retrieve the dropped fishing rod.

Dean, treading water, looked up at him, worried he might be in trouble, only to break out beaming when he found Bobby looking down on him fondly, no hint of reproach in his expression.

This boy—a little piece of sunshine in his own right—looked up to him, like he was the sun itself. Perhaps, that was what it meant—what it felt like—to be a *father*. In that instant, an indelible feeling bloomed in his heart.



Bobby gave his head a chiding, encouraging nod Dean's way, pointing his gaze toward Sam. Dean rolled his eyes, but dutifully went to help his brother recover and reset their fishing rod. Eyes starting to water, Bobby inhaled, keeping his breath under strict control to keep a snuffle quiet. He *loved* these boys.

Shifting in his chair, Bobby settled again as the radio by his side played a verse and seemingly spoke straight to his soul: "...*There was rhythm. There was order. There was a balance; there was a flow. There was patience... indulgence. There was a **power** I could not know, and I felt it all made sense. Innocence. A permanence...*"

He thought he'd lost his chance at family when Karen died, but here were two boys, not his own, absent their father, looking to him for how and who to be in this world—as a father—in ways Bobby thought he'd never get to know...

Sam walked the uneven dirt, root, and stone-laden path ahead of them, beach towel over his shoulder, their folded-up lawn chairs in hand, giddy about getting back to the house to fillet and cook their catch. He was rattling off things he knew about the fish caught today, lamenting not having encountered some of the species brochures said inhabited the river's waters. Bobby chuckled to himself and smiled. Seven years old and already, Sam was a walking encyclopedia.

A trio of modestly sized carp in the five-gallon bucket Bobby carried would make for a hearty dinner on the heels of an afternoon spent expending their energies horsing around in the river, once enough to eat had been caught. Dean came up behind him, tackle box in hand. Out of nowhere, a boy-sized hand found his, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Surprised, Bobby smiled, not looking down. A tear he'd fought back earlier finally found its way out of his eye and down his cheek. Dean saw it and squeezed his hand. Nodding, Bobby smiled, laughed, squeezed back, and held on.

A lyric bubbled up in Bobby's brain, refusing to leave the forefront of his mind without being heard.

*"I took my young son to the river. I held his hand out..."*



## Singer Homestead - Mid-Summer, 1994

The sun sat well above the high afternoon horizon. Cotton ball clouds cast small, undulating shadows on the grassy wildlands uphill from the creek and a swath of forest neighbouring the back of the wrecking yard property. The house was hot and stuffy. Cool air, shade, and solitude down by the creek made it the place Dean wanted to be—the solitude, in particular.

Under the shade of a maple tree, boots in the rich black dirt, one hand up under his shirt and latched over the opposite shoulder, belt, jeans, and briefs halfway down his thighs, Dean leaned his head back against the tree. Shifted his feet, propping himself up, his head lolled deliriously to one side, breathing desperate and uneven. It had started out as imagining that instead of heading down the roadhouse's porch stairs that night with a friendly tip of his hat and heading home to his family, the rodeo wrangler had stayed and shared more than a cigarette...

*"You're not sick, are you?"*

*"No."*

*"Then what the fuck do I care?"*

*Dean leaned back against the railing, jutting his hips forward, weighing down his waistband with his thumb, making what he was packing that **little bit** more obvious. Small talk. Sure, why not?*

*The rodeo man took a long draw on their smoke and sent a chin nod Dean's way. "Where you from, kid?"*

*Dean had his eyes fixed on the man's lips. On the thicker side. Definite nine PM shadow and a jawline that might cut glass. These unreal hazel eyes. The kind he'd never forget. "Nowhere."*

*The answer made the cowboy smile. Like he'd been there. Had the postcard and e'everything. "I*

imagine you feel like you're heading to much the same place." He passed back the cigarette, leaning heavily on the heels of his palms on the railing beside him, putting his weight on his near leg. It showed off the shape of his ass and put his hips that much closer to Dean. Near enough that, by no accident, he had one foot in and one foot out of his personal space.

"I guess so. Why d'you wanna know?" What Dean really wanted to say was, "You don't know the half of it, partner."

The gambler laughed it off with the kind of smile and feckless, warm laughter that evaporated suspicion instantly. "Wonderin' where you picked up that luck of yours. It's something else. You played it by the book, nearly the whole damned time, and bluff with the best of 'em, but some of that shit was straight fuckin' luck. That or you're the single best sleighter I've ever seen."

"You're not mad I took your money?" Dean asked, not perfectly confident in what he was doing with this man.

Cowboy boots had been stepping up on him all the while. They stopped, nearly toe to toe with his, challenging Dean to let him close the remaining space or call it off while there was a way out. Things suddenly felt quiet. Looking inside, over his shoulder, he saw the bar was unnaturally empty, the jukebox still playing *Night Moves*. Heh. The street light hummed. Crickets chirped off in the bramble and brush. Not a soul anywhere nearby but them. Safe.

When he looked at the man again, he had one hand on the rail beside him, and his face was inches away. Blowing smoke up in someone's face; not as sexy as some idjits seemed to think. Dean pointed his mouth to the side and exhaled with the wind. The man's eyes followed his lips. He saw it in his sight's periphery. A troublemaker's smile started forming on Dean's lips.

The cowboy shrugged, nonchalant, staring at Dean sidelong, eyelids heavy, eyes shamelessly finding his lips, speaking the unspoken—the forbidden. "That's the game. Only one of you is gonna win. If you want it to be you, you gotta sit down and play. I'm down tonight, but I'll mop the floor with those wet-eared morons one day soon. Don't worry your lil'

head about me. I win more than I lose. Still, can't blame a guy for wanting to get in on that luck of yours."

Dean started laughing in a way that moved him from head to toe, bowing his head. "I'd give it to you if I could." When he looked back and met the cowboy's gaze again, Dean presented him with as charming a smile as he could muster.

"Huh. That so?" The man was lookin' at him, doubt scrawled in bold across his features. For a second, he couldn't believe this was going down the way it looked to be.

Then, it did. "Yeah. You taught me the game. Least I could do to repay you."

"You got principles, kid. I like you. If you're meanin' what you say—and everythin' you're not—I can think of somethin'," the rodeo hand crooned, toes between Dean's now.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Dean challenged, taking a little of the ground between them for himself.

The cowboy's hat came off as he leaned in closer. "Close your eyes." A hand—rough, calloused, but smelling sweetly of soap and fresh, homegrown tobacco's aroma—found his cheek. His thumb traced down to Dean's lips and parted them. The weight of a whole body leaning into him sandwiched their stiff cocks between them. All Dean's air left him...

In reality, he'd leaned back against the off-kilter maple and with one hand, kept as good a hold on his cock as he could manage through jeans. Mimicking the weight of another cock beside his as well as he could with the side of his palm, drawing on a cigarette, Dean had his belt, waist button, and fly undone before his arse hit the railing in his mind's eye. Brushing grit off his hand on his pant leg, he fumbled himself out, all the spit he could muster in his palm, and... *sweet fuckin' mercy.*

His mind took them down off those steps when a "kiss for luck" became two, then three and four... a few more than that, and he wasn't counting anymore. There was no point...

The truck door swung open; Dean got in and climbed into the back seat of the full-size cab, shoving his pants and skivvies down to his knees.

The door shut. Then, there were two of them back there. Desperate kisses, each taking as much pleasure from the other as hard and fast as they could. Their kisses stopped. The rodeo man spat onto his hand and started jacking Dean harder. His jeans went down—commando underneath. Before Dean processed it, there was a well-muscled, toned, naked ass in his lap, and... this worked preeeeetty much the same, right?

There was a way in and inside it, fuckin' hot, soft, slick flesh... when the cowboy couldn't reach behind him anymore, Dean quickly took over, spit in his palm—there was nothing better on hand—and put as much of it on himself as he could before... **fuck**. Fuck, fuck... **fuck!** Tight as all fucking hell. A whole other person was writhing, tightening and throbbing around him, and this guy... he liked it. He **really** fucking liked it. The ass and thighs straddling him worked as though he could go for hours—like riding was his goddamned profession.

Oh, **wait**. Heh heh. **It was**.

Dean snickered. The cock-lover in his lap wouldn't need to go forever; he'd be shocked if he could hold out for more than a few minutes feeling this good. Warm... so damned warm...

His neck having a hard time keeping his head up straight, Dean looked down and realized the blazing sun had found its way through the trees overhead. It was the scorching mid-afternoon sun on his stomach and dick that had suddenly made things feel so warm, almost hot. His kneading fingers rolled across a nerve, and one of his legs suddenly didn't seem reliable. A little closer to the ground then; down on his knees. A little more spit for shining up his cockhead. There was this spot underneath, right up in the vee on the underside of his head. He rolled a finger over it, pressed down when he found it, jiggling the damn thing like he was trying to warble a guitar string, and... his breathing snagged. *Fuuuuuck*. Holy fucking fuck.

He was up off the tree behind him, bent over forward, braced against a boulder, holding his jerking his pelvis as far ahead as he could manage to keep cum off his clothes. The blunt sound of his seed splattering across leaf, root, and stone brought on smug satisfaction.

*Life for your crops.*



The last thing he needed was questions. Bent over, he tried his best to steady up his breathing and keep from making any sound. His cock and stomach still jumping and clenching, he started chuckling as he leaned back onto the tree trunk, happy, relieved and languidly stroking himself while the last of his flaming nerves fizzled out.

“Whoo. That had some extra kick to it,” Dean murmured. Blinking, clearing his throat and laughing contentedly, he squeezed the last drops of cum he could manage from his dick. Dusting off and using his cleaner hand, he tucked himself away. Zipping up, he found his feet, walking on legs somehow both spaghetti and stiff at the same time, down to the creek’s edge. He went down to one knee on a dry, smooth rock poking up out of the gently flowing water. Rinsing his hands, he brought some cool, clear water up to wash his face.

Man, that felt good. All of it. The... he’d gotten off to the idea of being inside a guy’s ass. How fucked up is that? Totally. Super-mega fucked up. Or, at least, that’s what Sam would think. Dad, too. Maybe not Bobby. He scratched the back of his head. Through thinking it would smell pretty funky for real, that the squishing noises were gross, that it probably felt fucking fantastic to jizz inside someone, no condom on, arms wrapped around them, then to just lay there on their heaving back, as they breathed together when it was done...

Start to finish, it felt like a good thing.

He closed his eyes, drifted, and let his body feel the memory of it one more time...

Hands buried in his pockets, he trudged back up toward the house. Shoulders hunched in, Dean came up on the backyard from behind Bobby’s corrugated metal tool shed. Laughter; first their Dad’s, then Bobby’s, met his ears. There was somethin’ off about Bobby’s laughter. It wasn’t quite... he didn’t really mean it. Dean let out a scoff. How his dad wasn’t picking up on that...

John wasn’t realizing it because he wasn’t paying attention. He was too caught up shootin’ the shit over God knows how many beers fireside by the pit made of one-third of a scrap steel fifty-five-gallon drum buried six inches deep in the ground. When they’d started showing up more



often, Bobby had constructed a brick well around it. The stone would get hot, but nowhere near as deadly hot as the steel. Steel that hot didn't burn; it sloughed your flesh off your body. Dean smiled at the thought. Bobby cared. He really cared. Thought about keeping them safe even when they weren't around...

"...I looked the guy dead in the eyes and said, 'Keep a closer eye on your soap, cockeye.' You should have seen the look on his face!" John's howling laughter put a bolt of fear straight through Dean's heart. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what 'cockeye' meant. Creeping, Dean stalked up behind the shed quietly, rolling the soles of his feet to silence his step just like Bobby taught him. Peering around the corner with one eye, mouth hanging slightly open to hear better the way he'd been shown, the young boy watched, and he *listened*.

Bobby lounged there, right beside his father, chuckling away. Dean's stomach sank way down into his boot heel. His eyes started to water.

He had no concrete grasp of why, but something in his gut had made him think maybe, just fuckin' maybe, he could tell Bobby. Ask him about what he was thinking and feeling. Get an idea about why. Bobby knew more than anyone Dean had ever known. Probably more than anyone he ever would know. He'd know about this, too. What to do about it. How to help him grow out of it, or get rid of it.

No.

The assertion slapped him across the face. Dean frowned. Something in him was held onto the memory of what he'd done by the creek for dear bloody life.

*It made me feel **good**. I'm not giving that up.*

His father's voice intruded. "Buddy wasn't getting' the fuckin' hint. So, we got him in his cot. Used his sheets to strap him down. Whipped out the dicks and duct tape and got to work..."

Apparently, the guy had been a little hairier than most. They'd covered his groin with duct tape. Wrapped his penis with it. So tight it would make his dick fall off if he didn't get it off in time despite the pain of ripping out hair and peeling off skin. All while the lot of them gagged and tea-bagged the soldier. They flipped the guy over and muffled his screams with his pillow when the fight to turn him over pinched and tore

his skin and ripped out his hair. John and his buddies labelled him in large, bold letters—the only kind duct tape can make: F-A-G. When the recruit ripped off the tape, it would leave those patches of bare skin behind. He'd wear the word on his back for weeks until the hair grew in again. That is, if he didn't wise up and wash out first. Hell, if he even lived that long. Remembering the guy's sounds in his cot afterward, then as he limped to the head, made his Dad snicker.

BOOM.

Bobby subtly snapped his gaze toward the shed at the thunderous sound of buckling metal. It was the barest instant, but he'd caught it. The sun on a mop of sun-bleached golden-brown hair. Bobby's expression slowly rearranged itself into a frown. Why would Dean *hide* from...? Oh no. Oh God, no. A boy like that on the road, day and night, with *this man*...

"What is it?" John demanded.

Bobby kept control of his expression, and every wavelength of every word he uttered, like a life only getting started, depended on winning this hand. He shrugged. "Nothin'. Probably a fuckin' squirrel. I'll check the traps later."

He took a casual swig of beer. John took the bait, hook, line, and sinker.

Dean held himself an inch or so off his traitorous cover, frozen in fear. Fear the likes of which he'd never felt in his life, and he'd known his share. Wide-eyed, stiff as steel, eyes full of water and quivering, Dean fought the urge to run and never look back. Away from the hurt in his heart, the sickness in his stomach, the kind of fear that could drive a person mad. He'd starve to death, or something wild might get him, but it would be *better* that way. Quicker, less painful. His father wasn't the person he'd hoped he was—that he needed him to be—and Bobby...?

He wanted to move his feet. He wasn't safe here. His heart was jackhammering in his chest. He was gonna be sick. Every fibre in his body was screaming, "Get away! *Now!*" But something profound, beyond instinct kept him stone-still—kept him safe from doing anything stupid. He heard a sound like rustling leaves overhead, but there wasn't a breath of wind in the trees.

Bobby's voice cut through the sound of his heartbeat and panicked breathing. "What was that you were sayin' about a rattle in the ol' girl's vents?"

John nodded emphatically. "Yeah. Weirdest thing. Noticed it a while back. Might've been happenin' longer, but—"

"Wanna go have a look? See what we can find?" Bobby asked jovially, but just a bit too quickly. That is, if John had really been listening. Which, after this many beers, he wasn't.

Belly-laughing, John shrugged, took another swallow of his beer, and got up out of his creaky, rickety lawn chair. "Sure!"

The old men strolled off toward the junkyard where Baby waited under shelter in a repair bay while they worked on changing oil. Dean took a small step to catch himself when he started feeling like he was about to pitch over forward. He let out his breath, relieved; he could move his feet again. The threat of emptying his stomach was much less immediate.

Listening for a few seconds to be sure Dad and Bobby's footsteps kept getting further away, Dean nimbly crept to the other end of the shed—the one closest to the house. With no more than a second's hesitation, he made a low dash for cover behind the shrubbery beside the back deck.

Staying crouched below the field of view from the ground floor windows, Dean slipped back in through the basement window he'd snuck out of.

He didn't see Bobby sneak a furtive glance back over his shoulder and smile.



## Singer Homestead - Late Summer, 1994

Bobby walked over to the old, weathered wattle fence, handing Dean a beer. Anyone who could pull off a solo hunt was old enough to drink far as he was concerned. The kid was greased up to his elbows from

working on his brand-new Baby-girl all afternoon. Well, brand new to *him*, anyhow. Somehow, it wasn't a chore for the boy. He loved working on 'er. Curious about *everything*. He'd had to stop Dean taking her apart any more than they needed to. There was no tellin' when John might reappear and the ol' girl needed to be back together quick-like if it happened.

Witcherville, Arkansas, was one sordid spirit down, and the truck was finally ready, out on the road with John. Dean might not look the age yet, but a forged license and borrowed social security number meant he could get behind the wheel. Once he was tall enough, he drove backcountry roads outside the law for a couple of years.

Dean took a long, cold, quenching drink. One thumbnail digging under the label on the beer bottle, he worked up the nerve to say, "I've been thinkin', Bobby."

"'Bout what?" Bobby asked with a lopsided smile on, clinking their beers necks together.

"Enlisting."

Bobby's cheerful expression fell in a heartbeat. "Dean..."

The boy scoffed, disappointed. "You don't sound... thrilled."

Sombre as a storm cloud, Bobby replied, "It's no walk in the park, kid. Look, huntin' is one thing... You wanna know what it's about? What huntin's really about? Going out into the world and making it safer, better. It's about putting a balance that's outta whack, right again. Seeing to it that tortured souls rest the way they oughta be. Sometimes it means ending something that isn't necessarily evil; it's just being what it is, like any other predator."

Dean just looked at him, taking in what he said, nodding.

"Enlisting... isn't about balance or a safer world. It's about signing up to kill or maim other human beings for all kinds of reasons, most of which boil down to something way above a grunt's pay grade and having little or nothing to do with what's 'right' and 'freedom'. It's religion, power, influence, politics, and resources. When you hunt something down, it's clean... humane. Mostly.

"War is about winning. Taking and holding territory. Brutally. You tell yourself you're shipping out to do good in the world. Then things start

goin' up in smoke... soon enough, you cain't see the line between right an' wrong anymore, and it's just about survivin' long enough to get home, no matter what you have to do. Don't get me wrong. Your Dad's time in made him good at what he does, and it's makin' you even better, but..." Bobby reached over and patted the kid's back, pursing his lips, and taking a firm hold of him by the shoulder for a few seconds.

"You don't want to see me doin' it."

Bobby shook his head. "There's no war on, son. When your Dad went in, there was reason to be there. At least, at first."

"You know an awful lot about this for someone who never served."

"Oh, I've served," Bobby shot back, his expression turning dead-to-rights grim. "You bet your ass they called my fuckin' number, 'cause that's how my luck works." Bobby downed a mouthful of beer.

Dean frowned. "Why'd you never—?"

"Say anythin'? Not the proudest thing I've ever done with my life," Bobby said, fixing Dean with a loaded look. One that had nothing to do with shame, more like... pride and affection.

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen men—people I thought were good men—do things to another human being that have stayed with me this far, and they'll stay with me the rest of my life. And it wasn't just our enemies they did it to." The look on Bobby's face darkened.

Dean's tone turned careful, like his voice was physically tiptoeing through the conversation. "Bobby...?"

Bobby shook his head instead of saying, *No, not me*. "In a way, I got lucky. There was another kid—he volunteered. Couldn't have been more than twenty... it was hazing. He got the worst of it that night. It got out





Bobby Singer © pimento-girl | DA | R | T |

that the kid had... uh, alternative sexual appetites, if you catch my drift. The platoon's Drill Sergeant and a K-9 handler got ahold of the guy.

Sergeant held his arms in a vice grip behind his back. They forced him to his knees. This kid was no slouch either; in better shape than I was. But it didn't matter. The handler had his German shepherd zeroed in on 'im. He so much as tried to struggle, that thing went at him growlin' and snarlin'... like his face looked good for dinner.

"They yanked the kid's pants and skivvies down to his knees. Don't remember clearly, but I think I saw the Sergeant, uh... untuck himself. Anyway, goes on for a few minutes. These two are yellin' every slur you can imagine at this poor kid at the top of their lungs, slappin' him when he tries to protest, and Sarge... he was grindin' himself into the kid's backside. I've never been sure, but I think that Sergeant got into 'im. These tics were happenin' on his face, no matter how hard he tried to keep his expression blank. *That fuckin' dog* was snappin' and swipin' his teeth at the kid a hair's breadth away from his skin the whole time. Like some hound straight outta Hell."

Dean watched Bobby recount the story with a look on that could've drilled through the aging hunter's temple. "It's a small miracle he didn't come away from that shit missing a chunk of cheek or a piece of his nose. Or get something even more important bit right the fuck off. I've never seen anyone shake like that, except in the middle of absolutely harrowing shit. Cherry on top was the Sarge bustin' a nut all over the kid's face." Bobby shifted like the memory sent a shiver down his spine—thirty-plus years on, it still did.

They were supposed to be *brothers-in-arms*, and how would that soldier ever trust someone who could do that kind of shit to him? Did he trust someone capable of doing that to another human being to give him orders worth following? No. Every time this kid would set foot out into the field, every second of every fuckin' day, he wouldn't just have to fight against people who were enemies of the good he was trying to fight for. He would look to his left, right, and behind him, keenly aware he was surrounded by enemies of who he is to his very core.

He already knew, if the shit hit the fan, his section mates wouldn't have his back. If they couldn't stand up to these men when there wasn't a single bullet involved, they would be capable of no better when lead and shrapnel started flying.

Not having taken so much as a sip of beer while Bobby told his story, Dean stayed unmoving, watchful, and silent as Bobby's internal understanding of what had gone down that night played out on his face. Plain as the letters of a neon sign that read: *this is the world you live in, son.*

Dean kept his cards out of his expression and voice like a champion poker player when he asked, "Did ya join in on it?"

Scoffing, Bobby replied, "*Hell no.* I was tied up. Besides, you sign up to serve and give limb or life—or both—for a country that doesn't give a shit about you the rest of the time, I couldn't give a flyin' fuck how you get your kicks, so long as it doesn't interfere with the job. That night stuck with me, though. Not because of the crap they did to me and the other guys. The rest was playground, frat-boy shit. Makes me sick to my stomach that I didn't have the nerve to help that poor kid. He washed out within the year. Never the same after that. Killed himself a decade or so later. Way too goddamn young. I don't think he ever got over the shame. The why of his quittin' probably followed him home." Dean frowned as his blood ran cold, sending chills and gooseflesh across every inch of his skin. Bobby cared enough to look the guy up more than a decade after the fact. They had been friends.

"That's not on you. He couldn't hack it," Dean responded with disdain, thoroughly devoid of emotion, let alone empathy. Bobby looked on the boy, stunned. It was Dean's—caring, where-does-it-hurt, I'll-raise-my-little-brother-if-you-won't—Dean's lips moving, but it was John-fuckin'-Winchester talking.

Bobby's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Isn't it? An' I hope to God you don't mean that."

Dean looked at Bobby out of the side of his eyes, face upturned like he was looking down on the man for showing weakness—vulnerability. "If I do?"

Bobby took a few small steps toward him, looking like he was ready to take a swing. Dean leaned away, staring at Bobby, boyishly wide-eyed and taken aback. "If you do, you're no better than those rapists. Standing by and doing nothing to stop them was as despicable as what they did. You have a good, long *think* about that, boy."



**HOOONK!**

Dean slammed on the brakes and released them a split second before he swerved back into his lane, out of oncoming traffic. The abrupt loss of speed gave him mere inches that turned a head-on crash into a near miss. He dialled back on his oversteering just before Baby's wheels hit the warning strip marking the shoulder. Taking heaving breaths as he reoriented himself to the present moment, how close that had been sunk in. There was a small divot on the edge of his side-view mirror that hadn't been there beforehand. The butt of a furious fist smacked itself down onto the ledge over the dash once and again.

"*Shit!* Sorry, Baby...! I'm sorry," he said, forcing his fist to unclench.

Sure of being back in his lane and safely spaced out from other cars, Dean looked into his mirrors for any sign that the other party had pulled over. Nothing—they were truckin' on their way along the road again. *Son of a bitch*. He soothingly smoothed out the spot on the dash where his fist had hit in anger before putting his hand firmly back on the wheel, keeping a laser focus on the road and surrounding traffic. Minutes later, he found a shoulder wide and flat enough to pull onto.

It was a long-ago memory, but he'd felt fifteen again so keenly he might as well have been standing there shootin' the shit and drinkin' beer exactly as he was now.

*Bobby had known him better than he knew himself. Even then.* He missed the salty old dog like he hadn't for a long time. Blinking, a single tear fell from each eye. Dean wiped them both away hard with a knuckle. With that, he'd shed more tears for Bobby Singer than for his flesh-and-blood father. His blood pumping and pounding in his ears, hand finding Baby's door handle, he opened the car door in front of upcoming traffic.

**HOOOOONK!**

"*Fuck!*" Dean shouted, instinctively slamming the door closed again, disoriented, his heart hammering and breathing heavy. He was as dangerous to others as to himself, like this. Turning the keys back, he killed



the engine, catching his breath. Climbing across the seat, Dean crawled out the passenger door. He went straight to the back for a water thermos in the cooler, pocketing his keys and letting the trunk drop closed again. Taking a long drink, he began to pace what little gravel there was before the shoulder dropped off into an overgrown, swampy, weeded ditch. His eyes wouldn't stop trying to water, and it pissed him off.

He took in a levelling breath, his gaze turning skyward.

Clear blue sky. Blue eyes. *Bright, clear, sky-blue eyes...*

A burgeoning ache swelled in his chest. Dean blinked water out of his eyes and the intruding vision out of his sight. Slowing to a stop, standing on the gravel unmoving, his expression went vacant: gone into his memories again.



Bobby had seen him once.

He'd blatantly looked over one well-put-together hunter from behind in passing at a roadhouse without giving any thought whatsoever to keeping a handle on the expression on his face. Another pair of hunters saw it from across the barroom and decided he was easy prey. They'd come at him from behind and to the side. He had no idea they were closing in until Bobby stepped between them, growling at the pair, "Go back to makin' love to your drinks, or I'll bury you in the foothills."

The beating they'd been angling for was suddenly not worth the trouble. One turned back to their table and took the other by the arm, half-dragging him away. The one being dragged fixed Dean with a stare that said, *I know you, and one of these days, I will get you, ya fuckin' faggot*, without saying a word. Bobby stood firm, staring down the miscreants and, soon enough, the rest of the bar when things went dead quiet.

Putting his arm 'round him, Bobby rested a steady hand on his shoulder and pulled him in tight. The touch unmistakably told Dean he loved him, full-stop, but the regretful look on his face, on full display in the mirror behind the bar, said, *Stow that shit, son. Ain't good for nothin' but trouble.*



Damned near pulling him off his stool, Bobby walked them calmly out the door—*nothin' to see here, folks*. Bobby kept his head on swivel and a hand near the sidearm at his hip all the way to their beat-up jalopy. Sam was lying down in the back seat, flashlight in hand, his nose buried in a copy of *Ender's Game*. Ordering Dean into the front seat, Bobby burned rubber on the way outta the parking lot. Lotta miles ended up behind them before they stopped again.

Their work here would have to stay unfinished. Sixteen and a few months to spare, half a head taller than most of the room, stacked for his age, and ballsy as fuck, Dean already stood out. He had the kind of face—the kind of smile—that people remembered, whether he wanted them to... or not.



Putting a hand over his eyes, Dean took a deep breath. His gaze fell to the ground. Evenly, calmly, Dean stepped backward out of a garter snake's path as the little thing eyed possibly climbing over his boot. No doubt, looking to cross the busy highway and head for the river on the other side. He found a loose stick in roadside bramble and hooked it underneath the snake's belly, gently, quickly, and smoothly putting the critter back into the water at the bottom of the ditch.

Digging his boot toe hard into the mud and grass, he scaled the step back up to gravel. Returning to the car, he opened the passenger side door, digging his hunter-annotated map book out of Baby's glove box. He paused as he was leafing through to his location.

The morning sun sat low to the east in a cloudless sky. The vibrantly colored, blue, green, and winding river glittered, forcing him to squint to look at it. He was surrounded by stunningly beautiful mountain country. Hanging his head for a second, he looked to his side for no reason in particular. The persistent—if suicidal—garter snake was back on gravel. Dean chuckled a few times, shaking his head.

"Determined little fucker, aren't ya?" he asked, sighing, of a creature that could give no answer other than continuing on its merry way. This little guy was gonna wind up a smear on the patchy, pothole-riddled

asphalt. He moved calmly to dig his leather work gloves out of clutter obscuring the floor in the back seat. It was a little warier of the branch than it had first been. Nevertheless, he managed to snatch it back from the treads of this beast of a pick-up truck just in time. His steady hands smoothly formed a continuous path for the snake to explore as the seconds passed until there wasn't a vehicle oncoming in either direction long enough to make it across the two-lane highway.

As he moved with greater effort, the snake became uneasier, moving slightly quicker across the supple leather he wore on his hands. "Somewhere you need to be right now?" he asked, laughing. He had to pick up his pace their last couple of steps. That got the little thing wanting out of his hands. "Okay, okay! Heh heh... there you go..." One last offering of support from the back of a hand saw the lively critter into the roadside grass beneath the guardrail. The sleek-bodied serpent slithered its winding way through the grass to the runoff from a nearby culvert—a tiny tributary into the massive, prey-rich river some yards away.

Dean smiled, sighing as he tucked his gloves into his back pocket, bracing himself on the guard rail and watching the plucky little fellow get on with his business. "Yeah... me too."

*Am I ever gonna show up at a pride parade wearing rainbows and behaving so flamboyantly I might as well have had a personality transplant? Hell no. Does just the thought of kissing, touching, and gettin' inside Cas... whoo. Yep,* Dean thought, whistling. He bowed his head, digging the toe of his boot into the gravel as he winced and took a stuttering breath to get clear of the headrush brought on by the fantasy.

*Makes my heart jump.*



Dean tossed his duffle down on the motel bed. Reaching up a hand to smooth out his ruffled eyebrows, he wound up wincing when crunchy, sharp crust in the corner of his eye bit into him while wiping it away. Frustrated by unexpected pain, he impatiently dusted off his hand on his jeans. It was early to throw in the towel, but in this headstate, he was better off parked and slowly drinking himself to sleep. There was no

reason to stay on the road, putting the lives of others in danger, because he couldn't stop thinking about things he didn't want to think about.

It didn't help that he'd come up against a dead end. He'd heard word about someone making a splash in the arcane goods market. The problem was, people seemed determined to keep who this person was, and where they did business, the best-kept secret in the northern states. The kind of place that can only be found by those who already know where it is. He understood it; nobody wants a dandy supplier drying up. A little you-scratch-my-back thinking in a world grappling with giving ghost stories, legends, myths, and religions more credence than ever before goes a long way. Still, he wasn't deterred, yet.

Elbow digging into his thigh above the knee, he covered his eyes with his hand. Keeping light out, he kneaded into the pressure point on his temple with his thumb. The first good rest his eyes had all day. He'd been on the move since six-thirty this morning. It felt like he'd spent the day in a time warp—like he'd been driving for days. The faster he wanted time to pass, the slower it went. *Fuck you, Time.*

Dean flopped back on the bed, absent any urgent impetus to do anything else. His eyes closed.

*Time...*

"Clock's ticking, John. I can't say it any plainer than that," Bobby stated, throwing his hands up.

"What are you talkin' about?"

Bobby stared at John, agog. "What do you expect the kid to do with his life, John?" he asked, incredulous. "Have you even thought about it? You think he's just going to sit in grungy motel rooms, learning the trade, staring at boob tubes and nothing but four walls until you finally kill the guy that's tryin' to kill him? Has it occurred to you that he could easily become a grown *man* before that happens?"

"I'm close, Bobby. This time, I'll get the bastard," John insisted, his voice thick with over-the-top charm that belied what he said.

Bobby shook his head, rolling his eyes. He let out a sound that landed somewhere between a scoff and sigh. "Sure you will, *Ahab*." The man

standing before him wasn't all the way gone, but he wasn't perfectly sane either.

"All right. You know what, I don't need this—"

Bobby stopped him before he could get out the word *shit*. "John, have you looked at your sons lately? Dean's *grown* and way too damned fast. He's not a kid anymore. Hasn't been for a *long fuckin'* time. You gotta ease up on 'im. Let 'im figure out how to be his own man."



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"He's drivin', huntin' on his own, he's doin' a bang-up job of lookin' after Sammy—" John countered, swinging his arm wide in the general direction of the house and Sam, nose glued to a dusty old tome, inside.

"That's not what I'm talkin' about." Bobby held John's gaze, anger starting to overwhelm any restraint he had to work with. "That makes him your man, John. Not his own. You asked him lately what *he* wants from life? Does he even *want* to be doing this?"

It was John's turn to scoff incredulously. "I taught him how to survive, Bobby. I taught him self-reliance. I never got on his case about shit that didn't matter..."

Bobby stared at John blankly. He couldn't believe he was listening to a grown-ass man. All that telling you to eat your veggies, wash behind your ears, and brush your teeth before bed is the kind of stuff you look back on and realize there was damned good reason for it.

John saw it the moment the look on Bobby's face called out his bullshit. "Sam is still alive because I—!"

There it was—the proverbial straw. Bobby snapped. "Sam is smarter than the two of us *put together!* He read Ender's Game six months ago, and you know what, John? He gets it. That book is mandatory reading in the Marine Corps, and your eleven-year-old son *gets it*. We're not equipped to teach him everything he's capable of learning. Dean's...!" Bobby trailed off, taken by surprise at how forcefully every fibre of his being knew John shouldn't know *this* about his son. A sudden chill seized him as the muscles of his face clamped his jaw shut before he could think to do it himself.

John's eyes narrowed. "*Dean's what?*" he demanded, advancing on Bobby like he was ready to extract the truth from him forcibly if he had to.

Bobby desperately searched his mind for something to offer up in the stead of: *Dean's... he's questioning himself... changing—growing—in ways I didn't expect.* "He's had to *raise* his little brother, John, and either you never noticed, or you don't care. An' I don't know which is worse." It didn't matter that he'd pulled out another potent, awful truth as a feint. He'd hesitated too long, and John was no idiot. Already calling his bluff, the look on John's face telegraphed working out the truth despite Bobby's best effort. The list of things Bobby wouldn't want him to know was short.

"Sam wants to try for university. Law," Bobby bluntly stated.

John rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Kid's eleven. He doesn't know what he fuckin' wants."

Bobby held John's gaze; held on hard. "Sam does."



"How the fuck would you—" John began, a disdainful sneer drawing up one side of his lips.

Bobby planted his feet hard in the cracked dirt. "I know because he told me."

"Why the fuck is he saying it to you, not his own father?" John demanded, suspicious. What the hell was going on with *his* kids and this man?

It was the derision in John's voice when it produced the word *you* that did Bobby in. "John, why the fuck do you think you know so many people *happy* to look after these boys when you decide to disappear for a few weeks...?!"

Dean had himself lying down, head rested surprisingly comfortably, between where an off-shooting branch split into two just after emerging from the thick, undulating trunk of the maple tree. The curve of the branch and its outgrowths cradled him like the hand of a sleeping, swaying giant. Hands latched over his chest, Walkman clipped to his belt, Dean slept better here than in any bed or couch in any house he'd ever stayed in. Better, even, than on Baby's seats.

Maybe it was because there wasn't one instance where he remembered something bad happening to him in a tree. Or because it felt like this tree had custom-grown to hold him, with branches perfectly placed to cradle his arms and comfortably sling his legs over, letting them dangle from the knees down. A dip exactly where his arse needed it to be. The wind, the sun shining down warm through rustling leaves, some easy listening Zeppelin in his ears. Peaceful. Safe. A simple boy's paradise.

He started awake violently at the sound of raised voices. One of them, Bobby, the other... Dad. Shit. No, no, no, no, **no**...!

Dean knew his way through the branches of this old maple as well as he knew his way around Baby's engine. Silently monkeying his way to the ground, he outstretched his boots as far toward the ground as he could before letting his fingers slide off the tree branch. Landing with fluid grace, itchy bits of bark fell on the bare skin of his neck as he landed and crouched, one hand going down to silence the jangling Walkman making noise on his hip. Dean kept low to the ground and out of sight

among the junkyard's maze of rusting steel skeletons. He couldn't get close enough to truly hear, not without being seen, even with wind gusts coming and going like this...

"You watch your goddamn mouth, Singer," John warned him, pointing an angry finger in Bobby's direction.

"Or what, *Winchester*?" Back to a last-name basis, then? Fuckin' fine by him.

"They're *my sons*! I'll be the judge of what's best for them and what isn't!" John shouted, a dangerous edge to his tone.

"You're so wrapped up in revenge, you wouldn't know what's best for these boys if I wrote it down on a two-by-four and **SMACKED YOU ACROSS THE FACE WITH IT!!**" Bobby was bellowing from the depths of his chest by the time he finished the sentence. John swung at him with such speed and fury his fists almost landed. A lesser man on the receiving end would've been out cold on the ground. Bobby moved a hair sideways on his toes and deflected the blow like a champion boxer, coming back swinging with fists moving so quick they were hard to see. Each shot landed with what could only be trained, gifted precision.

Dean watched, utterly confused, as the man he thought no one and nothing could take down wound up on his back on the dry, rocky ground, clouds of tawny, powdery dirt rising into the air around them. It all happened so quickly Dean wasn't even sure he'd seen the hit that did it. His dad's nose was bleeding, his cheek and lip split, and his movements had turned limp. From the way John was blinking and held up a hand to ward off blows without knowing whether or not any were incoming, it was apparent he was disoriented and couldn't see straight.

John looked up, uncomprehending, as the aging hunter-cum-mechanic towered over him, leaving him in shadow, a menacing, wild-eyed fury in his eyes.

"Now, get up, keep your shit together, go back to your truck, and wait for the boys by the road." John surged up like he wasn't done yet. Bobby drew the gun from under his belt beneath his plaid shirt in the small

of his back. John froze, the cold gun barrel metal pressed against his forehead, square between his eyes.

He'd kept his cool through some pretty gnarly shit, but he'd never looked *Death* in the eye before. What felt like... *breath* colder than ice gave birth to a chill at the back of his neck that permeated his body from head to toe. He'd never been close enough to the end to have what he knew to be a Reaper breathing down his neck. That gentled him down, and had his lips quivering in fear.

The sight of his father on his knees before Bobby Singer with a gun to his face stayed with Dean for the rest of his life. He couldn't hear what Bobby said next, but he knew his lips were moving. He wished he could read them.

"I swear to God Almighty, if either of those boys ever comes to harm because of you, I will track you down and take you apart so thoroughly you'll beg for Hell long before I'm done. *Get off my property.*"

Unsteady, John struggled to his feet and moved around Bobby as though skirting a mountain. Bobby stood in place, unfazed by any potential threat John Winchester might've posed, relaxing the firearm's hammer before John was out of arm's reach. Bobby took a deep breath, collected himself, and stowed the handgun under his pants waist before heading off for the house to find Dean and Sam.

Dean snuck into the basement and made it upstairs to the room he shared with his brother without being detected. He didn't want to risk the wrath of either of these old men for eavesdropping. Bobby, he knew, would never raise a hand to either him or Sam. John, on the other hand...

Knocking on the bedroom door before he walked into the room, Bobby told Dean to pack up everything he had in the house. *Everything.* Dean's expression fell, his eyes watered, and he knew there was nothing he could do to stop this or change it. Bobby watched it all play out on his face, never looking away. *Never look away from suffering you're responsible for.* One of the first things Bobby Singer ever taught him.

Despite knowing what was coming, actually hearing it from Bobby's lips cut much deeper than Dean expected. He didn't ask how much time he had. He just got up, got a grip on the emotions threatening to break his heart, and got to work collecting everything he could remember where it was and find.

Bobby watched as Dean took the hit and just kept on keepin' on. One more hard knock in a young life already brimming with them.

Dean thanked Sam's lucky stars when he got downstairs and discovered his little brother had been wearing his headphones while the shouting match transpired outside. Probably listening to instrumental music by some guy with a name Dean didn't wanna even attempt to pronounce, who'd been dead for a good century at the very least. Bobby helped him pack. Dean occupied himself in the kitchen, fetching some food Bobby told him to take with them, pretending not to be looking when Bobby stopped Sam in the hallway, hugging his youngest son.

The fearful look on Sam's face slowly rearranged itself as he learned in the moment to control his expression. He was so *smart*. Sam never once asked if they could go back to Bobby's again. He knew they couldn't. He just didn't know why.

Dean had their belongings packed into Baby's trunk with an efficiency that broke Bobby's heart. He watched from the front porch as the sixteen-year-old put his baby brother in the back seat, handing Sam everything he wanted to have with him to entertain himself on the road and stowing the rest of his baggage away in the trunk. Dean opened the driver's side door and stopped, turning to look back at Bobby.

Bobby raised a hand. No waving, no nothing. Simply raised it. He kept the expression on his face unchanged, hoping it would serve to hide the fact that he couldn't see the boy clearly through the tears in his eyes. He blinked, and a pair of tears fell, but by that time, Dean had turned away and stuck one leg into the car. If Dean had tried subtly communicating anything in those last few seconds, he'd missed it.

Dean fixed his hardened gaze on John, standing leaning against the door of his truck by the road. Slowly shifting his feet, John looked like a predator that resented being unable to get at a meal it wanted a piece of because it instinctively knew it would come away from the scuffle injured and empty-handed.

Turning back to the house, Dean kept one hand on top of the car door. The Impala was parked near enough to the road that Bobby was a slightly indistinct figure, standing still as a statue on the top step up to the front porch. Dean felt his expression twist in anger and sadness. Then Bobby raised a steady hand into the air and kept it there. Even now, the man was more concerned with giving him the strength to face the road ahead than keeping it for himself. He frowned as a peaceful, warm feeling appeared inside him.

*I'll see him again.*

Giving Bobby a small, reassuring nod, he stepped up and ducked into the driver's seat, swinging the door closed. The old girl's door shut with a slight, high-pitched complaint.

He'd have to wipe down the hinge and oil that at their next pit stop. Dean caught one last glimpse of the older man in the rear-view mirror as they pulled out of the driveway and followed John's dusty trail down the road.

The look on young Sam's face as he peered forlornly over Baby's back seat at him as they pulled out of the driveway stayed with Bobby. He remembered it with perfect clarity until the day he died.



Inhaling brokenly, Dean shifted on the bar stool to take pressure off a numbing spot on his backside. The muscles on his face worked as he fought to keep his expression from twisting and to stop his eyes watering. He neatly knocked back the remainder of the whiskey in the glass in hand. Not two weeks went by after that until the first time his father had told him to lure some hairy, stinking, burly werewolf trucker to somewhere



out of the way and into a trap John had laid for it. His father's words echoed in his ears, even now...

*"Convince him to come with you. I'll be waiting by the culvert," John ordered coldly, opening the door and moving to exit the truck.*

*Dean looked down into his lap, at a loss, his mind racing. "How?" he asked, coming up short for any kind of idea as John stepped down off the truck's foot rail, about to close the door behind him.*

*His father looked disdainfully back over his shoulder at him, out the corner of his eye. "If you can't figure something out, don't call yourself a hunter."*

John never insulted him over what he knew about him, but he never acknowledged it either. It was a piece of him his father treated like a scrap of meat to be tossed into whatever trap it could sweeten and wound up ripped into by whatever hungry, merciless creature found it appealing. Then, one day, he checked in with it and found it curled up, catatonic, cut up, bloodied, and slashed to ribbons in some deep, dark pit in the back of his mind, just like so many other pieces of him that'd dared to feel anything, that had risked attaching itself to someone.

He understood why his father did it. What—who—you care about can be used against you. John did it to make him stronger—like he was tempering a sword. So, he went along with it, let it happen, let himself be numbed—deadened—and sharpened, never thinking that one day he might want someone around in ways that meant he would need, more than anything, a part of himself he'd taken off life support long ago.

Dean emptied his replenished shot glass, sliding it back across the counter to the bartender.



Sam walked into the sitting room, off to one side of the main library, a glass of whiskey in each hand, one twice as full as the other. That one he offered to Cas. The angel hadn't realized Sam was in the room to interact with him until the moment he did. He'd been noticeably unfocused since

Dean left. Normally, Castiel was sharply aware someone was there before he ever looked your way. Usually knew precisely why you were there, too. More than once in the last day and some, Sam had walked up behind him, taking him by surprise. He'd felt awful about how badly it startled Cas. Now, he made a point of approaching the seraph from a direction where he could be seen coming.

"How you doing, Cas? You seem a little... off."

Castiel scoffed gently and hopped up his eyebrows, taking a sip of the whiskey he'd been handed, letting the book he'd been reading fall to rest in his lap.

Sam allowed himself a bout of chuckles. Now that he'd stated the obvious, time for something a little less apparent. Biting his lip a second, he asked, "Keeping an eye on Dean?"

Cas laughed bitterly and smiled. "No. I'm not. He asked to be left to himself... so, that's what I'm doing," the angel replied uneasily. He sighed unhappily, looking down into his glass, taking another, longer drink.

Seating himself on a lounge chair opposite Castiel, Sam settled in with his glass in both hands between his knees. "Cas, when was the last time my brother asked for what was good for him?" Sam asked, his expression turned pointed but still playful. A smirk started curling up one side of his lips.

"It's been a while," Cas said through his widening grin as he looked up to Sam.

Sam took a deep breath and sighed, relieved the angel seemed perked up. "Right. Look... I'm not saying 'go sit on his shoulder', just... maybe don't be afraid to listen in a little closer. Probably take the edge off your nerves one Hell of a lot better than booze."

Smiling, Castiel nodded gratefully. It was apparent by his expression alone he'd taken the advice on board. "Right." Sam acknowledged him in return, stood up and walked over, landing a solid, reassuring clap on top of his shoulder, careful of the seraph's wounds. Fixing his gaze on the bottom of his drink, Castiel turned the glass about in hand, pensive. Sam sauntered out of the room with his free hand in his jeans pocket, drinking down another swallow of the potent liquor as he walked.



“Mellow is the man who knows what he’s been missing.”

- Led Zeppelin’s “Over the Hills and Far Away”



Tonight, a rustling breeze turned the tree leaves and shrubbery in the garden plots outside the motel windows into wind instruments. Dean laid himself out on the bed, ankles crossed, stainless steel flask of whiskey on the night table, seeing in his waking gaze something other than the swirl-spackled ceiling above him.

Lee had to be one of the funniest people he’d ever met. Always had a story to tell...

“...So, I’ve got this girl set up on the John Deere—she’s never driven anything before in her life, mind you—and I throttle it up, give the thing some juice, and stand back. Off she goes down the lawn...” He shrugs. No big deal. “I head back to the back patio have a seat in the shade, havin’ a beer and watching her figure this thing out. As I’m watchin’... she gets comfortable and ups the throttle some. Does a lap and a little bit, nice and easy... and she pushes the throttle a bit further up. I’m just noddin’ thinking to myself, ‘All right—girl’s got a need for speed. I dig it.’” Dean took his shot on the pool table and sank it.

He wandered toward the cue ball as it slowly rolled to a stop. Unable to help admiring Lee for a few seconds, Dean decided on and lined up his next shot. He was far enough away Lee would never know the difference between assessing the table and checkin’ out what he was packin’—and he was indeed a built and *packin’* fella.

"*Next thing I know*, my mom calls me into the house. I went back in for a minute; grabbed the cookies and lemonade she'd made for us to chow down after we were done with the lawn..."

Cue. CLACK. Miss. *Dammit*. Eyes on the pool balls, Dean. The pool balls. Shaking his head, Dean refocused his attention on Lee's tale, chuckling. His friend moved himself into line with his shot as he continued the story with this incredible smile lighting up his face.

"I walk back out, beer in one hand, tray in the other, and when I come 'round the corner of the house... this chick is *flying* down the lawn towards me. You gotta understand, she was on the curvier side; tits like you've rarely ever seen, and she's not even mowing the lawn anymore. The mower is bouncing along, leaving long patches in the grass behind her, and it's a small fucking *wonder* these volleyballs haven't knocked her out, bouncing around like that! Sky-eyed, fuckin' beautiful wavy blonde hair, down to the middle of her back, all loose and flyin' around...! I hear someone crackin' up, coming from the window behind me, and it's my mom! Howling her damned head off!"

Dean damn-near spat out his beer instantly when the image of this chick hanging onto the wheel of a John Deere mower for dear life, bounding down the lawn with glorious knockers bouncing along in front of her, crystallized in his mind, left him grinning and cackling like a madman.

Lee took his shot and scratched, but he didn't give a shit. He should have, though. "This chick takes a turn on the lawn wide and waves at me like a mad fiend! She's havin' the time of her fuckin' life! I swear to you, what my balls did right then, never felt anything like it in all my goddamned years! I had to put the damn beer and tray down on the picnic table, or I was gonna drop the fucking things; I was laughing so hard. I've never seen anything like it! Not before or since...!"

Lee couldn't continue his own story, he was laughing so hard. Hot damn, if seeing a handsome human being laughing that whole-heartedly didn't *do things* for Dean. He set the cue ball up on the line, and the expression on Lee's face fell. Dean smiled and laughed, meeting Lee's resigned gaze as the guy shook his head. Dean stretched out his shoulders and settled down into position. Nice and smooth now...

THUNK.

The slower-moving cue ball sent his last solid down the side pocket at the perfect angle and neatly rolled to a stop, perfectly in line for an easy shot at the eight in the corner pocket.

Game over, and Lee knew it. He was sittin' there nodding away, still genuinely smiling, drinking his beer. "Dude, don't even bother. You win."

"No! If I'm gonna take your money, I'm doin' it honest. Ain't over 'til it's over," Dean said, knowing full well it was, but he'd never taken anyone's money until the eight was sunk. He wasn't about to start doing otherwise with a friend like Lee.

"You may be the only asshole on the planet I'll never mind losing money to. Take your shot." With finesse, Dean slid the cue forward, loosely cradling it on his fingers, giving the cue ball just enough juice to knock the eight and sink it but not enough to carry the ivory ball over the edge into the pocket behind it. Done deal. He reached over to shake Lee's hand. The guy hit him with a handshake and a folded twenty between their hands. It meant Dean had to run his fingers into Lee's palm to collect the bill. Something always made him wonder if Lee was doing that on purpose.

"Hey, what can I say...? Rack 'em up again?" Dean asked, pocketing the money; three games won so far tonight. He and Sammy wouldn't have to worry about food for a week or more when John disappeared next.

"Nah. My pocket's light enough for tonight."

Dean held his arms out to his sides, inviting. "C'mon. No money, man. Just play."

Lee shrugged, shaking his head, but the rest of his body language was still saying 'yes'. Dean grinned and started digging in his pocket for another coin to release the balls into the well. Least he could do was cover the game after winning sixty bucks. "Next round's on me..." *and maybe, just maybe, I can convince your body to say yes to a little more than pool.* The way Lee looked at him then, head cocked to one side, pale, bright blue eyes assessing him intently, had Dean looking away right quick and swallowing the lump in his throat. "How about this? As a thank you, I'll pull back the curtain and show you how I won."



"That right there, man. *That* is why I like you. Do it. Rack 'em."

Dean froze. Either there was something in the way Lee said, *I like you*, or he was hearing what he wanted to hear.

Lee cocked his head to the side and gave him this *look*. "What?"

Dean shook himself out of it, smiling uneasily. "Nothin'. Here, grab us a couple drinks," Dean insisted, handing over a fiver and change; enough to tip the bartender at an establishment like this.

Putting on a warm, cocky smile, Lee took Dean's money, leaving his cue behind as he jogged down the stairs from the dais with a spring to his step, sauntering over to the bar and showing off his backside all the more for it. Dean checked himself; the peacocking behaviour was meant for the girls at the bar eyeing Lee, not him. Couldn't be. He racked the billiard balls, perfectly arranged in an alternating solid-stripe pattern. Spaced in with his fingers nice and tight, rolling them into place to keep the balls exactly as they were once freed from the mould. He returned the rack to its slot in the table as Lee came back with drinks, moving much smoother on his feet on the way.

Dean smiled for no terribly good reason. Lee handed him a glass of whiskey ahead of the beers Dean paid for. "Cheers." Their glasses clinked, and following a quick sip, cues got chalked. Dean offered up the cue ball to Lee.

His friend refused it. "You won. It's your shot."

"No stakes, so take the first shot. You notice anything about my breaks?"

Lee shook his head as he rolled his eyes and snatched the cue all out of Dean's hand. "I haven't seen anyone break like that before."

"Get your cue as level to the table as you can. Put the ball down by the line and... three, maybe fourish inches away from the side of the table," Dean instructed. Lee did. Where Dean was sitting, the shot pointed Lee's ass squarely at him. *What a coincidence.*

Lee looked back over his shoulder. "No funny business."

Dean put on his most charming smile as he put the glass of whiskey to his lips for a sip, professing false innocence with a shrug and wave of an open hand, chuckling. "Am I makin' you nervous?"

Lee's eyes narrowed, but his mouth smiled. "Asshole."

Dean laughed and set his drink down, getting comfy on his stool. He didn't intend to mess with Lee at all, but hey, let the guy squirm if he couldn't get comfortable. Lee settled in and took the shot, allowing his cue to follow through but not to excess. CLACK. Dean watched the break play out intently. Solid down. It was a good shot. Lucky one, too. The eight rolled to a stop. "What d'you see?" Dean asked.

Lee shrugged. Then he saw it. "The fuckin' eight."

Dean nodded and smiled. It was perfectly positioned for an easy down. If it had rolled a little further, the game would've been won right then and there. "I've been trying for months to make that shot. Still no luck. Clear the balls on the table upwind of a clean shot at the eight, then go for the ones that'll leave the cue in position for an easy down on the eight." Lee frowned. When he thought back on their last three games, he saw the method to Dean's seemingly random madness in choosing shots. Some of them were feints to disguise the system, 'cause he knew he could afford to give him the extra shots.

Satisfied, Lee nodded, grinning. "Game on..."

Lee stared agog at the table as the niner snuck on past the pair of his balls in the path of Dean's shot at the corner pocket. "What the ever-lovin'...! Fuckin' leave it to you to snipe your way through a tight hole."

All false modesty, Dean shrugged, one hand in his back pocket. "I like a challenge." He topped it off with a wink.

Laughing heartily like the cocky, charming ass he was, Lee let the innuendo slide off him like it was nothin'. Predictable tactic to use when trying to put someone off their game: get sexual. He walked around behind Dean, delivering an unexpected pat—not to the guy's ass, to his stomach. Dean's springs were so loaded at the prospect of Lee's touch, his muscles reacted before his brain got any say in the matter. He jumped. Out-of-his-skin jumped. The up-sweep on Lee's incoming hand had pulled up sharply at the last possible moment. Lee never intended for his hand to land on his crotch at any point in the time it took for the gesture to go down. Still, the possibility was so immediate, so real, for a split-fucking second that when Lee's hand landed on his stomach instead—through the roof. It sent him through the *goddamn* roof.

Lee turned on his heel, instinctively keeping his eyes fixed on Dean as he stepped back, hands up in the air, hanging on to his cue in one hand with nothing more than a thumb—an unspoken profession of innocence—giving Dean berth, but none too wide. Dean watched, looking and feeling like a deer in headlights, exposed and trembling, as the expression on Lee's face changed from, *Whoa! Easy, pal,* to, *What the fuck was...?* to a lower lip biting, *Hunh...*

Lee looked on as Dean secured his shit again, the fear in his eyes turning placid, his rigid body moving into feigned relaxation, as the guy chuckled nervously and took up a shooting position again. Nothing to see here. Thing is, in cases where that's true, it never needs saying to begin with. Dean cleared his throat and took his shot—too soon. He hadn't squared up properly, tried to use his arm at an awkward angle to adjust, and couldn't follow through. The shot was a sure thing. It had been years since Lee had missed a shot like that himself, and Dean was better at this game than he was.

By the time Dean looked back up at him, he'd managed to switch back on that effortless, easygoing, fun-loving, and self-deprecating charm that made him so easy to be around. With a quick shrug, Dean laughed it off and smiled. "Ah, well, a guy can't win 'em all." His mouth was smiling. His eyes weren't.

"Dean..."

Still chuckling away, deflecting, Dean turned his back to him and went for a sip of his whiskey on the table behind him, failing to effectively pretend that he wasn't potently aware of Lee's attention laser-focused on him, and Lee... he saw it.

Going silent, turning his gaze from Dean to the table, he took stock of the flubbed shot. The only balls disturbed had been the cue and eight. Lee walked around the table, smooth and serene like he was in the pen with a high-strung horse. He plucked up the eight, putting it almost, if not exactly, where it had been, slightly askance from the side pocket. Taking the cue ball in hand, he closed his circuit of the table. Dean was back tableside, propped up on both palms, watching him reset the shot.

Coming around behind him, still moving slow and careful, Lee leaned a hip into the table close beside Dean. There was one reason,

and only one, to be that close. His hand dropped down to rest on Dean's ass, below the level of the table and out of sight of other patrons as Lee offered up the cueball. Dean stood straight up, by no means shaking it off, gritting his teeth, expression hardening as he surveyed the bar on high alert and considered his answer.

"Dude, I'm definitely not the kind who'll beat the crap out of somebody for that sort of thing, but keep that shit on the down-low, or you're gonna get us in trouble." Dean said it bluffing, like he wasn't the same guy who'd been eyeballing a friend's lips, dick, balls, and ass for a solid couple of hours now. Lee set down the cue ball, sliding back along the table's edge. He settled into sitting, braced on his palms on either side of his hips, ankles crossed. The move did precisely nothing to diffuse the situation. How much solid muscle was responsible for the shape of his ass now blatantly apparent, his jeans plumping up at the crotch with no space left for it all between his legs.

"What d'you say we take it *down-low*, then?" Lee asked, barely loud enough to be heard but far from quiet enough to be misheard. Bluff called. Dean dropped the poker face, looking his friend in the eye, wide-eyed in shock.

Dean took a deep breath. All right. No point in keeping up a front. He knew well enough the sort of guy Lee was—sleepin' around wasn't his style. "Dude, I'm not the sticking-around type. The family business? It's important. I can't..."

Lee put his hands up, taking things down a notch before Dean could say, *start something up*. He slid himself a little closer along the pool table's side. Shoulder to shoulder, his back to the rest of the bar so no one could see the look on his face or read what he said, Lee put his bet down on the table. "No strings, nothin' messy, just... whatever."

Dean's tongue wetting his lips was pure instinct by now. He brought up a thumb to the corner of his mouth, face forward but eyes cutting sharply down past his hand to get a good look at Lee's ass and well-muscled arms on display beside him. Lee didn't miss a second of it, keenly aware of everything about Dean he could be. His smell—leather, cotton shirts, blue jeans, tobacco smoke, sweat, and a cologne that didn't make

the eyes water. Too expensive to have been purchased with anything other than the five-finger discount. The *heat* coming off him.

The moment he'd been angling for damned near all night. Dean was smack in the middle of it and backpedalling. "Man, are you—"  
*sure...?*

Lee started chuckling and cut him off, helping himself to a quick look at Dean's ass before he met his friend's sideways gaze. "Tell you what, I'll clear the table and tab. You head out and get some air. If you're still in the parking lot by the time I get out, *cool*. If not, I'll head back to the motel and never say another word about it."

The words damned near tripped over each other to be the first out of Dean's mouth. "I'll be there."

Grinning and outright laughing in surprise, Lee nodded. "All right. Get the fuck outta here."

Dean reached for Lee's arm to run a hand down his forearm and over his hand, jerking it back when he realized what he was doing up on a dais in plain view of everyone at the bar. He cleared his throat. "Yeah." He took in a jerky breath, turned around, and downed the last of his whiskey, grabbing his coat and getting into it as he cleared off the dais like he had somewhere to be in a hurry.

Lee cleared the remaining balls off the table and brought their drink glasses back to the bar, having a jovial chat and smiling handsomely at the bartender as she took payment on their tab.

Turning up his collar against the chill in the air as he exited the sports bar, Lee shoved his hand into his jeans pockets. The back half of January meant downright bitter cold nights unless you were somewhere in a deep southern clime. Scanning the parking lot as he zipped up his jacket, he hunched in his shoulders, shivering the chill off his back. Roadside, in the streetlight's cone of light, stood Dean. Impossible to miss. Lee smirked. He sidled up by Dean's shoulder as Dean took a small swig from his flask, aware of Lee's approach but not looking back, pensively focused on something a ways down the road. Hands-off was still wise, so they stayed stuffed down Lee's pockets.



With only inches between them, Lee asked, "Where to?" It was a little too cold to disappear into the nearest wooded spot, but he didn't want to invite himself into Baby's back seat.

"I'm parked up the road," Dean replied, the beginnings of a smile appearing as he started walking.

"Busy spot. Folks are bound to, uh... notice."

Dean snickered at the thought.

"No. Seriously—" Lee said, worried, but too horny not pick up his pace and keep up. Long strides. Long legs. Tight, stacked, nicely round ass. He couldn't help sniggering at himself. Give yourself permission to see it, and it's real hard to unsee.

"There's a dead-end street between where I'm parked and the motel. No houses after about halfway down the road." Not only was Dean asking for it, he'd thought this through. Dean turned his way, and the *look* on his face...

Normally, Lee was the one doing the fucking, but goodness gracious, great balls on fire; Lee very suddenly wondered what tables would feel like turned. Peeling away from Dean's side, Lee headed for the passenger-side door of Dean's 1967 Chevy Impala, looking her over appreciatively. Black leather interior, black panels, black paint with chrome trim. Classy as fuck inside and out, even though the machine roared like a beast. Part of him kept coming around to thinking this wasn't real. Then he looked across the car roof and found Dean smirking at him, chuckling softly, having caught on to his jittery shifting on his feet and rubbing sweaty hands on his pant legs.

Busted. *Asshole*. Rolling his eyes and smiling back, Lee swung open the car door, slipping smoothly into the front seat, not bothering with a seatbelt. Right behind him, Dean stuck the key in the ignition, turned 'er over, and...

YEAAAHOO!

Dean started like a gun had gone off. Lee jumped because Dean had. Dean's hand shot out to turn the radio volume down and off... but Lee reached out and held his hand in place, a full-on smile forming on his face at the contact as a trumpet line split the tension in the air. Dean dialled the stereo down a little, grinning, and switched on the heat. He

wanted to hear if Lee had something to say, but the volume was still loud. Twanging guitar strings and a rich bassline filled the air, and Lee's foot started tapping along. Dean could see his knee moving under the shadow of the dashboard. Shaking his hanging head, Dean smiled and cleared his throat, carefreely belting out the opening refrain of the song alongside his friend.

*"Just two good ol' boys! Never meanin' no harm! Beats all y'ever saw, been in trouble with the law since the day they was born!"*

Lee's smile turned into a full-on grin. No matter what happened tonight, they'd be alright. Dean seemed to give himself a little shake, and the way he sang changed almost completely for the next verse.

*"Strrraightnin' the curves! Flattenin' the hills! Someday, the mountain might get 'em, but the law never will."* Dean's voice near bottomed out on "never will's" low note. Lee had slowly stopped singing, stunned speechless. The deep, full, melodic voice coming out of Dean's skinny six-foot-plus frame seemed out of place. This boy could fucking *sing*. Shaking himself out of it, Lee picked up the tune again, singing with a new kind of richness in his tone.

Grinnin' and laughin' with each other, they belted out the song like they damn-well lived it, fancying themselves modern day Robin Hoods, as Dean skillfully extricated Baby from her parallel parking spot and put them on the road.

*"You know my mamma loves me! But she don't understand, they keep showin' mah hands but not muh face on TV...!"*

The two kept goofing around with twanging out musical sounds to the beat long after the lyrics had ceased. Lee animatedly mimed riffing a guitar in the side seat, and Dean's singing broke down into laughter. The song's final bars died out as Lee whooped out an enthused *"Whooooo-wee!"* He looked Dean's way, the smile on his face shining, boisterous laughter bubbling up out of him like a pot boiling over. Though he'd barely managed to catch his breath, Lee spoke. "Where in the seven hells did *that* come from?" Lee demanded, floored.

Dean chortled quietly. "Dunno, I... uh..." His gaze fell to his lap. He thanked his lucky stars he was wearing looser jeans. Looking back at Lee,

the crooked smile and the dark bit of mischief in his friend's eyes came across loud and clear.

"You don't sing like that around your brother."

Dean brushed it off with a wave of the hand Lee's way. "That's fun and games, man. I don't want the kid to feel bad. He loves it."

Lee cocked his head to one side, grinning and chuckling. "Are you tryin' to impress me, Winchester?"

Shrugging, Dean's eyebrows jumped up as he leaned toward Lee, wearing a smirk that spelled out trouble plain as day. "Might be."

Grinning right back, Lee leaned in with his arm up on the seatback, locking eyes with Dean and then pointedly pointing his peepers toward the back seat, more teeth showing through in his smile with every passing second. Best get into it then. Dean nodded subtly, pulled his keys, and stepped out. To his surprise, Lee followed him out the driver's side door. He turned around, and they were face-to-face.

Walking right up into him, Lee took hold of Dean, sliding pairs of fingers underneath his belt and hauling him in close at the hips, dick to dick, only to get him turned about like that and back him up against the rear door of the Impala. Dean let out a small grunt at the impact. There suddenly wasn't quite enough air in his lungs. Lee's mouth hovered inches from his, coming closer.

"Might wanna go easy until we get back inside," Dean cautioned, still wary even though the street was deserted and dark.

Lee laughed, his hands finding their way onto Dean's ass and tugging firmly. "Fucking miracle I kept my hands to myself this long," he rumbled out, voice gravelly as hell, jaw working hard as he moved a half step back, closing the driver's door.

Dean smiled, nodding and pinching the inside of his lower lip. He sidestepped out of being pinned, looking on surprised as Lee stepped up, opening the back door for him, acting the gentleman. "After you... and yes, I'm doing this 'cause I want a good look at your ass on the way in." Or not. Dean laughed as he ducked inside, fully aware that his jeans and briefs would be sitting down low when he bent over to climb in because he hadn't pulled them up lately. Lee was in with the door closed behind him before Dean could sit down.

"You're a goddamn tease, aren't you?" Lee asked, sliding closer. He'd expected Dean to be all hands and all over *him*, but no. Here they were, and this guy, who walked what he talked like no one he'd ever known, had suddenly turned all shy. More than happy to entice, but Dean wasn't coming after him for anything. Lee met his gaze, riveted, and asked, "Never done this before, have you?"

Dean laughed nervously, creeping backward a bit. Maybe this was a mistake. "No, I, uh... you *have*?"

Coy, Lee hopped up one eyebrow, a chuckle happening deep in his throat as he crept up on Dean until he had him almost entirely lying down on the seat. "What do you think...?" There was no more room to retreat. Lee's lips met his. Lee wasn't kissing him like a girl or trying to get one-up on him. It was firm, sure, and lusting. Lee cared, and he let it show. Dean went slack, exhaled heavily, relieved and feeling... nice, with Lee's kiss still pressing down on him. The dam broke. Dean kissed back, pushed back, and took Lee by surprise. It gave Dean enough room to pull back, shed his jacket, and yank his shirts off over his head.

Lee smiled as he watched it happen. For a few seconds there, he'd thought that Dean was curious but just *not* into it when it came time to pull the trigger. He'd been wrong. Holy Hera, had he been fucking wrong—and thank fuck for that. Lee shucked his shirt off pretty quick, but Dean? The guy's hands were fucking smooth and *fast*. Dean was working on Lee's belt, waist button, and fly before his shirt was off over his head, and somehow, Dean already had himself undone, and his jeans hiked down a bit.

Between friends, size didn't matter, but there was no goddamn way. That *thing* was *not* goin' up his ass tonight. If this was Dean's first time—he definitely hadn't come out tonight expecting to get fucked—there was no way to know what was waiting in there for him. So, yeah, nobody's asshole was getting a cock tonight.

That didn't deter them in the slightest, though. Lee realized it wasn't just teasing—that was a big part of it, but not all. Dean was hesitant to have his dick out. So, that was where things got intimate for him. He leaned in and reached down for the waistband of Dean's underwear; Dean crawled back some. Surprised, Lee held his hand away, the look on

his face reassuring Dean that he got the message; he wasn't gonna do anything unwanted. Lee sat back, hunched over a little 'cause he was tall enough on his knees to bump into the roof of the car.

Working his jeans down below his ass, there was no disguising how hard he was anymore. Dean was antsy, but the only thing that betrayed it was the fact that he couldn't seem to figure out where to look. Then Lee's dick bobbed up out of the confines of his underwear and solved that problem for Dean—mostly. The guy looked torn; he couldn't stop looking but kept glancing away.

"Dean... if you don't wanna see me, just say it. This stops," Lee said, crawling back to hovering over Dean on all fours, one hand beside his head, the other, his chest. He couldn't help licking his lips. If this wasn't a first—a timid one at that—he'd be eating the guy alive right now. Dean shiver-shook his head. Looked more like, *No, that's not it*, than, *No, I don't want to*, but better safe than sorry. "Can I see you? Take your skivvies off?" Dean looked paralyzed, failing to register the question. He was shaking and breathing fast like a tiny animal cornered and keen on skedaddling the fuck outta there. "Feel you, maybe?" This time, it was a nod. Lee smiled, chuckling under his breath. Running the back of his fingers and hand down Dean's abs and stomach, he slipped under the elastic waist of Dean's briefs.

Uncertain as Dean was, his body had come charging out of the gate—there was precum down there already; a little bit of slippery wetness on a soft, smooth head that topped off a cock on fire. He could feel the heat radiating from Dean, his chest propped up a whole foot above him. As Lee savoured the feeling of twitching, throbbing cocks in hand, Dean's hips started to move, fucking into his grasp. He couldn't keep his lips off Dean any longer. Sliding down onto his elbow, Lee sealed his mouth over Dean's nipple, keeping a caressing hold of his shoulder. He started laughing as he worked on leaving a souvenir—the first of many if the night went the way he wanted. Nothing painful, but Dean's body would remember him for the next few days if he had anything to say about it.



That, though, wasn't what tickled Lee's funny bone. It was the idea of anyone who got too nosy walking by getting an eye-full of his ass and taint through the window.

Without warning, Dean bucked his hips up hard enough to lift himself from the seat. All in one smooth, swift movement, his pants and underwear were down, leaving his penis and balls out in the open. Lee grinned, his face still pressed into the skin of Dean's chest. *This is more fucking like it!* Dean's hands came up, going around his head in a tight caress, and suddenly he was getting shoved back. It wasn't, *get the fuck* away. Dean wanted something, and by the way he was pulling at his ass, coaxing him with hands on his thighs, he wanted it something fierce.

"Whoa! Dude, slow down! What're you thinkin'...?"

"In my lap."

Lee's face went slack for a second in shock. "You mean...?"

"On your knees. Lean back over the front seat."

His brain stuttered, unable to get past thinking there was no way Dean was telling him to square up and get his cock sucked, but sweet friggin' Jesus, he was. Dean was kissing frantically at his stomach and pelvis, his hot, saliva-laden tongue and lips already on the underside of his dick before he'd managed to get himself in place, his pants and boxers down around his shins. Dean's hand around the base of his cock pointed it at his lips, and *fucking Hell...* his penis slipped into Dean's mouth and Dean... relaxed. The jittery rush evaporated, tension in him faded away, and Dean bobbed his head slow, smooth, and fucking incredible.

Lee sank as his knees spread, lying over the front seatback, breathing hard and erratic. Back arched, he hung there, shivering with pleasure and letting his hips thrust a little when they wanted, but not too far. He'd never been one to abuse a mouth giving any kind of head, let alone a blowjob like *this*. His legs couldn't hold him up. There weren't bones and muscles in them anymore. Or, at least, there weren't any that would listen and Dean... *Dean*, his best friend, had his cock in his mouth, and no one—fucking *no one*—had ever loved it like that.

Lee didn't know it then, but he'd never feel anything like it again.

Dean had a massaging hand in the small of his back, right above his ass, another on his balls, sometimes pressing with his thumb at, over, and

around where the swell of his hard-on went underground. Lee couldn't help or stop his laugh, or the way he straightened up and jumped away from Dean's fingers at a hot spike of pleasure Dean managed to accidentally knead out. He stared down at Dean as the guy pulled back for a couple seconds, catching his breath, stray precum already decorating his lips. The daring expression on his face needed no clarification: *keep going?*

"Yeah." Nodding briefly, Lee collapsed again as Dean went back down for him. "Fuckin' *hell, yeah!*" he breathed out euphorically.

He tried to hold out. Dean wanted him to, but there was no way, just no goddamned way.

"I can't...!" Lee's breath left his lungs when the first spasm of release rocked him. He *tried* to lock it down, but it was no use. "Cumming!" Dean took the warning and let his cock leave his mouth, his tongue taking the first small spurt of cum with him. Lee slid down against the front seat when the next release wave hit him, obliterating any restraint he had left. Through it, his hips kept bucking into the hand Dean had tightly wringing his dick, slow on the upstroke, quick on the down.

Knees split wide, he damned near attacked Dean, not giving two shits about the taste of his cock and semen on Dean's lips. He kissed Dean, possessed of an abandon and madness he'd never felt before, as he thrust his still-cumming cock and balls against Dean's stomach. This fuckin' guy; he had his hand in there working on his cock, holding it against his skin, beside his dick, with the same firm but soft and deft surety he played his shots with.

When the chaos ruling over him subsided, Lee lay himself back against the front seat. He rested on Dean's knees, delirious, letting his head hang backward, throat, chest and belly presented. As time passed, he recovered enough of his breath and wits to look and find Dean reclined under him, looking him over, patiently massaging his thighs, ass, and sides like he'd never seen anything as captivating.

If Dean could've seen himself: cum running down his chest, all of it, with nipples that could cut glass still standing and casting shadows as the headlights of a passing car made the sweat on his skin shimmer, turning those gorgeous, luminescent eyes of his brilliant amber. *Red*, pouty lips

hanging open as he breathed hard, his tongue and teeth unconsciously folding them back into his mouth, returning saliva's sheen to them. To say nothing of the straining, twitching cock and high-and-tight, handsomely rounded sack laid bare at his crotch.

Lee took a good breath. Damned sure he'd heaved in enough air to say what he needed to, he rolled the dice. "Has anyone ever told you you're the sweetest damned thing they'll ever see?" He sighed out the rest of his breath, his jaw quivering. Every last letter of each word was the truth.

Dean got this look on his face. Like he believed every word he'd said, and realized the truth of them, taking it into his very soul for the first time. Lee found himself slackened by shock, *again*, and this time, breathless too. Dean... he didn't have the slightest fuckin' clue. That he was a goddamned *vision* too handsome to be real.

*And tonight, you're **mine**.*

Before he knew what he was doing, Lee picked Dean up and laid him down, legs spread out on the back seat. If it could make Dean's body feel good, Lee did it for him.

Kissed him, deep, crazy and messy.

Gave Dean's other nipple something to remember him by.

Kept one hand, as often as he could, on the roots of his cock, his taint, behind his sack, one ball on either side of his shaft, massaging with a strength that made damned sure the feeling went deep and touched something Dean had never known was there before.

Little as Lee wanted any space between them, he needed some to get both their cocks in hand. He whispered in Dean's ear, "I can't get in there, but that doesn't mean I can't fuck you."

Writhing and shivering underneath Lee like it was all too damned much, Dean found it in himself to look his friend in the eyes. The expression on Dean's face, wiped clean of all but pleasure, the way his eyebrows went up, especially in the center, spoke louder than words. *Yeah... okay.*

Leaning against the back of the seat, Lee propped himself up, borrowed some of the cum he'd thrown down on Dean's chest, put a little spit in hand and collected their cocks in one hand. He slowly started sliding his hand up and down the length of them, thrusting his hips for

more of the sensations it gave them both. Rolling their heads together, he ran his corona into the cleft of Dean's head, then Dean's into his own in turn. The thrusts of Lee's hips grazed some good nerves hard and shivered him, his body still riding the orgasm train.

Going on like this was a maddening feeling, but his semi-hard cock still loved it, teetering on the brink between torture and pleasure. He went limp for a few seconds, leaning his head into the black leather of the seatback, closing his eyes, and making no effort to disguise the fact that the feeling made him bobble-headed and slack-jawed.

Dean's hand appeared on the side of his face, nudging him down to where lips of a hard-breathing mouth waited—if he wanted them. Dean's tongue reached for his top lip and won the tug-of-war inside him. He chased that tongue down into the mouth from whence it came and hardly left it alone until Dean started shaking and convulsing under him, twitching and squirming as orgasm played havoc in his body.

Body language, faces, and voices can lie. The throbbing, cumming penis in hand beside his was incapable of guile. The warm, viscous cum on his hand, on their cocks and skin, was the truth. Dean was grinning.

Thank fuck for that.

Smiling and laughing himself, Lee gave him an unsubtle wink, kissed the boy, and crawled backward, sitting back with one leg up on the seat, his flaccid, satisfied cock rolling into its resting place against his thigh, his arm up on the rear seat's backrest. He heaved in a breath that topped up his lungs, letting him return to breathing almost normally again. Watching as Dean started digging through clothing and boots on the floor, Lee reached down to where he knew his T-shirt was and tossed it to Dean. Dude was wearing his cum with a smile on his face. Least he could do.

Dean started wiping himself off, looking like he was working up the nerve to say something. As, uh... freakin' adorable as this version of his badass best friend was, it could persist only so long before shit got awkward. "Spit it out, man. Ain't nothin' you can say that I can't take," Lee declared.

Chuffing, Dean nodded. "Were you like this with... uh—"

"You really want to ask me about other people right now?" Lee took hold of a little bit of skin inside his mouth with his teeth when the question was done coming out.

"Yeah..." Dean laughed, clearing the lump gravelling his voice out of his throat. Good point. "Uh, no... no. I don't. Not really," Dean said with a sweetheart smile, brief chuckling and a shrug.

Stretching his leg out, genuinely winding down, Lee let it come to rest against Dean's, and there wasn't the slightest hint of get-the-fuck-off-me-you-fairy in how Dean looked at him or the way his body jumped in surprise then relaxed back into him. Lee pulled his leg back to get just a bit more comfortable, and his heel hit something that clinked—sounded like glass—against the metal anchors of the front seat.

Lee bent down, searching blindly with his hand for a few seconds before coming back up with a one-third empty mickey of whiskey in hand. "Hmm. This calls for celebration. Got a shot glass lyin' around somewhere?"

"Probably. Why?"

"'Why?'" Lee repeated, mocking. "Because I'm not passing up this opportunity to have a little fun."

Dean grinned, but it disappeared the moment a thought crossed his mind. "You're not going to tell anybody, are you?"

Snickering, Lee replied, "Dude, no. Relax. I'm horny as fuck, not suicidal."

"So... one and done?"

Lee shrugged. "Doesn't have to be. You want anything else, you, or me, has got some work to do first. Can't happen tonight. Or anytime soon, really. Takes practice. Just find the friggin' shot glass, will ya?" Dean smiled a closed, impish smile when it occurred to him what Lee had in mind; Lee was grinning at the thought of what he wanted. It dumbfounded Dean how disappointed he was one of their dicks wasn't gonna end up inside the other tonight. Knowing now that a little solid pressure behind his balls felt that good, Dean figured getting at that from inside would be nothing short of incredible. Climbing halfway over the front seat, bare arse up in the air, Dean dug around in insurance papers, manuals, and Sam's garbage candy wrappers for a few seconds before



he found the buried glass. A playful smack and grab rolled into one landed on his butt cheek. Dean jumped at the contact.

"Ey...! Heh. Got it." Dean retreated to the back seat, giving Lee's leg a half-hearted shove as vengeance. Laughing, Lee lied down for Dean, beckoning him closer with both hands.

Dean ducked down, planting a sucking kiss on Lee's stomach, a ways below his belly button, chin digging in just above his cock. Low enough it sent a shiver up river, and had his dick sitting up and paying attention like it had a mind of its own and remembered being inside that mouth and those lips.

"*Damn, boy.*" Lee sighed the words out. Dean looked up at him, smiling with one eyebrow hiked up. Lee collapsed, melting into the seat from the fresh memory of being blown alone. He reached down blindly, fingers moving carefully, finding Dean's hair and combing through it. For a split second, Dean chose to rub into the hand on his head over leaving colourful souvenirs behind. Dean pulled back, out of his reach, and Lee dropped his hand to his side. He wasn't going to get head twice tonight. Still, the thought layered on top of the liquor in his blood had him more than pleasantly buzzed.

Cold glass touched his navel, and his stomach twitched. His eyes shot open, his head up, and he cleared his throat. Dean was gazing down at him, wearing a look that read, *Steady now.*

Lee squirmed, settled, and nodded, the glass still standing on his belly. Dean poured the shot and capped the whiskey bottle, dropping it by their feet. Ducking down, Dean grabbed the glass in his mouth, lips tight around the glass. He took his breath through his nose before propping himself up on the front seatback and turning sideways, pointing his face toward the heavens, turning his whole body into a crescent that had their cocks pressed between them, side by side. Dean emptied the shot glass of its cargo, making damned sure to show off his working throat, subtly grinding their dicks together. As surprisingly as it started, Dean stopped, setting the glass back down on Lee's stomach, a not-insignificant amount of liquor running down its outside.

A few quick lashes of his tongue cleaned the shot glass. Dean went back down for the stray drops on his skin. It became very apparent, very

quickly, that Dean wasn't just there for the liquor on his salt-lick skin. A kiss with lips and tongue suctioned onto his penis, right at the cleft, and Lee shot up and pulled back, one hand on Dean's shoulder pushing him away, breathing hard. Dean stared at him, doe-eyed, maybe a little hurt and thoroughly confused.

Lee shook his head but couldn't explain himself. If Dean kept at his dick like that, he would try to fuck him, which would end well for no one. Lee took in panicked, wavering breaths, meeting Dean's gaze. The words slipped from his mouth. "Be careful what you wish for."

Dean's incoming grin washed uneasiness off his face as understanding came to him; it wasn't rejection, it was protection. He winked, mischievous. "Your turn," Dean said, offering up the shot glass, chuckling and rather pleased with himself over getting that rise out of Lee. Dean reclined comfortably on a pillow of clothing, one hand behind his head, the other sliding down his leg to rest in the fold where groin turned into inner thigh.

Shot glass in one hand, Lee's other hand massagingly crawled up Dean's side, on his way to position it on Dean's belly... with his mouth. His friend didn't do it on purpose, but when Lee's fingers dug into skin over his ribcage, then dragged downward again, Dean let out a burst of laughter. He clapped his hand over his mouth to stop. Lee caught the glass on its way off the side of Dean's stomach, laying his head to the side a bit and looking up at Dean from that skewed angle.

He now knew something and intended to make damned good use of it—*later*. He moved sinuously to find the bottle of whiskey and pour that shot so as not to give Dean any excuses to toss the thing overboard again. He ducked back down for the glass, hovering over it for a second as though waiting for Dean's cock rather than a shot of liquor. Then, bottoms up!

Lee tried his best to steady the shot glass on Dean's stomach, but the guy's twitches and laughter made it impossible to keep the glass standing. Picking the glass up with two fingers before it wound up on the floor, he held on to Dean's body with that hand's spare fingers as he licked up spilled whiskey and sucked on Dean's belly. If this guy could

stop laughing long enough, he might be able to leave a little souvenir there.

“Easy there, jitterbug,” he said, digging his nose into the skin of Dean’s stomach, smoothing out the twitching muscles with a firm hand. The shot glass left his fingers. Lee looked up to see Dean cleaning the outside of it with his tongue. Two could play that game. He ducked down, and Dean damned near choked on the few drops of whiskey in the bottom of the shot glass when the first few inches of his dick were suddenly inside his best friend’s mouth. Dean’s breath stumbled out of him, bringing along sounds that were more jumbled letters than words.

It was a tease lasting seconds, but Lee wasn’t fucking around. His tongue went straight for and tickled the nerves in taut skin anchored in his cleft. He could feel the deep bass of pleased sounds in Lee’s throat reverberate in the flesh of his cock.

As Dean’s head left his mouth, he licked in and sucked up the drips of precum beginning to make an appearance again. Dean had been swelling in his mouth but not getting truly hard. Likely neither of them could get hard enough to go again so soon. A little reprieve, then.

Satisfied he’d given Dean enough shit for being a shit, he sat back and moved so his feet hung over the front seat and his upper body was cradled by the breadth of the back seat. He closed his eyes for a second, discovering that was a bad idea. If he left them that way too long, there was genuine danger he would pass out and not wake up until morning. He looked sidelong at Dean, laid out on the seat beside him basking in the happy stupor of afterglow, one knee up, shin cozy against his shoulder, legs open wide, cock leisurely lying back on his stomach for the taking, one arm folded underneath and propping up his head, the other hand lazily tracing around his skin. He quickly figured out Lee’s eyes were following it and used that to his advantage.

Lee swallowed and turned away, looking hard at his knees, his expression inscrutable.

Dean moved, getting up onto his elbows. “Man, don’t look at me like that, then just say nothing.” Dean kept rearranging his body, mirroring how Lee had arranged himself almost perfectly, excepting that his legs stuck out over the front seat, crossed at the ankles.

Lee took an uneasy breath, considering his words carefully, looking at Dean sidelong as he spoke. “You gonna go squirrely on me if I ask you for something?”

Shrugging, Dean quickly looked down. “No. I mean, I don’t think so.” He turned his gaze toward Lee, ready to receive. “What?”

Lee sighed. There was nothing for it... “Can we *not* go back to the motel?”

Dean’s expression fell. “What are you talking about?”

Lee looked at him intently, knowing everything he wasn’t saying was written on his face. “Whatever,” he said evenly, shrugging one shoulder, his gaze unconsciously flicking down to Dean’s penis for a split second.

The hair on Dean’s body started to stand on end, gooseflesh and all. This was still a no-strings thing, but it wasn’t *nothing*, either. He smiled, letting through a tenderness he’d kept under wraps. Dean swallowed nervously. They had cum for each other already. You can’t fake that shit—at least a guy can’t. Whatever this was, it was dangerous, but it wasn’t a trap—they were in it together. “All right... *yeah*.”

Lee started laughing, and unless Dean was mistaken, there was real joy in the sound. Lee came at him without giving him time to get laid out properly on the back seat again. Dean might have had a good four inches height on his friend, but Lee was cut and built by comparison. He could move a lanky, underfed, overworked guy like Dean to where he wanted him easily. Dean hadn’t been conscious of it before, but it crept up into his awareness now; it felt nice to be the one cared for—made to feel genuinely good—for once. He *liked* it. Really fucking liked it.

A hand kneaded at his breast, over his still-tender nipple, and Dean’s breath evacuated his chest like someone tripped the fire alarm. Lee pulled back and nearly stopped what they were doing, surprised by the intensity of the sound Dean made at the touch. Distractedly letting his hips grind their cocks between them according to their wont, Lee collected himself, bringing a hand up to his forehead and pulling it back through his hair.

With a touch that started out as anything but sure, Dean brought both his hands up and began massaging up from Lee’s stomach along his sides, onto his muscle-wrapped ribs. He hadn’t even hit his chest yet,

and Lee had his head lolled back to one side, their dicks rolling against one another, quietly moaning, like an animal inviting him to do whatever feel-good thing he wanted to its vulnerable belly. Dean stared, transfixed by the body in his hands; its definition was shaped more by tensing, undulating muscle than bone. Sure, he'd seen plenty of bodies like this before, but he'd never touched or loved one.

His hands found Lee's breast muscles, thumbs on his nipples, and stayed there, thumbs kneading down into and around the hard nubs of flesh. It was all Lee could take. He laid into Dean's hands, head hanging, holding one of Dean's hands against him. Letting him work, Lee didn't care in the slightest about holding back the subtle moans and sighs Dean's broad, plying, exploring hands provoked. It wasn't just that. Every limb the guy could use for the purpose was stroking him somehow.

*Fuck.* Sliding a hand up into Dean's hair, letting himself fall into holding their bodies tight together, he gave in and *kissed* Dean. In a way he shouldn't have but couldn't help, and he didn't fuckin' care.

When it was over, and Lee opened his eyes again, Dean looked at him, perplexed for a few seconds, but then... *then*, Dean kissed him back.

The shriek of the car door opening violently, over-extending the hinges, ripped the moment apart. Dean couldn't see who or what it was, but Lee was on top of him, shielding him and fighting with everything he had against being pulled out of the car, legs-first. Then their attacker had him by his pants' belt and waist. It was all over. One brutal heave, the sound of tearing jeans, and Lee was gone. His head hit the pavement hard and left him dazed.

"We've got our hands full playing whack-a-mole with Yellow Eyes' thugs, and you're out here fuckin'—!"

"*Dad! Stop!*" John stopped dead when he realized the dirty-blonde-haired boy in his grasp—the one he was about to clock some sense into—wasn't his son. Lee did not like the look on John's face when the man turned and ducked down, looking into the back seat to discover Dean shoving his erect penis back underneath his briefs and doing his jeans back up, no matter how uncomfortable it was. Dean got a T-shirt and both boots back on, laces still undone, so fast it floored Lee. The kid really was this perfectly trained little soldier.



Juxtaposed against his father like this, Dean was a kid again, no matter how awesome he was when he stepped out on his own. Dean shot out of the back seat with Lee's clothing bundled up in hand, shoving it at him while trying to help him find his feet.

Not a moment later, John had his gorilla hand around his boy's neck and shoved him back against the car, slamming his back into the Impala's doorframe. Dean bit down on his painful cry. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"We... uh—" Dean couldn't keep the shake out of his voice. John backhanded him savagely.

It suddenly occurred to Lee that not all the bruises Dean carried had come from hunts. The way he wouldn't look his dad in the eye and challenge him, and Dean was hiding it pretty fuckin' good, but when his dad's hands moved near him even a bit too fast, he flinched. Cards-down, balls-out, give-'em-Hell Dean Winchester flinched—and you don't get like that from one or two bad tussles with your dad. That shit runs *deep, and long*.

"Hey!" Lee shouted, enraged. "*Lay off, asshole!!*" Dean watched, horrified, as his friend lunged at his father, murder in his eyes, only to be stopped on a dime by a gun barrel pointed at the centre of his forehead. John wasn't even looking. The look on John's face told Dean he could shoot the boy dead and not lose a wink of sleep over it. *Oh God, no. Please, no!* Lee wasn't backing down. Not at all. He stood there, leaning his forehead into the mouth of the barrel harder, daring John to shoot and then explain to his father back at the motel how his son died.

If the look in his eyes wasn't burning holes through the back of his dad's skull, nothing could. Dean couldn't help the awed way he looked at Lee. No one ever stood up for him before, let alone this part of him, and with a gun to their head, no less.

John shoved the gun into Lee's forehead hard enough to put him back on his heels. "Back off."

That was his bluff called. As much as Lee wanted to see if he could rip John Winchester's fucking head off then and there, he knew perfectly well there was nothing he could do against a loaded gun at close range wielded by an alcoholic ex-marine on a hair-trigger without running a

very high risk of getting dead. Lee backed away in no hurry, gathered up his clothing, and skirted around John as he tried to tuck himself in and get his pants zipped up. He met Dean's gaze as he did with a look that told him he cared way too much and why.

He'd never minded losing money to Dean, and he never would because he knew, the vast majority of the time, the guy didn't go out and spend it boozing up chicks and gettin' himself some. Lee knew every cent made sure Dean and his brother stayed fed and clothed, with a full gas tank. He'd have given Dean the money, but the guy wouldn't take handouts. Dean stole—nimble hands like that don't come out of nowhere—but he wouldn't take charity. He believed he had to work for it, even if the work wasn't honest. Little Sammy didn't have any of the telltale tics Dean did. No doubt this guy had been his dad's punching bag all his life. Always putting himself between his little brother and his Dad's temper.

"The fuck are you doing?" John demanded of Dean viciously.

Then, something in Dean snapped. Dean wouldn't look at Lee anymore, as though he didn't matter. Like he didn't exist.

"I don't know... it's nothing, Dad. Just... *nothing*. A bit of fun..." Dean cleared his throat so he could speak a little louder. Give Lee no reason to stick around. To try finding him. "It's my birthday tomorrow, and I wanted to have some fun—"

Something in Lee gave way. It was Dean's birthday tomorrow. He hadn't wanted to give his friend a proper lay before, but he sure as fuck did now...

The back of John's hand came down again, *hard*. "Fun—?"

"He's nothin' special to me. It didn't mean a damned thing." Dean kept control of his expression and the sound of his voice with help from a will he had no idea where it came from.

Dean's look was downright frigid. Here he was, saying it didn't mean nothin'; not a damned thing. Lee glared back at him, accusing. *Yeah. It did. For a minute there, it **fucking did**. And you goddamned-well know it. But I can't do a fucking thing against a military-trained psychopath with a gun.*

"No, it didn't," John hissed menacingly into the side of Dean's face. Dean cringed away from his father. Watching as confusion, hurt, then anger played out on Lee's face from around his father's shoulder, the look Dean wore in return was cold and distant. *Cut him off. Keep him away from this. Safe. From Dad.*

Dean didn't have to say it. The look on his face said everything that needed to be. Lee felt one side of his mouth turn up in a snarl. *All right, you know what? Fuck you, too.* Getting his fly up made him drop one boot. Snatching it up off the ground, Lee booked it barefoot down the sidewalk toward the motel where both fathers and their sons were staying.

John started to breathe differently, deeper. The expression on his face relaxed, but in a way that turned the stomach. He took a step back, then another. A different breed of smile found its way onto his father's lips; it was dark and twisted with disdain. His tongue flicked out onto his lower lip like it was taking everything he had to keep from laying into him with the beating of his life then and there. Reaching into his pocket, John pulled out a battered, folded brown envelope, tossing it onto Baby's front seat. "A little something for your birthday. Meet back up with Sammy and me when it's done."

A hunt. Dean sighed. So much for doing anything *special* for his birthday. "Yes, sir."

Dean knelt and tied up his boots, then started walking toward the motel to pick up a few things he'd left in their room.

"Leave. Now." John's tone stopped him in place.

"What?" John made him think better of what he wanted to say next with nothing more than a hard look. "Okay. I'll say goodbye to Sammy then git goin'."

John prowled closer with every few words he said. "Get in your fuckin' car and get the hell out of my sight. I've got better things to do than deal with this *shit* right now." Dean nodded and stepped back on his heels around John, giving him a wide berth. He knew better than to say another word. Sammy would think he'd taken off without caring whether he said goodbye or not.

What they did was dangerous. He might not come home from whatever the fuck was in this envelope. Sammy would live the rest of his life believing he hadn't cared about him enough to say goodbye before he left. If he made it back, he needed to figure out a foolproof protocol to exchange messages with Sam. A way to find each other if they ever got separated.

He got into the car without another word and hit the road. At some truck stop a couple hours down the way, he pulled in. Dean knifed open the sealed envelope, upending its contents into hand.

Newspaper clippings. Arkansas Democrat Gazette. *Teens Die in Tragic Accident*. White Hall Journal. *Accident at RR79 Bridge Claims Two Lives*. The Arkansas Mirror. Pine Bluff News. No significant variations in the details. No collision. The working theory from the local P.D. was an animal appeared on the road, and the driver swerved, losing control—no foul play suspected. Case closed.

Coroner's reports. Aiyana Deschene. Nineteen years of age. No drugs or alcohol in her system. Glasses not required to drive. Her eyesight from her last ophthalmologist visit had been recorded as twenty/twenty vision. Cause of death—vehicular accident leading to submersion in the Arkansas River at a depth of twenty-five feet. Asphyxiation resulting from irrecoverable inhalation of water into the lungs (drowning).

Victim two. Courtney Walker. Eighteen years of age. Parishioner at Saint John Church. Cause of death—vehicular accident leading to submersion in the Arkansas River at a depth of twenty-five feet. Asphyxiation resulting from irrecoverable inhalation of water into the lungs (drowning). Body condition: arms folded across her chest. A locket closed in a rigor mortised hand, near-lethal levels of sleep medication Triazolam in her toxicology report.

Odd, for an accident. If you're in an accident, your adrenaline skyrockets, along with every other fear-related hormone. You panic. Struggle. You don't wanna die. You don't fold your arms over your chest in a gesture of self-comfort, or... like you already know you're in a coffin. Holding something dearer than life in hand.

No foul play means no nitty-gritty forensic report. Dean tossed the envelope and its loose contents into the back seat. He shed his coat and

hunkered down to sleep, feet by the steering wheel in case he had to be awake and driving fast. Covering himself with his jacket and overshirt, Dean tugged and tucked in the edges as best he could to keep the heat in. The seat beside him was ice cold, but it'd take on his body heat soon enough. Before too long, he realized he could still smell Lee on him. On his skin, in his clothes, on his hands.

Dean slept badly, shivering from the cold for much of the night, gun in hand under his jacket, finger off the trigger, lying on the front seat.

In the decades since, he'd only seen Lee twice. Things... were never the same.



In the end, it was Sammy who came up with the plan to stay in contact. It cost them twenty bucks a month. They had fifteen minutes to talk at most before it would cost more. Dean had to get a salesperson to set him up with a phone number and give him a SIM card, all without ever handing them a phone. Buying one would cost a clean grand, and there was no fucking way.

They could call the dead-end phone number from a payphone anywhere and leave a message. Next, call the company's voicemail number from anywhere to retrieve dead-dropped voicemail messages. One catch, though: they could never, ever, call from where they were staying. Long-distance calls from motel landlines would be charged back to their Dad's credit card, recording the number for him to find. It had to be payphones or otherwise. Always.

There was no way to tell what was lurking about these days. The times he didn't feel like seeing what was what when the room around him made a noise every five fuckin' seconds; it was then that he sat down, turned the lights down low or off entirely, parking his arse in a chair the dark. The only light in the quiet space came from the crackling, burning end of a cigarette made from tobacco grown with holy water and laced with clove. Dean put out the butt of the homegrown, home-rolled cigarette he was smoking. If he was feelin' extra fancy, he took the time to coat the outside of the filter with something sweet while rolling.



He'd found a stray sock in among the detritus in the back seat the next morning while cleaning the ol' girl out; wasn't his, or Sam's. Certainly not John's. He'd laundered it, dried it, making sure it was bone dry—spent the extra coin on a second round through the dryer and everything—rolled it up and put it away in a dirt-cheap, generic Ziploc-style sandwich baggy. Dean had stowed it in the very back of the trunk, out of sight behind the gearbox, tucked where the slope of the back seat and the trunk floor met the sidewall. Probably still there. He hadn't laid eyes on it since. That is, unless Sammy had been a neat freak when...

Dean got up out of his cheap, worn seat at the table. There was little, if any, cushion to the cushioning anymore. His arse and lower back complained about it as he went out into the night with a small flashlight. Propping up the trunk hood, Dean got one knee up on the fender and dug around, fairly gracelessly, in the space behind the weapons chest. His fingers found something plasticky and his heart damned near stopped. He got his hand around it, and he didn't need to pull it out and see to know, but he did anyway.

He stood and stared at the pristine keepsake in hand, in the exact condition now that it was then. The plastic bag had deteriorated—he could tell by the tack of the plastic and the smell—but the sock inside... a single grey wool sock. Blue-toed with a hole worn through it by the big toenail. Holding the thing, torn by the knowledge of what Lee had become, he looked over at the nearest garbage can.

*Then what d'you say we take it down-low...*

*Anybody ever tell you you're the sweetest damned thing they'll ever see?*

*Lay off, asshole!!*

*It's okay.*

*I'm glad it was you.*

Dean smiled and didn't try to stop the tears in his eyes from falling. Taking a deep breath, he said now what he should have said then.

*"Yeah. Me too, man. Me too."*

He'd done it quick. Clean. Right. It's not often a hunter gets that lucky. Dean sniffled and wiped his eyes with the back of his thumb and his palm's heel.



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The callouses there scratched the delicate skin underneath his eyes. He put the memento back where he found it. His tears kept coming. Lee had gotten lost along the way, but that didn't mean the man who stood up for *who he* was against a gun to his forehead, when no one else ever had, deserved to be discarded and forgotten.

The man Lee hoped to be back then, but never quite managed it, lived in him.



A few states and a few days passed by outside Baby's chassis, and Dean still didn't feel he'd screwed his courage to the sticking place—or managed to get any further away from an unpleasantness trying to

punch a hole clean through the back of his skull. That whole mess aside for the moment, he spotted the sign of the “antiques” dealer he’d spent the last day and a half tracking down. How these people managed to stay in business when no one seemed to know where the fuck it was? Beyond him. Baby’s wheels crunched to a stop on coarse gravel.

*“O, there ain’t no rest for the wicked until we close our eyes for good...”*

Dean let the song’s refrain finish before turning the keys back in the ignition, a mischievous smile forming on his lips. *No, there wasn’t.* Pocketing his keys and sending a hand to the back side of his right hip, he unsnapped his holster, concealing it under his jacket and overshirt again.

The place was rundown but cared for. A sizeable cabin with cracked windowpanes, nature encroaching, creepy-crawlies at home in webbed corners and beneath overhangs. Rotted out shells of ancient pick-ups lined up to one side of the lot, leaning toward the surrounding forest. There was no sign of life but an unlocked door. A chorus of sterling silver bells—runed bells—announced his passing through the door.

“Hello?” Dean called out loudly, not caring to startle or be startled by some rickety old-timer.

The voice that replied was young, sweet, friendly, and very feminine. Dean unreservedly pictured the body producing the sound and found himself not far off when she stepped into view from behind a tall shelf of dust-covered knick-knacks, kitchen implements, and cookware older than he was. “What brings you this deep into the woods, stranger?” Dark, glossy, wavy hair, vivid blue eyes, lips naturally red enough to shame the rose, all packaged up with some very, very nice curves.

“Something a little more *exotic* than copper ladles.”

She lit a home-grown cigarette and took a long draw, exhaling in Dean’s direction. The smoke’s smell was fresh but strange. “Define ‘exotic’.”

Dean looked around for a second when a tic troubled his eye. Lifting his left hand into the air, he displayed an intricate ring formed in the shape of a newt-like creature with decidedly draconic features. The young woman was taken completely aback when the silver creature opened its sapphire eyes, looked with intrigue into the air around Dean,

and began to flick out a tongue thin and transparent as fishing line, yet stronger than steel cable. Ensnaring the smoky wisps circling in the air around him, it inescapably drew them into its minute, hungry maw. Having lost a handful of their brethren, the remaining wisps dispersed, floating up into the rafters and taking refuge there. Sapphire glared menacingly in their direction before returning to her favourite sleeping position around Dean's ring finger, contently closing her eyes, once again indistinguishable from any other piece of silver in the world.

"Exotic enough for someone who knows a conjured pine wisp when they see one."

A warm smile formed on her full, saturated, and ruby lips. "Follow me."

Glancing up into the rafters, Dean watched as the wisps turned on and snapped at each other viciously. One quickly lost a piece of its tail. "Dangerous way to greet your customers."

"Sometimes, they're dangerous customers. Can never be too careful," she crooned, giving him a long, gauging gaze.

Dean nodded, laughing.

"If you're not aggressive, they're harmless," she assured him.

Holding up his ring hand, he asked, "This little lady wasn't aggressive?"

"No. She was curious... and hungry. There's no malice in that."

A heavy bead curtain separated the front of the shop from the storeroom at the back. As Dean passed through the curtain, the hairs on his body stood on end, gooseflesh raising itself everywhere. He let out a whistle and looked through the doorway now that it was behind him.

"What was that?"

"This room looks a *little* different to anyone I haven't invited in," the shop-keep responded.

"Hmm. Whole lotta dusty boxes and empty shelves, huh?" Dean asked as his eyes picked through oddities and ends enough to make any witch, wizard, psychic, or hunter feel like a kid in a candy store. Chicken's feet. Lots of *other* feet. A pair of refrigerators and a freezer sat at the far end of the room. Herbs, flora, and fauna displayed on shelving inside, bottled, or vacuum-packed in plastic. Herb sprigs bundled and hanging

to dry everywhere. The scent was very, very nice. Stones, metals, knives, wands, custom handguns under lock and key...

"You gonna stand there gawking, or did you show up here with something specific in mind?" Her impatience was genuine, yet lighthearted.

Dean's hands started patting down his pockets. "Right! List! I have a... list, here... somewhere." He frowned. "Ha! Got it. There... I mean, uh, here you go!" he stuttered, handing it over with a winning smile. Yep. She was sexy enough to have his words tripping over his tongue.

Intrigued but standoffish, she scanned the list, her expression growing increasingly engrossed.

White Sage (seeds?)	Cat's Eyes – 2 dozen
Lemongrass (seeds?)	- Two-Colored(?)
Hammered Brass Bowl	Henna powder
Tobacco (Holy Water)	Eucalyptus Oil
Dried whole Clove	Palo Santo – whole branches
(seeds?)	Goldthread (seeds?)
Filters	Wormwood (seeds?)
Oil of Abramelin	Bone Runes
Dead Sea Rolling Paper	Black Cat's Bones
Headsman's Axe	Kerosene
750 ml Alembic x 2	

"Headsman's axe?" she asked, cocking her head to one side. Something about the tic and the intent, inquisitive look that came with it sent a tingle straight to his dick.

"One belonging to the priesthood rather than a king's man, preferably."

Her expression turned a touch harder—a strangely specific thing to shop for. She continued with the things she found odd. "Cat's eyes."

"Mmm-hmm," Dean hummed and nodded as his fingers toyed with a braid of lemongrass. He picked it up, along with nearby abalone shells, and walked it over to what seemed to serve as her checkout counter.

"You'll be happy to know ours are ethically sourced. You have a cooler?" she inquired as she headed toward the refrigeration units at the



room's rear. Dean leisurely wandered with her. Neatly arranged in the fridge side by side in reused cardboard boxes that once served as pasta sauce powder displays at a grocery store were vacuum-sealed packages kept at just above freezing, containing small to medium-sized lizards of more sizes, shapes, and colours than it was possible to glean at a glance. Fresh herbs in bagged and tied bundles, their dried counterparts in glass bottles on a shelf beside the fridge. Vacuum-packed hearts of many, many sizes and species.

"I do. Where from?" Dean wondered distantly, pulling back from the temptation to expand his shopping list. What was there already would cost the lion's share of the paper in his wallet.

"Local vets, SPCA—at least as long as it stayed open. Fresh. Harvested within an hour of euthanasia, discarded after three weeks. Medically unsalvageable animals only. They've started releasing healthy animals into colonies. Better than having to put them all down for lack of food and space," said the woman regretfully as she worked her way through the assortment of many-colored eyes—ice blue, green, yellow. She had some from animals with dual-colored eyes. Often, only a single eye on the animal displayed the trait.

The woman held up a vial; no doubt to emphasize their rarity and thus, higher price point. He gave her an affirmative nod and said nothing. She included all three sets she had in his purchase. "You know your arcane implements and ingredients, stranger. These are all over the map..." She paused and swallowed, carrying on a scant moment later. Dean's eyes narrowed. She knew something.

"You wouldn't happen to have any rollers, would you?" Dean asked casually, reclining against a thick wooden support post.

She smiled. "They're worth their literal weight in gold these days, but, as a matter of fact, I do."

"Two?" Dean asked, pressing his luck. Her eyebrow went up at that.

Subtly teeter-tottering her head from side to side for a moment, she settled on, "For you, why not?" as a smile grew through her tough exterior.

Dean allowed himself a restrained smirk. The ice was thawing. "So, what do I call you?"

The woman extended a hand. "Lex. Lex Burke."

"Dean. Good to meet you." As hard as life probably was out here, she still had nice hands. Callused, but still smooth.

"Dean...?" she pressed, not letting go of his hand.

He did that for her. "Just Dean."

Lex was quickly grinning and chuckling. "Well, 'just-Dean', some of what you have here isn't easy to come by. How badly do you want it?" she challenged, holding up the folded list between two fingers.

Smirking full-on, Dean replied, "Enough to pay for it." His tone carried an undercurrent that told her he knew its value, too.

"Up front," Lex came back, her tone hard.

Dean's smirk got a little bigger. This would be the biggest payday she'd probably see all year. Still, no reason to be a dick about it and bargain too hard. "Half of any *outstanding* items now. Half on delivery, with an extra... hundred as a 'thank you' and good faith gesture with future dealings in mind." She was one of the good ones. As if the scenery alone wasn't reason enough to come knocking again.

Something changed in her expression instantly. She'd expected to be given a hassle and, because she was a woman, of course, he'd try to snake this haul out from under for considerably less than it was worth... but no. She gave him an appraising look-over. There wasn't an ounce of conniving malice in him. The deal was straight. "We have ourselves an accord. I'll keep the extra as a deposit on account. With the world the way it is, I've become many things I didn't think I could be. Still, a thief isn't one of 'em. I earn my way."

"That's more than I can say for myself," Dean quipped regretfully.

Her eyes narrowed, and again, she found no lie in how he felt about how he made his way in the world—regretful but necessary. "Hmm. Do I need to be keeping an eye on you?" she asked, joshing him in a sultry tone.

The warmth and charm in his eyes and smile could melt an ice shelf. "I wouldn't mind you keepin' both of 'em on me..." He looked her up and down unapologetically. "When you have some time to spare."

Lex whistled, her demeanour gone biting-cold as driving snow. "Hooo. That's some thin ice you're skatin' on."

Dean stood up straight, dialing himself back like he'd nearly gotten his dick caught in a mousetrap. "Oh, uh, sorry, my mistake."

Shaking her head, Lex pinned him in place with piercing blue eyes. There was no denying or escaping how that made him feel and why. Her eyes darted over him, from place to definite place, and he wasn't sure he liked feeling quite so seen. Being looked over like that by a woman rarely heralded anything good issuing from her lips the next time she spoke. This time, though, things transpired differently. When she did speak, there was a kindness to it he didn't expect. "Whatever that was, it wasn't about me... it wasn't even about you."

"Wow. Must be rustier than I thought," Dean mused, taken aback but relieved things hadn't soured.

Lex smiled warmly; one of the few things exchanged between them so far that hadn't been a front. "Don't be hard on yourself about it—you're not. Just... well, doesn't matter, either way." Her expression took on a dark, wistful melancholy, but she smiled anyway.

Shoving his fingers into his pockets uneasily, Dean genuinely relaxed otherwise. A little real talk suited him just fine. "Really? And why not? Life's way too damned short, especially now."

Lex turned on him, and everything about her, from her expression to the way she set her body, challenged him. "Because you are as charming, good-looking, well-built, and apparently, well-endowed as you think you are, but that was never gonna be enough to seal the deal from the get-go. And no, there's no home-team advantage in play."

Smiling, impressed, he cast a furtive glance out the window as he considered his response, meeting her intent glare again when he spoke through a widening grin. "Hmm. That's as good as compliments get around here, isn't it?"

"It is," she replied firmly, allowing herself the vulnerability of being amused.

"In that case, I'll take it." Warmth returned to his expression and smile, bringing a becoming blush of honesty along with it. Now that had been a proper "hello".

Lex started laughing, unable to help the affection that snuck into her tone and the look on her face. Could probably sweet-talk the Devil

himself, this one. "Let's get you squared away with what's in stock, and I'll see what I can do about what I don't have on hand."

"You, uh... you wouldn't happen to be a mind reader or somethin'? Not exactly my favourite kind of people. You know, personal boundaries an' all..." Dean prodded, leafing through the book displayed on a shelf beside him, trying to maintain his cool.

Shaking her head as her deft fingers knotted twine tight around his kraft paper-wrapped package on the counter, Lex replied, "I read body language and micro-expressions, Dean, not minds. Your thoughts, and your business, are your own—unless you talk about 'em. For the record: please don't. The less I know about what you people do with what you purchase, the less trouble finds its way to my doorstep. Just don't think of me as an idiot." She scribed in black marker the contents of the package in the top right corner, 'This Side Up' in another quadrant.

Chuckling and grinning, Dean assured her. "Wouldn't dream of it." Lex smirked, one eyebrow sitting high on intrigue. "Good."

The wheels on her dolly were squeaky and low on air. While she allowed him the courtesy of holding the door for her, she wouldn't let him help unload. Most he could do was make darned sure the trunk hatch didn't take anyone's fingers off. He'd rarely—if ever—let someone he'd known for a few minutes get a look at the arsenal he was packin', but there were no alarm bells with this one. Quite the opposite, in fact.

With a double-check of the dolly and the ground behind them, she made sure nothing had shaken loose and that they were all loaded up, barring what she needed time to procure. Lex closed up Dean's equipment box. Newly renovated, if he did say so himself, but he didn't. About as much small talk as could be made had been. The impressed look on her face was enough to tell him he'd made improvements. Enough to afford him the space to come to a place like this and take home a considerable haul.

Dusting her hands off, resting them on her hips, Lex fixed him with a fond look on a face that had finally chosen to show trust. "Watch yourself out there... Dean Winchester."

Dean's look, posture, and tone of voice turned standoffish instantly. "How do you know that name?"

Lex smiled warmly, chuckling. Full disclosure, then. "From what I hear, you and some like you have been doing a lot of good for a lot of people—especially since shit hit the fan. You ask for nothin' for it." The expression on her face turned deadly serious. "If you ever need anything—and I mean *anything*—you give me a call. I'll git you what you need."

Dean smiled, letting his guard down and switching over to a grateful demeanour that was in no way trying to charm her pants off. "Thank you. I appreciate it." He extended a hand, and she gladly took it, nodding and smiling again.

"Safe travels." Still wearing a bit of a smirk, she let go and backed away without turning around. She brought the dolly up the ramp and back onto the porch. She put her hand up as a visor against the late afternoon sun, offering him a wave and a smile like she was seeing off an old friend. Dean backed his Baby out of place and brought her nose around toward the road. He turned westward out of the driveway and gunned the engine, charging off along the neglected asphalt.

Shaking her head and grinning ear-to-ear, Lex turned and headed back inside, twirling the OPEN sign on the door over to CLOSED. She decided on breaking out a bottle of the good stuff after a take like today's.

Staring out the shop window, leaning against the frame as the sun painted the sky with a sunset to remember, she twirled the amber liquid in her glass, attention wandering off into thought.

*Dean Winchester...*

Lex raised the whiskey drink in a westward salute, draining it to the last drop. *To a promising patron, well met.*



"O, for a muse of truth  
That we could descend  
Into the darkest hells



Of our own inventions;  
a kingdom, a stage, a cage."

~ Shinedown's "*How Did You Love*" ~



Dean drove to the remotest piece of wilderness he could find. Picked the biggest blank on the map and drew a line between all of the nearest cities to figure out how to stay as far away from them as possible. That was how he ended up at this guard rail, at the top of this cliff, in the middle of buttfu... he choked on the thought, like it was something disdainful and foul. Dean frowned, trying again. How he came to be here, in the middle of nowhere. He let out a forlorn sigh, looking over the valley landscape below.

Sunset. A breathtaking one. The sun was setting on day three. Whether he'd outright said it or not, he'd meant to be back at the bunker before the clock struck midnight tonight. As things were, he couldn't go back. Not yet.

A scant hour ago he'd have gladly bedded Lex Burke with fervent, giving vigor that could make a porn star beg for more. He ran a hand back through his hair. What Lex said stuck in his craw in a bad way. Coming on to her—it wasn't her he wanted sex with, but he'd have done it anyway because it was easier than looking the truth in the eye. Coward; the unwanted thought intruded.

He'd stayed out of towns for a reason. He wanted to take a swing at someone, and—God help him—he didn't know if he'd be able to stop once he started in on it. His look turned hard and hawkish, surveying the heavily forested yet hardscrabble landscape. His throat began to constrict as something vicious clawed its way out. He turned on his heel and dug into his pocket for his keys, beelining fast for Baby's trunk. He dug frantically through her contents, finding what he wanted before desperation clouded his ability to look for it.

*I've got better things to do than deal with this shit right now.*

Dean dropped the wooden handle in his hand. He smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand... *hard*. "Shut. Up."

*The fuck are you doing?* Picking it back up, Dean let the trunk hood drop and slam shut, his heart pounding out drumbeats in his chest and ears. The sound was real. His father might as well have been standing at his shoulder, spitting at the side of his face as he spoke.

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up..." He vaulted the aluminum guard rail. His feet and legs had carried him to it unawares.

*A little something for your birthday...*

Dean nearly skidded to a stop before the towering oak tree, set his stance wide, and swung. "*I SAID SHUT UP!*"

SHUNK.

Dean blinked, relaxing his grip on the axe handle. Rage, hate, and something darker than the blackest night lived coiled up inside him. It terrified him. This was the kind of thing you'd think someone got used to, living with it every minute of every day of their whole life, until it couldn't scare them anymore. The exact opposite is true. When it's *in you*, no one but you knows just how bad it is, how dark it gets. No one could ever be as scared of you as you are of yourself, because no one who hasn't seen it can know just how deep the darkness goes.

His heart was beating fast, running amok on fear and adrenaline. Frantic for something, anything, comforting to latch onto, it wasn't time with Cas that he rifled through his head and heart and took hold of. It was Lee. Being laid on Baby's back seat. A strong hand under his skinny ass, lifting him, moving his body so that the twinge of discomfort in his lower back disappeared. Knowing without having ever said a word. Finally, weight and heat. Hungry lips on his, and two heartbeats in two dicks between two sweat-slick grinding bodies, straining to be wrapped up in each other.

Dean's lips parted as he took in breath deeper and quicker than his nose could handle. His own voice echoed inside his head.

*"You've tried to look at boys that way. I'm trying to stop."*

His eyes shot open. Dean's breath seized.

Aiya.



"I will never let you, or others like you, hurt her, ever again!" Dean backed away, bringing his rock salt-loaded shotgun up to bear. His heel caught on a stone in the ground behind him, firing the shot off wild. That was all the girl's vengeful spirit needed to make him regret not being sure of his footing. He blinked, and she was within arm's reach. A vicious swipe of the hand took him across the face, cut deep, and sent him to the ground hard, stones digging into his ribs and arms. He narrowly avoided smashing his mouth off the sharp edge of a rock. She closed the distance between them and hoisted him up by the throat as he spat out phlegm and blood onto the ground.

"Aiy-agh!" Her grip started crushing his throat.

"I tried! I tried... to be like you!" she shouted at him. "To look at boys, and feel the way I do when I look at her. But I can't. I don't. Why is that so *wrong*?!" She screamed it into his face from inches away. The stench of waterlogged, rotting human body nearly got the better of his stomach. Her skin hung from her face where it had been dashed open off the steering wheel and, in other places, cut away by shattered windows. Algae hung from her face, hair, and clothing. Her decomposed flesh crawled with wriggling, consuming maggots.

The inhumanly strong hand around his neck squeezed harder and harder. He didn't recognize his own voice as it rasped out of his closing throat. "You've tried to think about boys that way... *I'm trying to stop.*" The grip on his throat loosened. He heaved in the first good breath he'd taken in far too long.

"You're..."

"Like you." A violent fit of coughing ripped out of his throat, leaving him dazed and short of air. "Kinda, yeah."

"Then *why* are you here?"

Dean shrugged in her steely grasp. "Orders." The word rang as hollow as his conviction. His stomach turned in earnest.

"What did we do to deserve being *hunted*, like animals...?" She trailed off, searching him for an explanation. Something in his face, or his eyes, but there was nothing. Just... nothing. Complete detachment; the

fortress behind which he shamefully hid his lack of reason. Her lost confusion turned to fury. "All we ever *did* was love each other!"

Dean dropped the shotgun and stopped struggling. All he could manage was to keep from slipping on the mossy bark under his feet and keep from choking himself on her hand. "It's not about what you did, it's what you'll do." Her whole countenance changed in an instant. Her hold on him evaporated. He lost his footing on a wet, moss-slick root, falling gracelessly to the ground. One look and it was easy to tell, the fury she'd seethed with moments earlier was alien and frightening, even to her. "Whatever *that* was... Courtney has already lured five people to their deaths. What she's become? It's happening to you. You've got to be put to rest, or you're gonna hurt people." Dean found his way to sitting up as he spoke, started trying to stand, but left his shotgun where it lay.

"We didn't have the right to love freely among the living, and even in death, you'd take that away from us? Put us *down* like we're fucking sick...?" She was coming back for him, flesh hanging off the bones of her fingertips. Her fingers curled in, her bones sticking out like claws.

Dean gulped down the bile in his throat, weakly holding up a hand in self-defence. "No. Not sick. I said, 'put to rest', not 'put down'." He coughed hard when his breath tripped over phlegm, blinking away water in his eyes. "The longer you're here, the more control you lose. You'll turn vicious, feral. How you feel about her will get... twisted. It becomes the reason you do awful things."

"No, it won't. We'll leave. Go somewhere far away from other people, so there's no one to hurt," Aiyana insisted, eyes glistening, filled with unliving tears.

Dean's shoulders sank as he looked away, shook his head and looked for words. "You can't. You're bound to this place. Both of you."

She looked up at him with helplessness in her big, dark, beautiful eyes. "No..."

"Yeah, you are. Or I'm betting you'd have left already," he said, brushing dirt and crushed moss off his jeans.

Aiya's watering eyes overflowed. The distorted, otherworldly lilt to her voice was actually kind of... beautiful. "Why?"

Dean held his hands up, at a loss. "I dunno why. I just know how it turns out." He began limping over to a nearby boulder.

Aiyana cast her gaze toward the river, perhaps seeing something he couldn't. "How do I stop it? Make her better?"

Shaking his head, Dean replied, "You can't. But I can break your connections to what's keeping you here. Then you can both move on, together, to..." Dean shrugged. "Whatever comes next."

"Heaven?" Aiya asked, hopeful.

Dean's expression turned troubled. "I dunno. I don't think so, but, hey, what the fuck do I know?" He forced out a laugh and tried to smile.

"You don't believe...?" she asked with gentleness in her tone.

Letting out a scoff dressed as a laugh, Dean answered, "If I can see it, touch it, if it tries to kill me, yeah, I'll believe it exists. Other than that..." Dean shook his head in a definite, wordless "no".

Her voice suddenly small and scared, Aiyana asked, "What if it's nothing?"

Dean nodded, biting his tongue before he spoke. "Nothin'... sounds peaceful to me. A whole hell of a lot better than living in a fog of cold, confusion, fear, and pain. Sounds like mercy."

Aiyana frowned. There was water in his eyes. He wasn't only talking about them. A sickness took ahold of her by the very soul. He was so... young, but hard and cold in ways anyone only looking at the charm and humour on the surface couldn't see. *Orders*. He wasn't here by choice, and those words... they were his life. "What if I asked you to leave us alone?"

Dean hung and shook his head. "Even if I did, others like me will find you. And they won't stop to talk." She nodded, biting her lip, a bitter, twisted half-smile showing at the corner of her lip for a moment. Dean breathed deeply and sighed. Aiya wasn't a monster yet. She deserved to be treated like the lost, frightened human soul she was. When he looked up again, there was profound regret written all over his face. "Look, maybe it's nothin', but *maybe* it's somethin'. You know? Maybe it's not Heaven, and maybe you don't get to be you anymore. Maybe you just get to be somethin', or someone, different next time around."



Aiya walked to a nearby tree. She rested a hand on the bark, her expression one of sad uncertainty. The wind in the branches overhead filled the forest with a musical rustling. She looked up to the sky, starlight dancing in her large eyes, so dark brown they looked black in the dark. Maybe... becoming part of something different and new wasn't so bad. "What do you need?" she asked, looking his way, anger gone from her voice.

"I need to find your remains—both of you. Courtney's family didn't claim her body. I can't find it. No one on the reservation will talk to me. I'd, uh, rather not disrespect them by breaking in to find records, if I don't have to. Where were you buried?"

Aiya began to cry. The elders wouldn't let them stay, preferring to avoid trouble with white men and the Church, but they revered all life and understood that what they were wasn't a sickness. Her family and elders would have buried Courtney with her, prepared their bodies and their souls to walk on into the afterlife. Yet, they were still here. What had gone wrong? She let out an ethereal breath as a warm, tugging feeling came alive around something that lived in the centre of her chest. She turned and faced the direction it seemed to be leading until the feeling was pointing forward from the centre of her chest rather than through her ribcage and arm. "I don't know... but," she heaved in an unsteady breath. "I think I can take you there."

Frowning, wary, Dean gauged her for a moment, then nodded. There was no deception or malice in anything about her anymore. She truly was trying to help. "Okay. I gotta get some stuff outta my car, get 'er off the road so nobody gets any funny ideas. Camouflage 'er a bit. Then I'll follow you on foot."

"I don't know how far it is."

Dean smirked, let out a charming laugh, nonchalantly shrugging about the prospect of a very long walk. Laughing, Aiya waved a hand through the air like she was gonna smack him on the cheek. Her hand passed right through him, but Dean mimicked being slapped anyway and let his head hang. He laughed and looked her in the eye, doing his level best to avoid glancing at parts of her that should've been clothed,

but thanks to time and rot weren't. "Look, say your goodbyes, all right? I'll be back."

Sadness twisted the young ghost's expression for a moment before resigned acceptance took over. She disappeared right in front of his unblinking eyes. There might come a day when their unnatural ability to do that stopped making his stomach lurch, but today was not that day...



The night he'd put Courtney Walker and Aiyana Deschene to rest was bitter, biting cold. He couldn't sleep in Baby's back seat. What little money he had left from his bets with Lee, and then some, went on somewhere warm to stay that night. He showed up at the motel looking and feeling like something even Hell would spit back out. Dean ached everywhere; his ribs, arms, face, hips, back, legs, feet... heart.

He turned the key in the old, creaky motel room door, stepping into an empty room to the sound of screaming hinges and a darkness deeper than the night outside, closing the door behind him. The only things keeping him company were a strange bed, a small dresser and a cheap-o coffee machine. No Sammy and his extra bags of books. None of his complaints about how wonky the place smelled. Goddammit, he missed the little tyke. Dean shed his boots, jacket and languidly tossed his duffle onto the bed. He couldn't summon the will to take just a few more steps to the bathroom and shower off the earth, sweat and grime clinging to him.

Peeling open the turned-down covers, he fell back into the bed and stayed that way, his empty gaze unable to latch onto anything in the blackness. Then suddenly his mind's eye wasn't empty.

It was filled with the snarling, scratching, hissing assault of Courtney's ghost as it fought to keep him from pouring salt and gasoline into their unmarked grave. Reflexively turning his head away made no difference. It was there, real, and right in front of his eyes. He had the split lip and the bruises brewing under the skin on his jaw and cheekbone to show for it.





Salt and Burn © Winchester-Reload | B | In | JDA | T |



Aiyana had put herself between them and managed to subdue her lover's feral soul. He frantically dug into his pocket for and struck the matchbook that lit the bundle of kindling in hand.

"Will it hurt?" she'd asked in her final moments, afraid, as her snarling lover fought futilely to break free.

"Probably," he'd replied stoically, in the split-second before he dropped the flaming packet into the shallow pit. The look on her face in that instant might well stay with him the rest of his life if he let it. If their flailing and screams were any indication, it most certainly hurt. He lay still, fumbling around in his mind, looking for something, anything to feel better. To not feel so isolated and unwanted.

Dean took in a breath as the memory of Lee's cologne, his warmth and weight on his stomach and chest, his kiss and touch answered the call.

Still dressed in a T-shirt, socks and loose, ripped jeans, Dean rolled onto his side, hoping the feeling would leave him be. It didn't. The whole front of him was coming to life with it, his cock and balls eager for touch even if it was only his and a fantasy to go along with it.

A feeling punched through his breastbone and burned in his chest. Lee... he wanted him here, *now*. He remembered the motel number. Lee and his father might still be there. All he had to do was pick up the phone.

*I'm sorry. For cutting you off like that. I didn't mean it, at all—none of it. Don't hate me, please. I did it to keep you safe. From... my father.*

Dean remained stone-faced, his face half-buried in his pillow as what he wanted came into focus in his mind's eye. Lee, here in the same room with him, in *the same bed*, even if it's one they didn't own. A thousand miles from anyone who knew their names. On their own, even if only for one fucking night. To let whatever the rest of what the night could've been, be.

A blunt flash of nausea twisted in his gut. He curled up into himself, keeping his pants zipped up, legs together, and hands off his stirring flesh, cutting off the emotion trying to fill him up. The feeling bled away, leaving an achy emptiness behind. Dean sighed out his breath in the wake of a tainted kind of relief.

*Don't. It's better this way...*

Sleep didn't come easy. Once, he'd almost gotten there, then came the feeling of someone putting a hand and knee down, sinking onto the bed behind him. A hand, a *man's* hand, touched his shoulder and, for a precious few moments, it felt good. Peaceful and comforting. Then it became a bit too real, and something in him thrashed violently, moving his body the same way. Wide awake again, the half-dreamt feeling evaporated instantly. The room was empty, the door and windows locked, the blinds down. *Safe*. He collapsed into his pillow and fell into the kind of sleep born of sickening exhaustion rather than peace.



The sight of Courtney Walker's half nude, rotting ghost flashed before his eyes so vividly it was real; her prom dress hung from her body, her curves, and breasts, in tatters, doing little and sometimes nothing to obscure the petite thatch of hair at the crux of her legs, in the space between her thighs.

Sickness roiled his stomach.

"You *fucking bastard*," Dean spat, his hard, collected, cool shell breaking. He shouted what was in his heart into a cold, empty sky. "WE WERE YOUR SONS, NOT YOUR PETS...! I've seen people feed their fucking cats and dogs better food than you sometimes left *us*. And I had... I had to pick up the *fucking SLACK!*" He smeared tears away from one eye with the palm of his hand. "Didn't you ever wonder how we didn't starve when you took off and left us a *few days* of food then disappeared for two fucking weeks?!"

He lifted the heavy, arms-length axe and swung with a blind, boiling-over rage.

"You SICK PIECES OF *SHIT!*"

SHUNK.

He wrenched the axe head free of the tree trunk as he shouted, "I hadn't even *kissed* someone yet the first time one of you *assholes* decided you wanted your cock sucked!"

SHUNK.



The register of his voice wasn't so low and rough naturally. His throat and vocal cords had seen more... wear and tear than he cared to remember.

*Cold, gritty, slimy tiles scraped skin off his knees thanks to rips in his jeans. Hands so immovable they might as well have been made of iron clamped down with a vice-like grip on either side of his head...*

"What kind of..." He choked on the memory. "Evil sack of shit DOES THAT TO A FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD?!" The words tore at his raw throat on the way out.

Swing. SHUNK.

SHUNK. Dean left the axe where it stuck and put his hands to his face, lips turning down hard and jaw trembling as the accusations rose out of something awful in the back of his mind...

**You** asked for it. **You** lured them in. Brought them places. Let yourself be brought. **You** smiled pretty, opened your mouth. Unbuckled your pants. **You** chose that—all of it. **You** used **them**. They weren't using you. **You** chose to be there. To do what you **did**. **You** were the one in control. They paid **you**.

NO. I didn't want it. Any of it. I had to...

"What's the title, Sammy?" he asked, lying on the sagging couch, lifting one headphone off his ear to hear his brother's answer.

Sam turned the printout into a paper airplane and sent it—intentionally, maybe—into the side of his head, despite his half-hearted effort to dodge. "Biology 11. Publisher's McGraw-Hill-Ryerson."

Shit. The retail price was seventy dollars and change...

He saw them appraising him, and they saw him, defiant, through the gap between the panel and frame of a locked stall door. The neighbouring stall door swung open. A twenty-dollar bill pushed through a

ragged, duct tape-rimmed hole in the stall wall. In came a flaccid piece of flesh he didn't much like the smell of.

Just get it done, he thought. Don't gag. Like it. They cum faster that way.

"Swallow it."

He didn't know how they knew when he spit it out. He was fucking quiet about it, but somehow, they just did. The guy took himself back through the hole in the stall divider, still grunting and muttering to himself.

"Augh... fucking hell. Un-fucking-real."

Doing his belt back up, he exited the stall door. The taps at the sink never turned on. Heavy footfalls thudded on the tile and headed for the door. Another set walked in.

"Your lucky night, pal. Fuckin' best little cocksucker this side of Memphis in there."

Another twenty and another limp dick.

Dean's stomach twisted something awful. Now that the flood gate had opened, he couldn't close it. Couldn't hardly keep his feet. Couldn't stop...

"You think Sammy grew up to be six-foot, four on fucking Spaghetti-Os and Frosted Flakes?!"

SHUNK. Recoil, swing.

SHUNK... SHUNK... SHUNK.

There were times he'd been so malnourished his skin wasn't supposed to be that yellowish colour. He knew desperation—what it was like to go without food for days. Sometimes water, if the motel had been *that bad*. Sammy didn't. His little brother had never gone a day without a meal in his life. Not on his watch.

Sam's stomach grumbled loudly. "I don't feel so good."

Dean rested an apologetic, comforting hand on the crown of his brother's head. "I know. Sit tight, Sammy. I'll be back with some real food."

"When's Uncle Bobby gonna get here?" Sam whined. Something in Dean took it as a slight. He wasn't good enough. Like all the rest, he

shrugged it off. The bind they were in, the life they lived, none of it was Sammy's fault—his either.

He had no doubt Bobby was on the road, burnin' rubber in a beeline toward them as they spoke. "He was on the other side of the country, Sammy. Day after tomorrow, maybe," he replied evenly, patiently. Caring. Reassuring. Too far. Too long. There was nothin' for it. No other choice. He'd been out-hustled at the pool table last night. John had started making him keep receipts. He knew enough not to bet with his father's money, or even everything he had anymore, but what he had left in both reserves was chump change, not enough to buy enough meals for one for three days. He needed **something** in his stomach to perk him up and keep him going...

Sam watched his older brother storm back into the motel room without a word or so much as a glance his way. Dean grabbed the duffle with his clean clothing in it without slowing down in the slightest as he passed the foot of his bed on the way to the bathroom. The door slammed closed, locked and didn't open again for an hour and a half. The smell of cigarette smoke wafted into Sam's nostrils. There had been what he was pretty sure was blood and any number of dirt smears on Dean's clothes.

The smell of shit, too. He looked and smelled like Hell, as though he'd been walking hard for hours. Dirty. Tiny dead insects sticking to the sweat on his skin. His hair was soaked and matted down with sweat, his T-shirt wet with it and clinging. There was something else in the air. Something foul Sam didn't know enough to place.

Letting out a furious, agonized, animalistic scream, sweat mixed with tears running down his face, Dean swung the axe into the trunk of the tree with enough force that it felt as though feedback fractured something in his leading hand.

"RRRAH!" The pained shout echoed around the valley. He was shaking. His arms were burning. He could hardly lift them. They hung at his sides like dead weight as he desperately heaved in breath. Fixing his gaze on the trunk of the tree he'd victimized, he felt the urge to clean it up—fix

it. *I'm sorry.* Peel away the stray flaps and shards, shave down loose splinters, neaten up edges, and make it presentable again. Make it look good again, so the rest of the world would never know just how badly mangled he was. *Never let them see.* Skin—bark—would heal, regrow, but that would never be enough to completely disguise the damage underneath. Not if anyone ever took a real good, hard, long look at it. So many scars had faded with time, but the hard nodules of changed flesh underneath were still there.



Missing You Already © ancient-fangirl | T |

Dean swallowed hard. He could hide it from everyone—from himself, even—but not from *him*.

You're **broken**.

*Hurt and anger—that's what drives you.*

*That's who you are.*

Who... you... **are**. The garbled, corrupted words echoed in his head.

*But it's not, Dean.*

*It's **not**. I see...*

*He sees... me.*

**You**... Cas, you see, don't you?

You can **actually see**...

You **know**... that I've **tried** to...

*You know...*

*That's not me; it's not who I am.*

*If I'd had any choice...*

*I would've been someone different.*

Dean stopped his hands' desperate work—cleaning away rough-hewn edges and splinters—stepping back from the tree trunk. He kept on retreating, taking deep, stilted, needed breaths in and letting them out evenly. His eyes adjusted to see the towering, hardy, living, breathing thing for what it was. Rich green leaves rustling in the mountain breeze. Roots that ran deep. A sight as handsome and sturdy as it was rough-skinned and gnarled. He looked down at his hands; calloused, joints protruding and wrinkled like they didn't used to be. Hands that knew the meaning—and the price—of *real* strength.

He frowned. It had only been the once, and he'd been anything but sober, but his expression softened and his eyelids got heavy as his palms remembered the feeling of Cas' jittery stomach underneath it, of having him in hand. Hot, slick, shaking, his hips straining upward into his hand and



penis sliding through his grip. Loving the feeling of it. He started breathing again when—

Cockeye.

Like a slap across the face. *What? No. Well, okay, yeah, but...*

*Then don't call yourself a hunter.*

Something in him hardened and managed not to snap. *Hey now, I'm not just any hunter, I'm one of the best.*

*Nothin' but trouble, son.*

A punch to the gut. **Bobby?** *What the Hell, man? Of all people, I figured you'd be...*

Low, menacing laughter. *Heh heh... Heheheheh...*

*No. You're not Bobby...*

Footsteps. What **have** we here? *Big, bad hunter wants to make looove to the fairy-man. Pack 'imself some fudge. Adorable. Just... fuckin'... adorable.* More laughter; a dark, creeping, unstoppable force, prowling up on him from behind.

*Fuck you,* Dean thought with a snarl. He turned on the sound, ready to choke the life out of the throat making it with his bare hands... but there was no one to be found.

*Fuck me? Heheh. No. Fuck YOU.* The voice sounded loud from right beside his ear. It was something straight outta the pits of Hell. It was going to take him. He couldn't stand still one second longer. He stepped away and to the side, back from the edge of the sheer drop at his feet, his heart thundering in his chest. When the fuck had he walked so close to the edge?! He pulled himself up out of the back of his mind, blinked and saw the world around him again. Turning around and about again, he confirmed there was nothing—no one—there.

Swallowing down his panic, he desperately tried to collect his mind's reins. Then it appeared again, dragging him, kicking and fighting, back into some pitch-dark pit in the depths of his consciousness. Somehow, he found his feet. The instant he had the footing and form, he turned to strike, driving an elbow straight into the face of... his father. Whether he wanted it to or not, his body obeyed a will not his own and stopped itself on a dime.

"Dad..."

John's lips moved, but what sound came out was distorted. Sinister. "My son... one of **them**."

Dean squared his shoulders, bringing up and pointing a chiding finger at his father. "Hang on just a fuckin' second—"

The snarl in John's voice, the sneer on his face, made Dean feel so much smaller than he was. "*My own flesh and blood; bitch to a disgraced, crippled angel with a fetish for dumb animals.*"

"Shut up. Don't you dare talk about Cas like that!" He stepped up on John, taking his shirt and jacket in his fist, hauling the man in close and holding his ground. Suddenly, it dawned on him; he was looking down on his father. He was taller, stronger, and bigger than his father.

"You go down *this road*, don't you **ever** come back," John spat at him, physically and figuratively.

His look going hard as tempered steel, Dean wiped away the phlegm from his cheek and put himself toe-to-toe with his father. "I said... *Shut. Up.* All my life, I looked up to you and thought to myself, 'I'm gonna be like *him*. He's the *best*—as good as it gets. I was so fuckin' wrong."

Dean advanced on his father, and John stepped back. "I might not be the quickest sonuvabitch, but I get there eventually. You wanted everyone to know your name. You *needed* that, fed on it. But you know what? A great man doesn't need everyone to know it, he just is—he was, until the day he died. You know what he once told me? That we were *his* boys, and despite every amazing thing he ever accomplished, *raising us* was the best thing he ever did with his life.

"The last thing he did with the last breath he ever took was make damned sure we knew we were loved and that he was proud. That we mattered to him more than *anything*. He didn't even have to say it. He didn't need *time* to come around to that. It just always was and always will be the truth. An' you know what the truth is? The parts of myself that I hate the most... every last one of 'em walks, talks, and believes *like you*."

The side of Dean's lips curled up into a snarl. "You can do what the fuck ever you want with me...

*John*. Say whatever the fuck you like. I've taken your worst, and you know what? *I'm still standing, asshole*. But Cas? I'm warning you: keep the fuck

away from 'im." Dean watched as the grip of his hands on his father's throat turned his knuckles white.

Giving his head a shake, Dean did a double-take. He didn't remember getting his hands on his father. It had been violent enough that John's split lower lip was trembling. Twitches contorted in his face—his jaw and mouth. He was strangling. Dean blinked. *No. Not like this. This isn't me. I don't want this.* Feeling a kind of peace take over, Dean stepped back.

"No. No more. You don't get a say in this. I'm done. You don't get to keep me from having someone I want—someone *I am dreaming about*—in my life. Not anymore." The rush in his chest when the words "in my life" left his mouth made him feel like he could vault the moon. All the songs and stories a man could ever imagine couldn't do it justice. Something good was happening.

John's expression had turned cruel with a knowing edge. His father scoffed derisively. John's lips moved, but the voice coming out was his own. "*Dude, could you be more gay?*"

His own voice sounded off in his head like a gunshot. He cringed. Like that was a bad thing—something to sneer at. That wanting sex with another man made someone—made him—lesser. Something to insult *real* men.

"*It's just a bit of fun. Don't mean **nuthin'**.*" His own words echoed around his brain. The look on Lee's face when he'd cut him off... *Christ. It did. It had. It could've been...*

Can't mean nuthin'. Feeling good. Only thing sex with someone built like you is good for, right? Fun. Kicks and laughs. One and done. Love 'em and leave 'em. Nothing serious. It ain't for nothing else. Nothing at all. Put it in the ground. Kill it. Burn it. Bury it.

*Aiya... and Courtney...*

Like he did back then.

Dean shook his head. *No. That's not true. This feeling... what else could it be? What they say? It's all true. I've never felt **anything** like it.* He blinked. Tears ran down his cheeks.

"*I'm pouring my heart out here, like a fucking girl...*" The darkness inside him cracked him across the face with his own words.

*Oh, fuck off. If I hadn't let that shit out...*

Dean heaved in a breath. The remembered smell of rich dirt, decay on the forest floor, green, pungent leaves and fresh, clean water. Melting to the Earth under the feeling of his hand standing in for the gambler's hole.

*Fuckin' ride it, cowboy... ohhh-ho-ho yeah. Fuuuuuck me... hng! Ah!*

Dean blinked. The smells of the forest and the feeling in his groin... gone. A sudden flashbulb memory put his balls in a vice-grip and hit like a fist between the eyes, blinding him to the real world.

*Whipped out the dicks and duct tape...*

*F-A-G...*

*"Freeeak. That's what you are."* The hissing, distorted voice was his own, coming at his ear through a mouthful of teeth grown into flesh-rendering points. The voice bubbling up underneath sounded oddly like... Sam?! *"There's no becoming someone else. This is what you'll always be. Take it from me."* Something he couldn't see suddenly took hold of him by the neck. Then, it showed itself. He struggled against the doppelganger wearing his clothing, his skin, but it was futile.

This thing absorbed hits like they were nothing. It might as well have been a robotic hand around his throat. *"Candlelight dinner for two... out on the patio, strolling hand-in-hand down the boulevard... white tuxes, white roses and you're goooiin' to the chapel..."* Snickering derisively, the hand around his neck yanked him forward as it hissed out its mockery and slammed him back against something he couldn't see. *"That will never be you."*

It was the nineteen-fifties again out here—or worse. It would never happen for them. He knew that down to his bone marrow. Not in his lifetime.

*"Something like him, here to stay for love of someone as insipidly sssimple as you?"* the thing hissed, punctuating it with cruel, derisive laughter. *"You're alone and you'll die that way."*

Dean gave his head a few twitchy shakes, eyes watering, lips quivering. "No, that's not true."

*"They smile pretty, make it look good, but behind all the empty eyes, underneath the pretty smiles... they **hate** what you are. You're hideous."*

*Unnatural. Shoving your dick up inside another guy's shit chute? That's just gross. But enjoying it? Craving it? You're one fucking sick puppy..."*

Nothing. He had nothing. He screwed his eyes shut, willing the thing to be gone, opening them again.

Suddenly, Cas was there, over the black-eyed thing's shoulder, just out of reach, but there was something off about him. Dean didn't hesitate. "Cas," he choked out. "*Please...*" *Help me.* Dean reached for him. Like he'd never reached for anything or anyone in his life. It wasn't just his hand he was reaching with. His head, his heart—his very fucking soul. All of it straining for the angel just out of reach. Dean's stomach twisted something awful as the distance between them began to change—to grow. Castiel stood unmoving, staring at him placidly. No desperation. No disdain. Simply... nothing.

No! Was he... too late? Had he stayed gone too long...? Was Cas turning a deaf ear to his prayers?

He raised a hand against the putrid thing with its hands around his neck, but it stopped his fist mid-air with a bone-breaking grip on his arm. Sniggering viciously, it closed the distance between them and spoke into his ear, dropping the words into the pit of his gut like boulders. "*You will never be loved.*"

*Cas... wait. Don't do this! Don't...!* Dean felt something in him break, a torrent of panic flowing out. He stopped reaching. *Don't go. Don't leave me.* His throat closed off, the lump inside swelling as Castiel disappeared into the darkness. *No. Not this. Not again! CAS!* His mouth moved, but no sound came out. Dean started kicking, lashing, and hitting out. There was no breaking free, getting out of this thing's grasp, but he was *never* going to stop fighting. Then came the strangest soothing sensation: a comforting hand in the small of his back. He stopped struggling, gave his head a violent shake and finally, he could hear what Cas was trying to say.

*"I love you."*

Plain. Pure. Simple. True.

Dean snapped, turning on the black-eyed thing holding him, fighting his way free of its grasp, the demon knife in hand. The thing locked eyes on the blade, looked at him, and like *that*, the game changed.





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Dean swung, intending to plant the thing between its ribs, and finally it had no choice except to let go. *Heh. That's right. You're in my house, asshole. I make the rules.* Another swing and the blade caught its tricep from underneath, cutting flesh and its putrid spirit like butter.

The thing recoiled, losing ground, bleeding foul-smelling black ooze, with real fear in its eyes. Dean pinned it to the trunk of the tree, bracing

himself to drive the point of the knife through the underside of its jaw. There was an awful menace in his voice. “Stop talking, or I’ll stop you.”

Head bowing, wounds disappearing, the thing in his hands started laughing, but it was incongruently good-humoured. *Wait. What...?* Dean blinked. It let go of his arms, standing peaceably in his grasp, showing him open palms, smiling, self-satisfied. Suddenly, he was looking into a mirror—or at least the face now staring passively back at him was doing so with his own eyes again. Confused and rudderless, Dean couldn’t see the emotion coming through for what it was—affection. Dean swallowed and blinked, lowered the knife, and backed away, realizing what the doppelganger’s eyes showed him: unadulterated affection, and... pride?

It took in a deep, peaceful breath, beginning to grin. “That’s it, isn’t it? Right there. That’s the sticking place.” With a reassuring wink, the vision was gone.

Dean shuddered a chill out of his body, sucking in a deep breath to make up for his recently shallow breathing. He took a few vertigo-induced steps back, his gaze wandering up into the canopy of the tree before him. His hands were empty—except that wasn’t quite true. There was memory in them. The skin of his palms, the insides of his arms, his chest, sides, thighs and back remembered what it felt like standing against the edge of the table in the Bunker library, Castiel’s arms around him, each holding the other close, learning what peace felt like from the natural rhythm of their steady, easy breathing.

A chilly breeze pulled his body and mind up from under the flood of relief washing over him, fogging up his thoughts. He hauled in a deep breath. His gaze, freed from the prison of his mind, wandered down the trunk of the tree, to the roots and the ground, across the short, verdant grass, spotted with thistles, and young trees. His sight found the horizon, drifting to the colourful twilight wisps of cloud and the inky, star-spattered sky above. The absence of electricity across the country showed him a breathtakingly starry sky, the likes of which he’d never seen.

Stepping up to the edge of the plateau, peering over the edge to know what the craggy cliff face below looked like, Dean smiled bittersweetly, remembering one of his darkest moments...

*He stood on the Bunker's roof, the world around him gone sickeningly quiet and empty, his toes at the edge of the rooftop. A mickey in one hand, empty but for the last couple mouthfuls, and his phone in the other. Either the world was moving out from under him, or he was swaying. His line of sight cleared the ledge, and maybe... it wasn't so far down. For one potent, awful moment, he fought the urge to throw Cas' phone over the edge and watch it shatter on the jagged rocks below, then, to fall and shatter with it. Expressionless, with tears rolling down each cheek in turn, he called, listened to the stiltedly recorded message... and stepped back from the ledge...*

Gravity acting on his heart no longer lured him over the edge. Feeling a little bit crazy, Dean laughed as he smiled and spoke his heart into the blue and purple twilight sky. "I'm sorry, Cas. I'm sorry it took me so long. I'm sorry I'm not gonna be back tonight like I said I would." The ache in his chest turned truly uncomfortable. He fiercely wanted Castiel here. Now. Dean looked back over his shoulder to where Baby sat, as quiet and constant a companion as she ever was. Forever his ticket home. "I'm on my way, Cas. I'm comin' on home." Dean didn't say it out loud, but he thought it: *comin' on home to you*. The thought had him snickering quietly and put a loving grin on his face. If he had to drive through the night, that's exactly what he'd do.

A sudden lurch in the ground underfoot plummeted his heart down into his stomach's deepest abyss. *What the...?* In the timespan of a blink, the plateau's edge gave out under him. He went down—*hard*. The hit winded him, a few stones digging into him badly. In the ensuing daze, he failed to realize, at first, that he was sliding over the edge.

With the last scrap of wherewithal he had, Dean snapped his arm backward at a painfully awkward angle, clutching the shoot of a young tree, pleading with the twiggy sapling to save his life.

He felt a root on the far side of the young thing snap.

*Don't. **Please**, don't let go.*

Tears came into his eyes. He explained it like the flora in hand might understand.

*Not here. Not now! I have to get home!*



The crumbling stopped for a few moments, seeming as though it was over. His heart thrummed in his chest like never before. It frantically clenched out and inhaled blood like it was gasping in air with no oxygen in it.

He dug his boot heel into the dirt above what felt like a decent-sized rock, and slowly, steadily pushed.

It gave.

The sound he made was a scream wrapped up inside a growl. "Shit. Shit! *Fuck!*" Two more roots in the sapling gave. All he could do was moan as the ground beneath and behind him sloughed off dirt and stone. He dangled from the cliff face, all his weight hanging from a failing lifeline. There was nothing by his right hand to hold onto. *Nothing.*

*Shit.*

Getting as much of a hold on his breathing as he could, he slowly tried rolling his chest to face the cliff. His shoulder didn't make it past his face. Another root gave out. Cas was back at the Bunker. He couldn't heal himself, let alone...

*Jack...!* No. He wouldn't interfere. The sickness in his stomach told Dean everything he needed to know; he'd keep his promise. Deep down, Dean knew it was for the best. Tears fell from both of his shot-wide eyes. There was nothing for it.

*Cas! I need you.*

He waited one heaving breath, then two. Nothing. He couldn't breathe anymore.

*CAS! I need you here...NOW. PLEASE...!!*



"I took her to a place that was so incredible it wasn't human. She actually meowed!" Eileen recited.

Sam laughed. It was quite possibly the single funniest scene he'd ever witnessed in his life. Second only to the look on Harry's face when Sally proved, in the middle of a packed diner, that women can, in fact, fake orgasms, punctuated with a perfect one-liner from an onlooker: "I'll have what she's having."

He didn't care that he'd seen the movie more times than was healthy. It was part one of tonight's double feature. As much as he enjoyed the movie, that pick was for Eilee\*. Liar Liar was his choice.

Eileen frowned, concerned, when she noticed Sam's smile disappear instantaneously. He stopped in his tracks a step later. Sam looked back in Cas' direction, wondering why he couldn't hear the angel's footsteps right behind them anymore. The look on Sam's face changed the instant he saw the expression on Castiel's. The angel stood frozen in place, popcorn bowl and a glass of root beer in hand, looking as though he'd just heard a far-off, blood-curdling scream. Sam felt sick to his stomach from merely seeing the seraph's face. Before he could utter any sound, Cas disappeared before his eyes. Suddenly without anyone holding them, the stainless steel popcorn bowl and pint glass hit the ground. The glass shattered, shooting shards across the map room floor as the popcorn sloshed out of its bowl, overturning completely.

Without hesitation or a word, Sam put down his bowl and drink right quick, sprinting to Dean's room. He flung open the door, finding Dean's closet door hanging from one hinge, the jackets and shirts inside still rocking back and forth in the aftermath of Castiel outright ripping his coat and jacket off their hangers. Eileen walked up behind him, quick and quiet. He turned around, meeting her worried gaze.

"Dean?"

She didn't wait for his answer to close in and wrap her arms around him. For a long moment, she pulled back to look at him again. Shaking his head, distraught, Sam bit his lip before he answered.

"Must be." She didn't need him to sign it. She read his lips as though reading words on a page. Truly scared, Sam pulled her back in, nuzzling his cheek into her silky brown hair. They held on tight to each other.



"Dean!?" Castiel hectically cast his gaze around, distraught. Baby was here, with Dean nowhere to be seen.

"CAS!"



The angel moved before Dean finished making the sound. Vaulting the aluminium highway rail, he found Dean hanging from the cliff by a sapling barely holding onto the rock and dirt it was anchored in. He dove for Dean's hand, seizing his wrist, careful not to disturb the infant tree doing the heavy lifting.

"Cas! I didn't...!"

He couldn't put too much pressure on Dean's wrist and hand without breaking them, and the angle was precarious at best. Castiel watched in horror as the sapling's roots started to come undone. This time, they wouldn't stop. Digging the side of his heel into the ground behind a small rock bought him only moments. It started to roll up out of the ground when he put too much weight on it trying to lift Dean. Desperate, his nose bleeding into the soil, he reached his other hand toward a wooden post the guardrail was bolted to, latching on telekinetically. He tried, but if he held it much longer, he'd burst a blood vessel that mattered. They started to slide.

Cas' gaze snapped toward the Impala. He prayed that what Dean kept in the trunk hadn't changed. Instead of pulling himself up, this time, he brought the tool he needed to him. A crowbar snapped into being in his outstretched hand.

Dean full-body twitched, startled when a deep boom akin to firing a steel anchor into the ground echoed through the air. Their slide stopped instantly. He laughed gleefully.

*Holy shit!*

He could breathe again! Taking an instant to think, Dean balled a fist. Something that couldn't slip out of Cas' iron grasp. Held it like his life depended on it. Letting go of the sapling, he made the turn onto his chest this time, grabbing at grass, dandelions, anything that didn't have thorns, he hauled himself up high enough that he could latch his hand over Cas' forearm and once they knew his hold was good, Cas pulled, dragging him up, across the grass and to his chest.

Dean laughed, giddy. "Cas...!" The sound was, *Hey! and, Man, are you a sight for sore fuckin' eyes!* rolled into one. Lying on stones and dirt, Dean slipped an arm between the angel's shoulder and the ground, going for a hug, maybe a kiss, only to collapse onto Cas' breast and

collarbone, dizzy. Shuddering like the air had turned arctic in a moment's time. Panic hit. *He'd almost...!* Cas let go of the hand he held, hauling Dean up to lie on his chest until their breathing and panic mellowed out. He let go of the crowbar, tenderly wrapping that hand around the back of Dean's head, holding him in the crook of his neck and shoulder.

*Safe. You're safe.*

Senses catching up, Castiel realized he was shuddering too. Dean latched a leg over his, dragging their bodies flush together. As fear subsided, an unbridled need to do something he thought impossible three days before, ignited underneath it. Blazing to life like nothing he'd ever felt. Some small part of his brain kept logic switched on. Baby's back seat... the only place near enough. But Cas... Cas wasn't ready for what he wanted. They couldn't. Not right now.

He moved, finally able to see Cas' face and look the angel in the eyes. He froze, staring wide-eyed, taking in everything he could. A dark want burned in the angel's eyes. They had to get up, get over the rail, and get to the car. If he kissed Cas, he wasn't going to stop. Dean got to his elbows, then his knees, hauling himself to his unsteady feet, holding onto the guard rail. Minutes ago, he'd climbed over easily.

That was unwise on legs this wobbly. Cas' hand on the back of his thigh helped him up onto steady footing. He went over the rail on his stomach, one leg, then... the heel of his trailing boot snagged on the rail's back lip, sending him stumbling backward.

By some miracle, he stayed on his feet. The jumpscare set his heart racing again. He held himself up with one hand on each knee, looking on as Cas vaulted the railing and landed a little unsteadily, wiping fresh blood away from under his nose.

The instant the angel stood solid and strong on his feet, Dean damned near lunged at him. Coming together was a haphazard mess, hands tucked under clothing in the wrong ways, their entire arms wrapped around each other in the wrong places. Only one thing was perfect: the way their devouring mouths came together.

For a long... long, long moment, Dean had the strangest impression that nothing else existed. Not the gravel and ground under his feet, the air around them, or the world beyond that. He couldn't sense any of it.

Nothing other than the heavy press of their bodies against one another and their welded lips.



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Dean felt his legs about to go. Air. He needed to breathe. Dean parted their mouths no more than needed for air to slip between. He was gasping for air like a burned-out sprinter, his forehead wobbling against Cas'. The angel stood firm, an inhuman pillar Dean shamelessly clung to.

Words started stumbling out of his mouth. "I... Cas, this wasn't me... it was an *accident*. A fucking accident—!"

"Dean—"

"I swear to you, I wasn't trying to..." *Kill myself*. He couldn't say it to the angel's face. "I wasn't..." Dean's uncomprehending gaze magnetically snapped to the cliff edge. "*What the fuck...!*"

"Dean..." Dean snapped his mouth shut, eyes fearfully fixing on Castiel. "*I know.*"

Dean's breath left his chest, leaving him dizzy. The adrenaline crash hit, dropping his eyelids closed. In its place, something else rose. Heat. Blood rushed to his head—both of them. He'd prayed and...

*I always come when you call.*

Smiling with water in his eyes, Dean bowed his head. Cas always would. The thought was in his head unbidden as something greater than plain information; a foundation of profound truth. Dean slumped against the angel for a few seconds before prying himself away. Slipping out of Cas' arms, he half stumbled aside along the guardrail's support, heart still thumping in his chest, though gradually beating slower. Castiel followed him, arms at his sides. He stepped in closer as Dean's breathing evened out, burning eyes fixed on Dean's open lips, his instinctively falling open, inviting.

Dean gave in, no longer keeping himself from reading what those lips said unspoken, letting his gaze rest where it wanted, free of the need to look down and away. A quizzical tilt of Cas' head asked him for another kiss—to breathe the same air again. Giving in to the carnal daze taking him over, Dean cocked his head to get at Cas as deep as he could, letting his head slowly weigh into the kiss.

His nose touched Cas' skin, and he snapped his head back, blinking. Dean frowned. Confused, he slid sideways out of being wedged between the aluminium rail and his rescuer. Castiel watched serenely, letting him go. Dean took disoriented, zig-zag steps toward Baby on the rough gravel, bringing his hands to his forehead as Castiel shadowed him, concerned.

Letting his palms fall to cover his eyes, Dean wove under the momentary influence of another dizzy spell. He set his stance wide. Something was... off. He'd gone from sheer, unadulterated terror to feeling like he'd downed a triple hit of lust-laced valium—from sixty to zero—in seconds. It wasn't... *natural*.

He turned to face Castiel, frowning and glaring hard, backing away. "Back off."

Cas stopped and cocked his head back like he'd been slapped. Hesitating, he reached out. "Dean..."

"*Stop it.* Leave me alone." Castiel's hand froze mid-air.

Understanding bloomed on Cas' face, and Dean felt his emotions change, returning to the incredulous terror he'd felt realizing how near he came to plummeting down the cliff face. His anger began to boil, slowly rising. "Cas, you can't do that to someone. I need... I *need to feel...*"

"Dean, you were uncomfortable, in distress. I could ease that, so I did."

"Cas, you're not listening. *Don't do that kind of thing to me.*" Dean frowned as doubt snaked its way into his heart and had him questioning. "That night... yeah, I was out of my mind over the prospect of having you back. But... what I was feeling... How much of that was me... and *how much was you?* Were you *making me* feel that way?"

"No. There are certain effects opening myself up for someone might have. I don't know anything certain. This is as new to me as for you," Cas confessed, fear beginning to show through on his face, his eyes dropping away. Dean's stomach lurched.

Stepping up on him, angry, Dean demanded, "Look me in the eye, Cas, and tell me you aren't *making me* feel this way, the same way you cut my fucking strings, and switched off that panic."

Cas shook his head, fear taking over his expression. "Dean, *why* are you doing this?"

"Answer the question, Cas."

"Dean..."

"Answer the *fucking* question!" Dean took hold of Castiel by the collar and violently shook him. Cas didn't so much as lift a finger to stop it, letting himself be moved.

"Dean, you're... tearing apart the memory of something... extraordinary. I don't understand... *why?*" he pleaded, slowly taking gentle hold of Dean's hands.

The fury boiling up inside Dean reached its zenith. He cocked back a white-knuckled fist, ready to extract the answer he was demanding forcibly. He was only vaguely aware of the fog hanging heavily around his better judgment. Cas's demeanour changed immediately. He didn't



need to read Dean's mind to know that there was nothing his gentler side could do to keep their train on its tracks. Answering Dean's aggression evenly in kind, Castiel came back ferociously, their trajectories circling as Dean, taken aback, started trying to extricate himself instead.

"Do you have any *fucking* idea what the Emptiness is? I spent thousands of years becoming intimately familiar with the agony corpses feel, consumed by maggots and rotting in the grave. I refused to give up—to sleep. I spent the process awake because that hellhole is *the end of the fucking line!* I wish that were the worst it had in store. I keep thinking this might be some special Hell constructed specifically to torment me. Afraid the other shoe will hit the ground any goddamn second now—that we'll come apart in ways I cannot stop. That this is the Shadow's elaborate torture ripping to shreds a bond I cherish more than my existence—until there's nothing left!"

Cas turned away from Dean, keeping an unshakeable hold on him with one hand by the front of his jacket, shouting viciously into an empty sky, "If you think I'm going to lie down dead and let this happen, *you have another thing coming!*" Dean watched, shaken by just how close to insanity Cas' outburst sounded. By how inhumanly inescapable the angel's grasp on his clothing was. Cas slumped, bracing himself up with a hand planted on his knee, his breathing stilted, shaking fearfully, keeping himself standing with his grasp on Dean's clothing instead of dragging him by it.

Dean frowned, his expression softening as he unclenched his lowering fist. Seeing Cas so weak, his evident pallor and sickly sheen of sweat, still driving himself to fight for this—for them—to the bitter end, shook him.

Before he realized what they were doing, his arms circled Cas, helping him upright again. The angel went slack, laying his head on Dean's upper arm as though it took everything his vessel had left to remain conscious and standing. They figured out how to lean into one another without bringing each other down, and stayed that way. Holding Cas close, one hand flat on his back, Dean's eyes darted about frantically, having a hard time taking on board what he'd been told. *Thousands of years being eaten away...?* "It's been months, not—"

Castiel's patronizing laugh punctuated the sentence as he came back to life, animated by a frightening vigour. The seraph turned his burning gaze on Dean from close up. The burn wasn't desire or affection. It was angry, white-hot, and terrifying. "For you," he growled, wrapping a hand around the back of Dean's head, pulling him close to look him in the eyes. "Answer to me; if everything I've suffered has amounted to nothing, you will *answer me; why?*"

Dean remained speechless facing the angel's fury. He swallowed nervously, as afraid to ask the question as he was of the answer. "How long...?"

"*Eight thousand years.*"

Shoulders sagging, his grip on Castiel's coat loosening, Dean asked helplessly, "Is what I'm feeling even real? Do you want this so badly, I don't have a choice?" Fog scrambling his thoughts thinned. Dean knew full well where the blinding rage he'd nearly let loose on Castiel came from. A thing with a mind of its own, planted and thriving in the putrid soil of every awful thing he'd seen, done, and suffered. At a loss, he met Cas' glare for moments, unable to look him in the eye thereafter, ashamed.

Seeing Dean fold and offer no defence smothered the angel's flaming anger like water. His hold on Dean's head became gentle again. "I'm able to affect what someone feels, Dean. I'm an angel." Cas' intent gaze asked Dean to look at him with words unspoken. Slowly, Dean did. "If I hadn't heard your heartbeat that first night, I would've thought you lie dead beside me. Your trust was absolute. I hope *some* of that was my doing, but *not* the way you're afraid of. What happened? What's *changed?*" Castiel demanded, but softly. With every word Cas spoke, Dean turned his head further away again, almost cringing. Castiel's tone returned to its gentler register. "Dean, *talk* with me."

"I can't, Cas... I *can't* talk about it. Any of it," Dean shrugged helplessly, childlike. There was too much that was too awful for words. He couldn't say it out loud, but he didn't want to carry it alone anymore. Cornered. Unwilling to stay, unable to go. There was no way out...

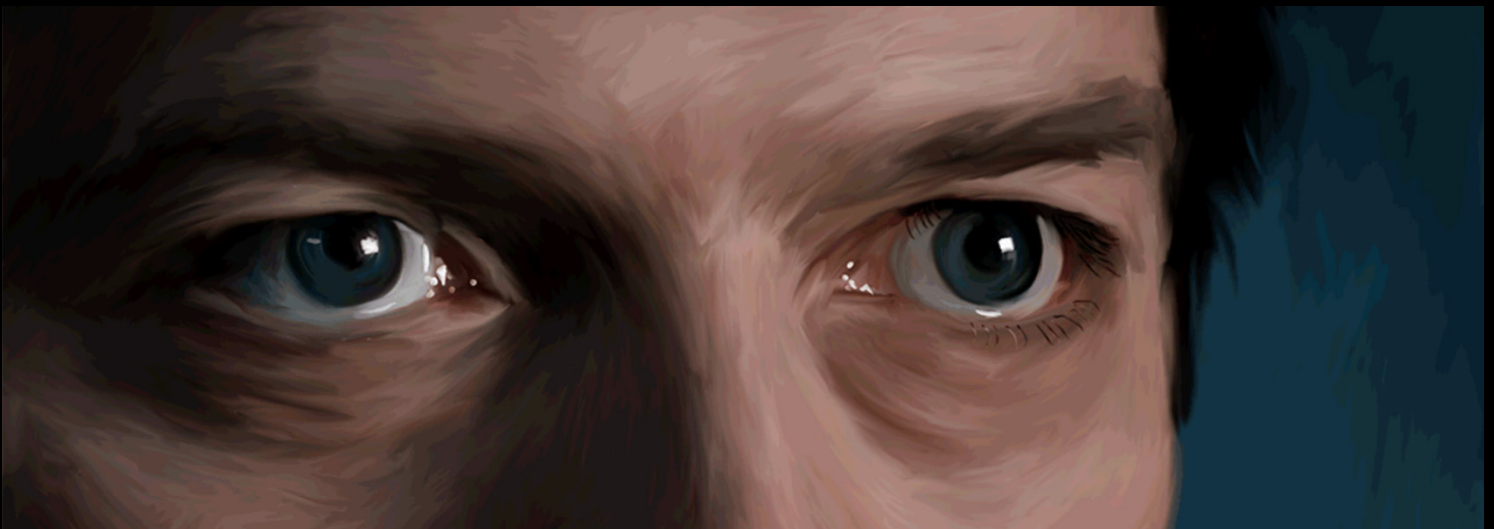
"I can help y—"

Snapping, Dean shoved Cas back against the side of the Impala. "You want to *know*? Fine! *Look!*" Castiel's gaze fell for a moment as he

gauged whether or not Dean's inviting him in might inflict even more damage on the bond they shared. *"Fucking look!"* Dean shouted from inches away, shaking him again. Their unyielding gazes locked and stayed that way until Dean felt something give. He exhaled sharply, blinking. A single tear ran down from one of his eyes. Face devoid of comprehension, Dean wiped it away. Slowly, understanding followed.

Dean couldn't speak aloud the things he carried—not even close—but he wanted Castiel to know, to understand. Resting a comforting hand on either side of Dean's rigid neck and jaw, Castiel guided Dean's face back toward him and *looked* into him, eyes wide, drawing nearer.

Castiel's piercing gaze transfixed Dean. Somehow, it rounded off hard edges—hypnotized—made his head wobble on his neck. Had him wanting to fall in, let go, and peacefully... *drown*.



The Night We Met © pimento-girl | [DA](#) | [R](#) | [T](#) |



*"Where's your brother?!"* The vicious shout fractured the silent night air, despite coming from inside a motel room. Castiel walked over the empty parking space outside the window into the room. Closed, smoke-discoloured venetian blinds couldn't keep his eyes from seeing what transpired on the other side. Dean stood close behind him and to one side, near enough he could feel his warmth.

Dean scrunched his eyes closed and opened them again. The blinds were gone. He looked in on himself, witnessing the memory disembodied.

He watched himself shrink back from his father as his dad took step after shuffling step closer, looking exhausted, ragged, fresh from a hunt, down into the bottom of the bottle in hand, his pupils so dilated they were almost black. The demon possessing John Winchester tonight was not one born of Hell, rather the cornfields of Tennessee.

"Don't shrug at me and tune out *when I'm talking to you!*" John swung. The hit landed on the side of Dean's head square and with full force; it took his knees out from under him. He fell back into the wall, his shoulders and the back of his head making full-on contact. The hit robbed him of any control of his arms. Couldn't break his fall. Another blow landed on the side of his mouth. He spent weeks after this worried he'd lose a tooth. Somehow managed to salvage it.

If he made too loud a sound, John hit him harder. So, he closed his stinging lips, gritted his aching teeth and kept quiet. John seemed to realize what he was doing couldn't show. He stuck to body shots. Hits to the head landed in his, at that time, longer hair. On Dean's raised arm. Long sleeves it was, then.

*I lost Sammy.*

*When you screw up so badly it can get someone else killed, this is what happens.*

*I deserve it.*

Water sprung into Dean's eyes as he watched his father work him over from the sidewalk, through the motel wall. Suddenly, this weird vertigo got ahold of him, inexorably drawing him into the room even though his feet stayed in place on the pavement. *No. No, no!* His heart started beating frantically, fear he'd never shown before had the muscles in his face and neck taut, his eyes wide, and tears falling without his eyelids having to move at all. He would have given *anything* not to be inside this memory again, but felt powerless to stop it.

Cas' arm came up in front of him, his forearm against his belly—he jumped at the touch—and, in an instant, the vertigo and fear disappeared. The gravity dragging him back into being that boy inside all over again had been severed with what seemed an odd, surprising finality. He turned his head to watch Cas watching him—them?—without pity or condolence, taking it in, unblinking.

*Never look away from suffering.*

Bobby's words echoed in his mind. The corner of Dean's lips turned up as he looked fondly over the angel's profile. A blunt, aching feeling took a squeezing hold of his heart.

Castiel stood, watching, as the man Dean loved, trusted, and idolized lay down a beating on his son—his baby boy—that would kill Dean if he didn't stop.

Then, he did. His hand went still, cocked back in the air. Dean found his feet again, the way he always did, as John turned and stumbled away, summoning every scrap of restraint he could muster.

"Get out."

Dean looked up at his father, bewildered. John would lay one on him then send him to another room, out to the car, or somewhere out of mind if out of sight wasn't possible, needing to pretend he didn't exist for a while, but *never*... "Where am I gonna go?"

"I don't know and I *don't* care." The words hit Dean in the face like a slap.

"Uh... I need to—" *...wash the blood off before I go.*

He tried to say it, but the look on John's face kept his mouth closed better than wearing an iron mask.

John lumbered up to him and brought his face in close to the quivering boy's, looking him in the eye, daring him to flash the faintest hint of defiance at him. "Get the fuck out. Or I'll kill you."

The words hit harder than any physical punishment he'd ever taken. Dean felt something in him shatter. Hurting so badly and thoroughly, it was impossible to pinpoint what it was. Stunned speechless, unable to look his dad in the eye, Dean made one foot move, then the other. He almost forgot his jacket with keys and wallet in the pockets on the way out. He walked out the door feeling as though he was swimming through the air, dazed and untethered. He felt the body he lived in, the clothing he wore, his plasticky, numb skin, the blood pooling in bruises underneath and drying on it, didn't feel real. The world around him didn't feel like something substantial enough to hold on to, not anymore.



John passed out on Dean's bed within minutes. He never remembered what happened that night. Perhaps because it was easier for his conscience that way.

Dean turned to walk toward the car, freezing in place, his breath leaving his lungs when, out of nowhere, he came face to face with a staring creeper in a tan trench coat.

"The fuckin' hell is your..."

The look in the considerably older man's strangely vivid blue eyes made him feel... quiet. His gaze fell to the centre of the man's chest, like he didn't have enough strength remaining to hold his eyeballs up. Letting go of his breath, he bowed his head, his breathing going shallow, wincing out of surprise when a gentle touch appeared on his cheeks, guiding him to turn up his face. The man's forehead gently leaned into his. Dean let out a confused laugh made of scarcely more sound than breath. His body hung from the hands on his face as though disconnected from his brain.

There was light—fire—so hot it burned blue, in the stranger's eyes. It occurred to him that this is probably what someone homeless would feel like; out in the freezing cold day in and day out. Finally able to warm their hands by a barrel fire or around a mug of hot soup, for the first time in far too goddamn long... except that's the way this man's presence blanketed and warmed his soul.

The skin of his forehead made contact with Dean's and it seemed to Castiel that in every way but the literal, the ribs caging his heart cracked straight down the middle and, like wrought iron gates, swung open wide, exposing the bonfire in his chest and letting the feeling fuelling it out into the world around him. It was into that bonfire he wordlessly invited the boy to discard anything and everything he needed to. The night's razor-sharp despair that shattered his heart and slashed up his will to carry on, and the pain wracking his body—that was all Dean gave over to be incinerated. The rest he kept for himself, knowing he could carry it.

Cas nodded as slightly as he smiled. He would have taken it all away if he'd been allowed. Dean, however, had made his choices. Castiel admired and respected them. Dean would never remember this.

Stepping back, the seraph looked the boy over from head to toe. His heart was whole again, and he was young and hale—his wounded body would heal well. Any work he could do in this moment was done.

The boy blinked and started when he woke from the trance he'd fallen into. He had no idea how much time had gone by, but there were tears on his cheeks and he'd been standing there long enough his slightly open mouth had gone dry...

Dean looked on, gobsmacked, as a white glow started to show under the skin where Cas' forehead and his—theirs? Whatever—touched, unable to shake the feeling that he was watching memory and reality intersect. He remembered lingering there on that cracked, buckling sidewalk, feeling shattered. He couldn't do this anymore. Even little Sammy wasn't reason enough. It hurt so *fucking bad*... then, it didn't and this clean yet pungent smell tinged the air. He remembered looking around like he expected someone should be standing there. *No one. Hunh...*

*He had to clean the blood off himself and his clothing. Find band-aids. Get his shit together. He could feel weak, but he couldn't let anyone see that. Mistakes of that sort get you eaten alive out on the street.* Dean watched his younger self cross the parking lot and head toward the corner store for supplies he needed to shoplift. His too-big cargo jacket came in real handy. He already had an idea or two about where to find a bathroom he could use undisturbed.

Castiel's touch appeared on his shoulder, giving Dean a start. The sensation wrenched him out of his thoughts, putting his feet back on solid ground. He met Cas' gaze head-on, swallowing the lump in his throat.

He'd spent his whole life looking the other way, shoving shit like this aside and soldiering on. Now, he recognized it for what it was: a scar. An indelible mark. A gnarled, mangled piece of him that would always be the boy in that room who'd first learned what the icy breath of Death felt like—not from some supernatural monstrosity—but by his father's hands and words, under his father's roof. Castiel's other hand came up to cover his eyes, his thumb resting lightly on his lips. Dean laid his head into the touch, reaching up, stopping when his fingertips grazed the back of Cas'

hand. He started breathing in deeply through his mouth. Feeling his heart grow calmer in his chest, it returned to an even, steady beat. His shoulders relaxed. He hadn't realized they'd been that hunched up.

Castiel took his hand away, letting the daylight in. Dean let his hand fall back to his side. Dean looked around, momentarily confused, wincing at the sudden change in light. *Daylight?* A pine tree line. Water. Just outside civilization. Far enough away, you couldn't see it. Close enough, you could still smell it. A gentle breeze rustled the trees. Small, quick waves lapped onto the stony shoreline. Dean looked up, wincing at the sun's obliterating brightness. He stepped back, unsteady.

*Clunk... clunk.* A wooden dock underfoot. They'd been here before. Dean looked at the angel, a sheen of vulnerable surprise in his eyes; *Cas remembered.* Castiel let his hand come away from Dean's shoulder. Dean brought his hand back up, catching the seraph's forearm. Dean stared down at where he held onto Cas, watching the seraph's hand cautiously turn down, touching him in return. He didn't know much, at least not compared to some, but he knew in that moment he wanted to hold and be held by the angel there with him. But... he couldn't move. Drawn as he was, something in his head still occupied space between them.

"Dean..."

Letting out a sigh, Dean smiled. He didn't have to look at Cas' eyes to see the unabashed, inquisitive look he knew went along with the tone of voice.

Dean frowned. As much as he wanted to keep his sights on where Cas had his hand on him, a sound in his ear started getting louder, and louder, and louder until he *had* to know where it was coming from.

Castiel watched, concerned and looking for the source of Dean's disquiet in their decidedly tranquil reverie as Dean's attention seemed pecked at by something. Eventually, wrenched away from him entirely. Dean started and dropped his arm, pulling away the instant he blinked and found their surroundings changed...



The sound: water gurgling out of a restroom tap without an aerator. Dean stood aside as a gaggle of the bar's lady patrons passed between them. None of them looked at either him or Cas like they existed.

Dean met Cas' intent, expressionless gaze. Castiel watched as Dean processed and realized where and when they were. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. Cas took a levelling breath as he watched Dean orient himself, forcing his legs to walk down the poorly lit hall. He stood in front of a heavy door held shut by a closer. The sign on the washroom door: MEN. His jaw and cheeks worked, brow furrowed, tendons in his neck went taut. Then came a hand on his shoulder. Something inside him gave. Feeling relieved—steadier—Dean reached for the grab handle, opening the door wide.

Within moments of the two men inside coming into view, it became apparent to Castiel what was happening. The jeans on the stocky man facing the wall, propped up by one hand against it, were undone and down to just below his ass cheeks. His skivvies were flying low, too. Lean, limber, bowed legs dressed in jeans bought ripped belonged to the young man on one knee between the flexing ass obscuring their view and the grimy, ceramic tiled wall.

Oily yellow lights lit the restroom that indelibly smelled of human effluence and vomit that no amount of cloying air freshener and an insufficient amount of cleaning product could hope to combat.

A pang of pain shot through Dean's heart as he watched the legs in ripped jeans start to flail. His gaze involuntarily dropped to the floor. He didn't need to look to know and feel what was going down. A large hand had an iron grip on the back of his head. Too much, too far in. He couldn't breathe. It was blocking his throat completely. Even breathing through his nose did no good. Choking, he started to bring his teeth to bear, then the sudden violence of the thrusts against his face slammed his head back into the wall with stunning force.

His arms started frantically looking for purchase on the wall. Malnourished, he didn't have strength enough to shove the sturdy john away. The only thing that might keep him from blacking out was trying to

stand or to turn his head and fall sideways. The effort earned him a moment's reprieve, saving him from vomiting and passing out.

As suddenly as it turned violent, it was over. The cumming penis straining deeper into his mouth stopped, then it was gone and a hand was caressing his face as he hacked up semen in his throat. Disgusted, stomach sick, his mouth and throat hurting, he slapped it away without thinking. That same hand came down backhand on his cheek, hard. One of the man's feet took a step toward him. Seemingly, he thought better of it when Dean instinctively cringed and uselessly put up shaking arms in defence.

*Pathetic.* The trick laughed darkly as he tucked his slick penis away, zipping and buttoning himself up as he turned away from the boy on the floor, slumped against the wall coughing, gagging and wheezing for air after accidentally sucking another glob of cum into his lung.

The man met Castiel's ice-cold gaze head-on as he walked out of the open restroom door, slipping by him, chuckling. "Your turn, pal." Castiel icily watched him go, grateful the man would continue living his life as if Hell wasn't real, only to discover that *it is*.

Castiel observed as Dean of long ago found his feet and pulled himself up to the sink, curling over it, retching up as much foul-smelling, curd-laden ejaculate as he could, turning on the cold water tap and spitting into the sink. It came out tinged pink with blood and snot.

Glancing Castiel's way, eyes bloodshot and tears running down his face, the boy flipped him off. "Fuck off, pal." Cas' gaze promptly hit the tile floor. Dean's voice sounded raw, weak, and wrecked. Speaking caused him pain. Dean couldn't see him clearly through watering, bloodshot eyes, and he hadn't spoken, betraying his voice. There was no need to alter the boy's memory.

He backed out of the room, reaching for the edge of the door, wordlessly inviting Dean to close it. Dean started, letting it go. Castiel turned his gaze to Dean as the door creaked closed beside them. Dean tried to keep his gaze up, look him in the eye, and keep his eyes from watering worse than they already were. He succeeded at none of those things. What he'd done back then staved off him and Sam starving another four or five days. This time, John would return before things got



worse. That did nothing to take the edge off how shamed, filthy, and worthless it had made him feel. It still did. His hand started heading up to cover his eyes.

"Dean, don't—" Cas gave his head a gentle shake and brought in his hand to keep Dean's from rising further.

"*Feel ashamed?*" Dean demanded, interrupting, his lips quivering slightly. Castiel decided against what he'd been about to say, seeming tense for a moment, only to have found something that gave him peace by the time he met Dean's gaze again. Dean swallowed nervously as he looked Cas in the eye. What he saw therein—there was only one word to describe it. Reverence.

Castiel's expression changed. He regretted realizing something too late. Lower this time, Cas's hand came to his arm again. "Dean, leave. Please. You don't need to be here with me for me to see your memories. I don't want you anywhere near this because of me."

Dean scoffed bitterly, sniffing. "I already am, Cas." He shrugged helplessly, fixing his hardened gaze on the closed bathroom door. "I live with this shit every fuckin' day."

Castiel blinked, shocked, looking away from Dean, taking a small, weaving step backward when a second vertigo wave washed over him. He looked up to Dean, deepening fear and confusion taking over his face. For minutes now, a growing sensation, the onslaught of a fast-moving current, had been worrying him. Now, it began crashing into him, such that even a seraphim found it near impossible to keep steady on his feet. He wanted to stay. Unless he fought it, it would carry him away from this place and time.

"Cas?!" Dean latched a hand onto the angel's forearm when his gaze went unsettlingly distant. He looked like he might keel over backward. Castiel's attention snapped back to here and now—to Dean.

Again, drifting away from Dean, Cas looked at the hallway wall as though looking through it. "Let go, Dean... I have to go."

"Cas, what is it? What's going on?" Dean's hold on him got much tighter.

The seraph shook his head. Defeated, Dean let go of his hold on Castiel's arm. *What* was happening? All this talk about choosing each

other, about being what he needed him to be when he needed it, and now the angel was the one freaking and squirrelling the hell outta here? *What the fuck?*

Backing down the hall, his steps getting quicker with each one, Cas let his focus be taken from Dean and turned it to keeping his bearings in the swirling eddy of time and an odd species of gravity.

“Cas? Where the Hell are you goin’? I let you in and you just *nope* the fuck out?” demanded Dean, striding after him.

Cas spared Dean one last moment of his undivided attention. He’d turned his back on Dean and begun walking away without having realized it. He planted his feet in place and turned to look back, taking in the sight of Dean standing just beyond reach, one hand still up in the air a bit, hoping for him to reach back, the look on his face *what—the-fucking* at him, accusing, and hurt. The moment in time crystallized perfectly in his mind—both what was here in their minds and seeing Dean entranced in the world outside against the backdrop of a majestic hundred-year maple tree and the blue and violet twilight sky, blended. This place, this moment in time, was the beacon to which he would return.

Something deep, deep within him didn’t believe they lived in a universe cruel enough to rip them away from one another now. His perception returned to the dim roadhouse hallway—to Dean’s hurt and fear plain on his face. “I have work to do.” Stepping back on his heels, he turned away. His feet stopped walking him away from Dean. Leaving things this way was wrong. Too painful for Dean. Looking back over his shoulder, Castiel smiled, warm and loving, “Don’t worry, I’ll be back before you know I’m gone,” he promised. Cas let his feet walk him around the corner, giving up his hold on this time and place as he vanished from Dean’s sight.

Dean rounded the corner and started, freezing. The look on his face hardened. Son of a bitch was gone.



Castiel walked into the remote campground bathroom, dispassionately taking in the sickly yellow lighting. Spider webs clothed

light fixtures and corners, littered with the tightly wrapped carnage of years of good eats for the facility's resident arachnids. The distinct stench of decades of filth aerosolized by air dryers clinging to every surface of the repugnant structure. An unclean, unshaven beast of a man exited a bathroom stall. It only took a few steps before Cas saw the limp, lifeless-looking lower limbs of a young boy in ripped jeans from where he stood. The man continued about the business of rinsing his wilting penis off at a sink as if Castiel wasn't there. Cas walked over to the stall, swinging the door back completely, taking in the sight of the boy before him, his heart *breaking*.

The man behind him started when the door moved for no apparent reason. The movement had drawn his attention back to the not-so-lively looking kid. The corners of a bunch of poorly folded hundred-dollar bills stuck out of one of the kid's jeans pockets. Enough to convince the kid this was worth it. With no one there to stop the john, he tucked himself away, doing up his fly and walked back toward the stall, reaching for the money in the boy's pocket. He was bent halfway down when something yanked him backward by the collar of his jacket, throwing him into the sinks and mirrors on the wall behind him with bone-snapping force, shattering the mirror. Shitting himself, terrified and confused, the man fled the isolated facility favouring his fractured ribs and cut leg.

Turning his attention back to the boy draped lifelessly over the toilet in the stall, Castiel frowned. Something wasn't right. The boy's arms lie loosely hanging off both sides of the toilet, one of them resting on the floor in his own puke, bile and blood. He'd tried to fight off the much larger man, not stopping until he couldn't maintain consciousness. His jeans hung down around his mid-thigh. The blood running down the backs and insides of his legs was flecked with a sickening amount of debris. A shredded rectum and lower colon, torn anus. Kidney damage. He'd been unconscious while the worst of it unfolded. It was searing pain that finally blacked him out altogether. Internal bleeding. The contents of his bowels leaked into places it didn't belong. Infection would likely kill him even if someone managed to find him.

His heartbeat was weak, his breathing too shallow. A candle's flame only a breath away from being snuffed out forever. Castiel looked

around, confused. This boy... wasn't *supposed* to die here, but no one was coming. No one. There wasn't anyone, anywhere around for miles who could find him before it was too late. The butterfly heartbeat in Dean's chest twitched a wing for the last time.

Cas' uncomprehending gaze returned to Dean—the movement so smooth it was nothing if not alien. His expression turned at once present and warm, yet distant and all-seeing. Stepping back, out of the flow of time, Castiel watched as the first of a delicate web of synapses lit up, forming a hazy starburst at the root of every choice in every mind whose actions had intermingled with and influenced theirs. Each of those actions—their own and those of others—minute tributaries into a greater body of flowing energy. A burst of light sparked where their paths first converged. Islands formed in its course, where their ways separated from and returned to one another as they moved forward in time. Their bond grew deeper, wider, and brighter—always. Castiel laughed, a single, exhaled shot of breath. *Absence* \*\*...

The branching paths of all possible permutations of every choice either one ever made withered away as each choice was made—an incomprehensibly complex and intricate series of events that brought him through to this moment. Then, all at once, Castiel saw it.

Their *love* manifested before his eyes, taking shape as a function of time, space, a variant of gravity and the free radical choice. He saw it; dazzling, vibrant, and suspended in the solution of existence. It was exquisite and elegant, enduring and ever-changing, yet fragile, as only a natural wonder can be; and it *didn't end here*.

The sudden presence of bare skin under the fingertips of his outstretched hand snapped him back to where and when his vessel resided. This skin was softer, younger, more pliant and unblemished by scars accumulated over a lifetime of violence, but it was *Dean's*.

"No, you don't, you stubborn mule," Cas murmured, chuckling darkly. "Not yet." Castiel moved Dean's feet out of their awfully twisted position. Cradling Dean's face in one hand, holding it away from the filth that coated the porcelain toilet base, he rested his palm on the boy's tailbone, a radiant white light shining beneath it, spreading deep into Dean's lifeless body.

Dean took in a strong breath, jerking awake. His stomach failed him immediately. What little was in his stomach, he threw up. Pushing himself up off the toilet, he used wadded-up toilet paper to wipe away as much of the filth on him as he could. He remembered being punched in the face at least twice. Probing his jaw and cheekbone, he felt almost no pain. *Odd*. He instinctively knew he should've been much sorer than he was. Missing teeth that he wasn't. Then his gaze fell on the sinks and shattered mirrors on the other wall. He had no idea what had happened—didn't give a flying fuck either—but letting someone bring him somewhere this far away from other people was a mistake he would never make again.

He left the outhouse, walking past the man in a dirty and worn tan trench coat leaning back, collar up against the cold, the bottom of one foot planted against the cinderblock wall, as though he were invisible. Stopping at the road, unsure of which way to go, Dean looked both ways. The street lights were dim in both directions. The forest beyond the cones of light was black—no city lights in sight.

Castiel's gaze focused intently on the street lights to the right. The lights along the road in that direction slowly grew brighter, steadier. Dean reached into his back pocket, making sure he still had the john's money before turning and heading right, inexplicably sure of which road to take to get back to Sammy.

Castiel bowed his head, knowing now why Dean called him here, and where he was needed next.





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Lawrence, Kansas - October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1983

Kneeling penitently by the bedside, the dim, oily yellow light on the master bedroom wall lent her wavy, honey blonde hair a warm, ethereal glow. Clothed in a white cotton and lace gown, her knees resting on an ornately embroidered prayer pillow, her voice took on a hypnotic, lilting quality as she murmured her nighttime prayer aloud. Mary opened her self and heart and, rather than speaking directly to God, let the whispered words pour out of her very soul into the ether for anyone who might be listening and hear.

"Heavenly Father, hear my supplications. I cry unto thee; I lift up my hands toward thy holy oracle. While the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Maketh me to lie down in green pastures: leadeth me beside still waters. Restoreth my soul: leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Lord, I pray, lend my husband your protection where he walks in the shadow of death. May thine angels watch over my sons: their wings and grace offer shelter from the storm.

"I ask naught for my own sake. You are my Lord and Saviour, and I fear no evil: for thou art with me. May thy goodness and mercy follow me and flow through me all the days of my life. Ere the end of my days is upon me, I offer my immortal soul unto You. May it dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This, unto you, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son and Saviour. Amen," Mary recited. A prayer she had taken up the day she set aside the ways of her Hunter heritage and committed herself to John and, before long, to their firstborn son. Then, just months ago, came their second blessing and newborn baby boy.

She bowed her head, her gaze at last leaving the cross adorning the wall opposite where she knelt at the bedside.

The daughter of Samuel Campbell crossed herself. *Watch over my boys, please.*

A gust of wind disturbed her hair, tickling her cheek. Wind from the direction of a closed window. She snapped her head toward the window, still closed, but before it, a trench coat-wearing man loomed in shadow, outlined by moonlight, his features indistinct. "Please, Mary, listen to me. I don't have much time. You are going to die." Mary dove for the

nightstand, producing a knife from the drawer. Castiel berated himself. Perhaps not the best choice of tidings to lead with. She lunged and dodged a half-hearted attempt at fending her off, burying the knife between the intruder's ribs, and by what she knew of anatomy, the blade reached his heart.

Something happened then she did not expect.

Laughter. Kind, warm—loving, even?—laughter, and a knowing, affectionate sigh.

She watched, dumbstruck, taking the gold cross on her necklace in hand, recoiling, and stepping away as the man took hold of the knife and slowly removed it from his chest without the slightest indication of feeling pain—quite the opposite. In fact, he was smiling at her; the inexplicable amusement to it put her ill at ease. Clouds drifted in, obscuring the moon behind him, and revealing his face.

Dean hadn't acquired his habit of stabbing first and asking questions later anywhere strange. "I heard your prayer, Mary Winchester."

Her breath caught, but at the same time, peace came over her. There was a smell in the air. Sharp yet... clean. Something in his eyes, something in the tone of his voice...

She felt much of the tension in her leave her body. "Who... who are you?"

The man smiled lovingly. "You know the answer."

"That's not—"

"Possible?" Castiel supplied, chuckling gently at the irony, considering whom she'd prayed to scant minutes ago.

Eyes fixated on him, shaking her head, she looked down for a moment as he offered up the bloody knife in hand, handle first. In that instant, the vastness of the chasm between belief and knowing became clear to her.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Are you... here, for me? Right now?"

Raising one hand in a supplicating gesture, Castiel set aside her knife on a dresser. "No, *no*. Not now. Not me. I cannot say when. I'm only here to warn you and to do as you've asked." He offered up his open, empty palms to assure her he meant no harm.

Mary swallowed, finding her proper voice. "I'm... going to die? How?" If he wouldn't lift a finger to change things, she didn't intend on going down without giving her murderer Hell first.

Shaking his head regretfully, Castiel replied, "I cannot say, and I cannot prevent it, Mary. It is necessary. All I *can* do is give you time to put the affairs of this world, your heart, and soul, in order."

"Wuh... H-how long?"

"Not long."

"You can't stop it, or you won't?" she demanded, her tone bitter. She had a whole lifetime ahead of her. Dean was such a little sparkplug already, and baby Sam was only months old. First words, first steps, kindergarten, school, so many more birthdays, camping trips, families of their own... and she wouldn't be there for any of it?

Sighing sympathetically, Castiel answered her, his voice caring and soothing. "It would irrevocably alter future events—necessary ones. If not for that, I would."

Sharp pain in her chest sobered her. Mary exhaled. "What will their future... their *lives* be like?"

Castiel forcibly kept his eyes from watering as he watched Mary's expression dart between anger, defiance, and finally, acceptance and grace. He smiled softly. Such fortitude in someone so small. "It will be difficult for your sons, but they will *always have each other*."

Mary nodded, believing, but still needing to ask. "I don't understand. Why would God send someone—"

"I am an angel," Castiel insisted, to make her say it and believe it.

She nodded. "...Why would H-He send an... angel... to watch over my sons?"

Castiel cast his gaze heavenward. "God didn't. I'm here of my own volition. God is... capricious and indifferent to humanity. He's not listening to your prayers." Castiel's gaze drilled into her. "He ceased to value humanity long ago."

There wasn't the faintest trace of a lie in his eyes. Mary scoffed. "Aren't angels God's messengers? If you weren't sent here, why do you care?"



Castiel sighed, solemn. "Because, one day, your sons will help a new God, one who values humanity—who recognizes and protects the sanctity of all life—rise to power. You are their mother. For their existence, you have my eternal gratitude. I want to... offer you whatever peace I can, before the end."

"You sound like..." She couldn't shake the impression he was talking with her like a dear friend. "Why do you care if *I'm* at peace before I die? People die without rhyme or reason, without warning or peace, every day..."

Castiel smiled kindly. "I owe it to you, to Dean, to—"

"To *Dean*...?" Mary demanded, frowning.

"Yes." The angel's expression turned fond.



Mary © JJPADTK | [In](#) | [T](#) | [Tw](#) |



Realization slowly morphed her expression. She inhaled deeply. "You're not just here for *me*... are you?"

For a moment, Castiel's gaze wandered to where Dean slept peacefully on the other side of the wall, considering obfuscating the truth. He couldn't lie. "No."

Mary's eyes narrowed. "My son isn't just a means to an end to you, is he?"

"No." With a subdued smile, Castiel gently shook his head. Approaching her, he intended to offer a reassuring touch, so she might spend her remaining days hopeful and unafraid. He stopped when she tensed defensively. "I will watch over and protect him, Mary. Always. I promise you."

Mary relaxed and smiled, understanding and awe beginning to show through in her expression. Water rose in her eyes. "I believe you."

Castiel nodded reassuringly before releasing her from his unwavering gaze. He turned to the window behind him, wistfully looking to the full moon hanging low in the sky. Mary had the distinct impression he was leaving. "Wait. What's your name?"

As he turned back to face her, the clouds moved away, and the moon's curvature happened to wreath his head with a crescent of blue-white light. The angel smiled serenely. "Castiel."



Castiel stood, arms crossed, one foot weighing down the side rung of a kitchen stool whose legs were hovering precariously an inch or two off the floor. Balancing on the stool, straining for a jar of sweets atop the fridge, stood a young child with a shock of blonde hair and a determined, mischievous glint in his eye. Castiel smiled fondly on the boy. He didn't have to have seen this before to know what was coming. In the end, the few moments of childish, impish delight Dean experienced were worth preventing him from falling and breaking his wrist.



The Life of Dean Winchester © petite-madame | [In](#) | [T](#) |

An ill-judged swipe at the jar sent it off the edge of the fridge. It fell to the counter, breaking. The boy was quickly down off the stool, fright taking him over. John Winchester stormed into the room, all fury and no restraint. Castiel watched serenely, unable to reach out and affect events in any way that either would remember. Part of him hoped that, somehow, the shared moment of mischief and being there with him, bearing witness and feeling for him—not pity or sorrow—but loving empathy, would, in some small way, reinforce the child's thus-far indomitable spirit.

No matter how hard John hit, Dean never stayed down.



Dean walked out of the bar and into the night, “lettuce”—a word for money he’d never heard before tonight—from a pool table harvest in his back pocket. About four hundred dollars. Somehow, he’d managed to extricate himself before the guy sobered up and realized how far down he was. That said, they weren’t long for this town. Not anymore. Someone loses money like that and has the right kind of friends... shit can get ugly quick. The last thing he needed was his kid brother mixed up in something like that. It was time to move on. They couldn’t wait for Dad anymore.

He turned up his collar, the comforting flip and swish of his Zippo sparking a Pavlovian craving for the nicotine hit incoming from the cigarette in his mouth. Hiking his shoulders up against the cold, he leaned back against the wall. Hanging up his boot heel on the gritty brick, he tried not to think about the kinds of things he might be leaning on outside a joint like this as he let the smoke take the edge off.

Dean frowned; his gaze fixated on the broken, concrete sidewalk riddled with crushed gum in various stages of wear and greying colours. He couldn’t shake this feeling crawling up his ribs and onto his shoulder blades. Taking one last deep drag to see if that got rid of the itch, he settled, hacked out a slight cough, and waited. Nope. Fuck it. Whatever it was, his feet wanted to be moving, so that’s exactly what he was gonna do. He’d learned long ago to listen to shit like this—when his body started feeling some odd kind of way.

Fashion said the rips in his jeans looked cool. All they were fucking good for was letting the cold in, said he. Problem was, it made him look like he had more money than he did, so he kept wearing the “cool” jeans. Whatever it took to make folks less likely to turn up their nose at him and walk away disgusted because he looked and smelled as poor as he was.

Plastic’s sharper burn told his mouth he was down to the filter. A decisive flick of his middle finger sent the discolored white butt sailing out onto the empty street. Striking pavement, glowing embers scattered from the end. Exhaling the last smoke through his nose, he zipped up his coat and sunk his hands into his pockets. This feeling crawled up the back of his neck and head the way it always did when he took a chance like this

and stayed out 'til closing time. He had to get back to the motel before Dad showed up and gave him Hell for leaving Sammy alone again...

Leather soles of black polished shoes that had walked miles beyond counting beat concrete under the weight of a man dressed in an unremarkable suit, a rumpled white shirt with an unbuttoned collar, a dirty tan trench coat, and a loose, conspicuously blue tie. A man with dark, unkempt hair and searing blue eyes. Hands in his coat pockets, he moved with an uncanny smoothness along the sidewalk. Unlike humans, one of whom whose body he wore as a living, breathing costume, he could see far more at any given time than their limited biology was capable of. Humans paid no mind to where their feet fell, not caring one bit what scraped and crunched between their footwear and the ground, announcing every step.

He remembered a time when failing to care about such things earned the human in question a gruesome end at the claws, paws and maw of a stronger, faster, better predator. In comparison, he knew where every pebble, every scrap of made-man debris lay in waiting to betray his presence with sound. He stepped around or over the stones primed and ready to alert anyone nearby. He did it effortlessly and effectively, as though he walked on ground that was hardly there.

Then, smoothly and purposefully, the footfalls of this urban jungle's most dangerous predator exited the same bar behind him and fell in step. The boy in the ripped jeans ahead picked up the pace, ignoring the burn in his skinny, malnourished legs if it meant getting inside, out of this cold even one minute sooner. Where the boy ahead turned, the man behind him followed. If it had been two, three, or even four turns before their paths diverged, he would have thought nothing of it. But... the boy in the ripped jeans was smart. He knew how to figure out if someone was following him; taking a few turns at random, in quick, but not too quick, succession, heading nowhere you were actually going, toward more people, not less, and always, *always*, stick to the light.

The boy with ripped jeans wasn't quite sure yet, but the man in human costume was.



This businessman in a dark gray suit with fashionably barbered hair, and a silver ring on the finger that showed a man to be married, was tailing the boy ahead.

Grey Suit Man knew this boy, too young for the drinks he was buying, had money on him, won hustling the pool tables. A lot of it. He'd lost at cards tonight. That money would fend off divorce if he could get his hands on it. Carried by that starved wisp of a kid, it was money ripe for taking. If in the process of taking it for himself, say this twink's pants happened to inexplicably slip off his pert little ass, well, who in their right mind could pass up an opportunity like that?

Perceiving the thoughts clearly, the man with a blue tie and blue eyes heard them as if they were said aloud. His unaffected expression turned cold and hard, his eyes murderously narrow. The instant he spotted a shadow tall and deep enough to conceal him, he walked straight into it and disappeared. Grey Suit Man's eyes were never capable of seeing him to begin with. He wasn't, strictly speaking, walking on the "right" side of the world to be seen by human eyes. He stood stone still against the brick wall, beside concrete stairs. His eyes locked onto Mr. Grey Suit. Instead of moving his eyes in their sockets, his centred pupils dictated the turn of his head as the sharp-dressed predator walked by, oblivious.

Falling in step behind him, it was mere seconds until Grey Suit strode past a collection of trash cans, a slender wooden scrap leaned up against one.

The next instant, the board was gone from his peripheral sight. The impossible occurrence snapped Grey's head toward the trash heap, instantly standing every hair on his body on end, but his feet kept on moving. The wooden slat had fallen, at the perfect instant, between his steps, which meant it caught between the calf of his outside leg, the shin of his inside leg swinging forward at full speed and by lever action sent the trash cans skidding and clanging to the sidewalk like gongs in the night as he pitched over forward onto his knees, palms and forearms, narrowly avoiding breaking his nose on the sidewalk.

"FUCK!!"

The boy in ripped jeans broke into a sprint and disappeared around a corner before Grey's sight found him again. Cursing flowed freely while



he picked himself up, as hurt by shame and failure as he was by his gashed open palms, wrists and knees. With a fingernail, he pried a pebble out of his profusely bleeding skin. “*Godammit.*” There were many, many more. His slacks were garbage. He turned around to go back the way he came, screeching out a shameful sound at the shock of coming nearly nose-to-nose with a man whose presence alone made him believe incarnate evil was real. He leapt backward so fast he felt as though his flesh, skin, and organs wanted to be away from this man faster than his skeleton could follow.

Again, he toppled over a trash can, struck his head off the ground, losing more skin, this time on the backs of his hands. Quaking with equal parts rage, pain, and fear, he cried out as he managed to relieve some pain by lying on his back. By instinct alone, he pointlessly held up a bleeding, shaking hand that wordlessly pleaded with the man in a tan trench coat to not come any closer. Not to hurt him.

If, in that instant, he didn’t already believe in the devil, the man’s eyes glowed blue, his lips moved and out came a sound Hell’s cesspools vomited up. “GO HOME.”

Suddenly, pain didn’t matter. He was up and sprinting for his life away from whatever the fuck was wearing a man’s skin standing beneath the streetlight, his face indiscernible through the shadow on it except for two glowing blue points of light that extinguished the instant before he vanished as though he was never there at all. Tears were suddenly streaming down his face, and a wailing, endless cackle haunted the night air as he scrambled down the street, falling twice more before he found his car and locked himself inside. Mad with fear, he reached for the rear-view mirror and tilted toward both sides of the back seat, so afraid he couldn’t turn his head on his neck to look. He slowly panned the mirror back to the far side of the car and went sheet white at seeing the pitch black shadow with glowing blue eyes sitting in his back seat.

“Hello...”

Grey couldn’t hear what he assumed would have been his name. His shriek drowned out the sound as he flailed uselessly in the driver’s seat of the car, trapped inside by locks that wouldn’t *fucking* work! And windows

that wouldn't roll *the fuck* down! And a seat belt that wouldn't *fucking* unbuckle! The man-shaped shadow came at him *through* the seat, and his scream went silent. A burst artery in his brain and a heart that beat itself so hard and fast its muscle ripped took his life as patrons stood outside the bar, uselessly dialling 9-1-1 and trying to get into the car.

The apparition had never existed. The man with blue eyes, a blue tie, and tawny trench coat sat on a rooftop peacefully watching over the boy in the ripped jeans at a motel many blocks away. There was nothing of him, or anything else, present in the car. Nothing other than the predator's broken mind and putrid conscience.





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The backwater bar stank of spilled booze, spit, blood, mud, manure, and food from upset plates ground by foot traffic into the grooves between wooden floorboards. Conglomerate detritus transformed into a kind of permanent, repulsive grout by a wet mop night after night. The only thing in the air heavier than the odour of closely packed, infrequently showered human bodies was cigarette smoke. Music at this volume obscured all but the closest of conversation. To human ears, anyhow.

Castiel sat on a hardtop bar stool, keeping up the appearance of being contemplatively focused on his drink as he sorted through the multitude of sounds and thoughts assaulting his senses.

Excessive hairspray. Pungent perfume. A text message. *Horrible date. This guy smells like a brewery.*

CLACK. The cue ball rolled, its trajectory altered by a divot in the table's battle-scarred felt.

Deafening music. "*Don't rock the jukebox! I wanna hear some Jones. 'Cause my heart ain't ready for the Rolling Stones...!*"

Two cargo jacket-clad bodies collided. One much lighter than the other.

"Watch where you're goin', kid."

"Oop. Sorry, dude. My bad."

A drunken stumble, a scoff, a dismissive hand wave, and a roll of eyes. "Yeah, whatever."

Castiel smirked. One of them walked away lighter in the pocket than he was a moment ago. Booted feet, a sauntering gait inherent to bowed legs, circled around and casually wandered past the poker tables in the quietest corner of the bar.

Instead of wallets, these men carried rolled money. If Dean could make a mark of just one of them, he and Sammy would be flush for a couple months, probably more. One of the players had his jacket hung over the chair back, pockets facing away from the table. Dangling there like the money in the inside breast pocket was *meant* to be his. By the make of the jacket, it was an unbuttoned pocket, not zippered. Dean moved across the floorboards, stepping lightly, smoothly. Eyes off the



tables, keeping expressionless and nonchalant. These guys were touchy about an observer tipping off other players to the nature of their hand.

A blink later, he had the money between his fingertips.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Castiel watched as the young man skillfully lined himself up to casually brush past a player at the table on the way to a pinball machine. His prize: the pocket's monetary contents in a jacket size or two bigger than his and about four sizes bigger than one that fit him. The seraph discreetly slid his arm off the bar, the beckoning gesture of his fingers at a precise moment obscured by his coat.

A whisky glass on the poker table *moved*, seemingly without reason, drawing the gaze of a player in a cowboy hat.

A loud, long whistle at the table jolted Dean badly. The money hit the floor. *Shit!*

"Weeell, looky, boys. What *have* we here?" His drawl was southwestern and thick.

"You little shit...!" The mark sitting where the jacket hung from shoved their chair back so fast it knocked into a petrified Dean and toppled over, clattering on the floor. There were suddenly three grown, large men standing, glaring at him with dark and dangerous resentment in their eyes. Before his brain could catch up to what happened, a large hand had him by both shirts and jacket, its owner cocking back the other hand to clean his clock.

"Hands off the kid, Barton," the player who'd made him ordered, something threatening in his voice. The fist coming at him stalled in mid-air. "I said, *hands off*."

"Who died and made you..."

The cowboy's eyes burned like a brand. "You really gonna deck this starving whisp of a kid for your dumbass mistake?"

"'Ey! Fuck you—!" A thick, challenging finger pointed at the cowboy.

The rodeo hand stood fast, a champion rider's belt buckle in plain view from where Dean was being held captive, and suddenly *everything* in the air was different.

He was slighter than Dean's captor, but tougher and meaner, and he knew it. If they did throwdown, he'd come out on top. "Let the kid



go.” He said it slow and low, one side of his nose curling in with disgust—last chance, asshole.

The hand on Dean’s jacket three-inch punched him in the chest, putting him back on his heels. His would-be assailant turned to sit down. The cowboy rolled his eyes, sighing. Rick Barton was many things. Intelligent was not one of them. “Barton. Yer money.” Barton cast a sour, pissed off glare at Dean’s saviour and snatched his bill roll up off the floor, stuffing it into his front jeans pocket. The cowboy settled casually back into his seat, like he hadn’t been hair’s breadth away from fisticuffs over a street rat he didn’t know from Adam fifteen seconds ago. The others were happy to peacefully return to their game.

Aggressively perceptive, the cowboy looked Dean over. Dean couldn’t recall ever being assessed like that before in his life. Like he was being seen down to his very fucking bones. It made hair everywhere on him stand on end. Something he batted away from his consciousness like a buzzing mosquito crackled to life in the nerves down low in his gut.

If that whiskey glass hadn’t shifted and caught his eye—he still wasn’t sure how that happened, either—he’d never have seen this kid. He was good. Really fuckin’ good. The kid’s stomach growled. So, he’d been right about that, too.

“You’re pretty good, kid. How’s about learning to pick pockets the legal way?” Dean stayed silent and cautious. “Well, legal-adjacent, anyhow.”

Dean looked like he needed to bolt. That or take a piss real bad. He stayed put, though. The cowboy’s one eyebrow went up, his gaze fixed on the kid. It was either bravery and desperation, or dumbass ignorance keeping this kid in place, and he was getting’ the feelin’ the needle on that was leanin’ heavy in favor of the former. The rodeo hand smiled. He reached into his pocket and peeled off a few bills. Six-zero bucks. He held it up in the air between two fingers.

“Kid, you can take this and run. I won’t stop you. Neither will anyone else. Or...” He leaned in close, one elbow on his knee, piercing hazel eyes looking up at Dean from under the brim of his hat. “...you can take a seat and play. When the money’s gone, you’re done. What’s it gonna be?”

Dean swallowed hard. He cleared his throat. “Play.”

The wrangler's smirk turned into a toothy, handsome grin. He shunted his chair to the side and put Dean on his left. "The game's poker, son. Have a seat."

John had taught him poker. The rules, the mechanics and variants. He'd played against Bobby for Smarties and won—sometimes—but it was here and now, his ass planted firmly in the hot seat, the gun of starvation pointed at his temple, that he truly learned how *play*. Two hands in, he knew half the tells at the table. He kept his own in check. Played it smart and straight, mostly.

Two rounds turned into four. Four turned into more. And more...

Five hundred bucks up and three hours later, it was closing time. He knew full well the reason he was walking out of there with the money he'd won in his pocket was because this cowboy with a gold cross strung around his neck on a delicate chain was a *good man*, and no one at the table was brave enough to raise a hand against him.

The rodeo hand had taken him under his wing that night. Waxed philosophical about the game, about life and how the two mirrored each other. The need for balancing instinct and deception with proven plays. How to survive with minimal losses and make the right move at the right moment.

He'd learned more in three hours than John taught him in years, soaking it in like a sea green-eyed sponge. Cards come and go like the wind. You don't play against a force you can't predict. You ask for its blessing and play the men around you. The guy with a tic that has him knuckling an itch at the bottom of his nose when he's in a bad way. The guy whose banter suddenly turns stilted when he's been slick as a hooker's cooch the whole time. The guy who pretends to have a chip-twirling tic, but has no tell even when shit's getting hairy and it's him that's your real problem.

He'd played. He'd won. Beginner's luck? Maybe, but just maybe... he was actually good at this. Like, *really* good.

Wrangler-man asked him to wait out on the patio while he cleared his tab.

Dean took out a cigarette, popped his Zippo open one-handed and lit it.

The cowboy stepped onto the veranda, smiling and nodding an unspoken greeting Dean's way. Donning his hat, leaning against the rail with one side of his hips down, his boot toe planted on the ground outside his other foot, he dug into his back pocket, drawing his jeans tighter around his hips. In that instant, something low, low down in Dean moved at the sight. Popping open his smoking case on automatic, intent on keeping Dean's company a few minutes more, he laughed at what greeted him inside the case. Empty.

Dean popped his case back open. Runnin' on empty, too. Letting out a sharp laugh at the irony, Dean offered up the smoke he'd finished stoking.

"You're not sick, are you?"

Dean smiled kindly, shaking his head. "Nope."

"All right, then." He accepted the cigarette and took a long draw. Dean didn't mind in the slightest. He was walking out of here tonight, set for a long time, because of this man. "Hot damn...! I've needed that goin' on an hour now. I don't even know your name... Gideon." The wrangler said it around the cigarette pinched between his lips, extending a hand.

Dean nodded, shaking on it. "Dean. Glad I had one left."

Everything about the wrangler paused, other than the hand returning the cigarette, and fixed on him. "Over four hours sittin' at the table, an' I still cain't get a bead on ya. What brings you to a place like this?"

"Been on the road long as I can remember."

The rodeo hand nodded slowly. "Been everywhere, from nowhere."

"Pretty much." Inhaling a draw, Dean changed lanes. "That was one hell of a game. Lady Luck had her skirts up for us to-night."

The cordial air of the cowboy's southern hospitality took on a hard edge. The kind that had Dean standing up a little straighter and listening. He tipped his hat up, speaking so he looked Dean right in the eyes. "Son, lemme give you the most valuable piece of advice you'll evah hear: always, and I mean *al*ways, respect a lady. Or you will come to rue the day you didn't."

Dean nodded, standing corrected. "Heard."

The cowboy smiled lopsided, giving up the smoke in turn. There was a good soul in this one. Proud, but not too proud. The boy stood there sucking back the nicotine hit, hand buried in his pocket, his gaze on the ground a second too long. Somethin' in him he couldn't explain had him standin' up tall and liftin' the hat off his head, hangin' it on this kid's bowed head. "You played a damn fine game tonight, son."

The way the kid's breathing hitched made him pull his hand back.

Keenly aware the hat on his head was probably worth more than every piece of clothing he'd ever worn in his whole life put together, a swell of emotion filled Dean's chest, threatening to overwhelm him. He lifted a tentative hand snuggin' down the cowboy hat; it couldn't have fit better if it were *made* for him. He felt, in that moment, like it was. Like it should've been. Something in him lashed itself to the feeling, wanted it, in ways nothing like anything he'd ever felt.

He pinched the hat's crown. Taking it off, Dean bit his lower lip. He couldn't keep it. It'd wind up ruined or their father would think he'd stolen it, and he'd pay bloody Hell for it. Dean put on the best bullshitter's smirk he could manage. "I can't. Not today... but one of these days, maybe..."

There was a light in the kid's eyes—a belief—that made the wrangler smile as he accepted his jet black Stetson back, combed back his hair with one hand and set it right on his head. "You got heart. Whatever it is that moves this world respects that, and you've got luck, kid. *Practice*. You'll be playing as well as, or better than anyone at that table, soon enough."

Dean beamed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been praised for something without being made to feel like a good-for-nothing screw up over something else.

The wrangler blinked. God *damn*, this kid was a looker. A good few years older and...

He leaned in a hair too close. "Heh. Don't get cocky. At least not until you fill out quite a bit more. Otherwise, you'll wind up getting' your ass kicked, maybe left for dead. Like the rest of this life, the game isn't always about winning. More often than not, it's about—"

"Knowin' when to fold 'em," Dean said, parroting the lyric. "And get the Hell outta Dodge."

The cowboy laughed, giving him an approving nod. "Whip-smart, kid. *Exactly*." His gaze, settling on his aging pick-up, and the sigh that escaped him telegraphed the next words from his mouth. "Look, I gotta head out. The missus'll have me dancing a gallows jig under the willow tree if I don't git my arse home. Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

Something in the middle of Dean's back prickled; a hard lesson learned the hardest of ways. "Nah, I'm good. Thanks, though." Dean held out a hand, wearing a closed smile.

The cowboy, his grasp strong and sure, took it, a cockeyed smile lighting up his face. He gave him one good, solid shake. "Stay sharp, kid." He winked, smiling affectionately. "You'll be all right."



Dean looked down over the gravel parking lot from the rotting porch leading up to the side door of the mission, keeping eyes on Baby parked in the bitter cold, Sam asleep in the back seat. His gaze wandered up to the darkening mid-afternoon sky of a snowless northern winter day. Afternoon shade would soon become twilight.

He'd lost at poker. John found out and forbade him from using his money to play cards ever again. He would. One day. He knew that. But right now, his father's fury scared him more than his empty stomach hurt.

His stomach started talking, sounding loud in the uneasy silence of those lined up to ask for whatever food the Angels of Mercy Mission had to give. A few heads turned at the sound, and a few more sets of eyes looked, trying not to be noticed. He smiled uneasily, but it disappeared the moment he had his mouth hidden behind the collar of his oversized jacket. It'd been four days since he last ate or drank anything that didn't come from public water fountains, or grocery store and restaurant dumpsters. Sam had the last of their food for breakfast, and he'd go hungry for dinner tonight without help. Some friggin' canned meat and bread that didn't have mold on it to be cut off would be nice. *Really*



fuckin' nice. It was all he wanted right then—not to taste the taint of mould and rot on his food for one fuckin' day this week.

The mission only let in a few at one time, each beggar escorted around the shelves by mission volunteers. To prevent theft. Theft, from a place already giving you shit for free when others needed help, just like you. He couldn't understand some people. Looking to his right, down the ramp built for wheelchairs, he couldn't help the sting of shame he felt. He didn't belong here. The life his father's vengeance forced them to live... never able to set down roots, or find work. Attend school. Life didn't have to be this way, and he *hated* it. He was tired... no, *exhausted* to his bones, the reservoirs of his heart runnin' on empty.

It'd been so long since they'd had a home of any kind. Even some rundown ghetto apartment felt like a luxury beyond reach.

A hand reached out and touched his coat arm. He jumped at the touch, startled. Christ, he was in a bad way. Couldn't get his brain to hold onto reality well enough to know he was being spoken to because it was his turn. Maybe it had been a day or so longer since he ate than he realized. Probably 'cause keeping a grip on reality meant feeling hunger-induced nausea clawing at his nerves, and he didn't want to feel anymore.

The woman smiled kindly, bringing him in with a gentle hand behind his arm. Blonde. Slim, wearing a knit sweater, lightly made up, blue-eyed, and generous. She reminded him so potently of his mother, not necessarily in her face, but in her faith, charity, guiding touch, and friendly, welcoming warmth that it took everything he had not to tear up and cry. Most of all, he hated that something so mundane and commonplace to anyone with a home and family made him so *weak* when he felt just a moment of it.

She watched the boy perk up as he stepped inside, out of the cold. The minute smile at one corner of his mouth was barely there, but it was real.

Dean looked her in the eyes.

*Things are gonna be alright.*

Giving her a grateful nod, he stepped up to where an older woman, visibly cooler in how she welcomed people, stood manning reception at a high counter, log book laid out in front of her.

Suddenly nervous, Dean tried to flash her a charming smile, but it wouldn't take. She didn't much care about what he did manage, anyway. "I, uh... I've never..."

"Have you been here before?"

"No. Never. I haven't..." *...needed it before.* But no, that was a lie. He'd needed it more times than he could count. Only about the age he was now did he think he could finally go to a food bank and not get his father in trouble for it. Bring social services down on their heads.

She fixed her gaze on him, waiting. This woman would make bank at a poker table.

He managed a winning smile he genuinely meant. "Things have been tougher than usual... lately. Found a leaflet over at the church, and I... hoped I could find some..." The word stuck in his throat. "...help."

She softened a little at that. "Driver's license, please, and we need something with proof of address on it."

*Shit.* He felt his expression fall. He couldn't help it. "We, heh, I don't have my... uhh..." He wasn't carrying ID with his proper name on it. He hadn't thought this through. He didn't want to offer up a precious false identity either.

"You don't have any ID?"

His gaze suddenly locked on the counter, Dean shook his head. "I don't. Our house burned down with everything inside not long ago..." She didn't need to know it happened ten years ago, not ten days. The water in his eyes wasn't exactly fake, either. It still hurt. It always would.

"You don't have a fixed address?"

"Yeah. She's parked in the lot outside."

"Your... girlfriend?"

Dean laughed. "No! No, my car."

"Where are your parents?" The question slapped in a way his ego resented. He'd been finding his own way for fuckin' years.

"Our Mom died in the fire. Dad's... I don't know where he is."

"Our...?"

"Yeah. Me and my little brother. He's asleep in the back seat."

Something in her face changed in a way he didn't like. Sour. Unease started prickling between his shoulder blades.

"What's his name?"

For a split second, there was a fond smile in his eyes at just the thought of his brother. "Sammy."

"Sam...?" she prompted, clearly wanting a last name. He swallowed. He wanted to give their real names, to tell her the truth. But... what if he found out? If their dad found out he'd given out their real names, he wasn't gonna be happy, at the very least, if not outright pissed off. The thought of John angry made him abruptly queasy.

"I'm Dean." Not exactly a graceful side-step of the question. He flashed her a charmer's smile. The way her face changed... *shit*. She wasn't a mark. Someone to con. He'd chosen wrong.

"I need your names for our records. I can't take you in without them," she insisted, with the tone of a DMV agent refusing to bend the rules. Pity gone, and shields up. His jaw tensed. Trapped. Truth it was, then.

"I... look. I can't. It might get Dad in trouble. He... hasn't been the same since. It's been a little more than two weeks since the last time we saw him. He left us food and money for a few days. I've kept my brother fed, but I haven't... it's been a little bit since I ate anything that wasn't garbage. Look, we're not local. I get that you provide for your neighbours, and we're not from here..." His sight locked on the three Wal-Mart bags of food in someone's hands leaving the mission the way they came in, snapping back to her the instant the angle was awkward. "I wouldn't need nearly that much. A couple cans of meat and a loaf of bread might get us through until our dad comes back." He watched her face, desperate to change the trajectory of her reaction with every word he spoke.

"I'm sorry, son. You'll have to visit the food banks in your own town. I can't take you in if you didn't live in town before the fire. I wish we could help you, but these rules are in place to protect the community we're mandated to serve. If you can tell me where you're from, I can find a good few minutes to look through our phone books and find the banks in your hometown..."

*Where you're from...*

Dean nodded, looking down, his expression twisting, shifting on his feet. He straightened it out where she couldn't see the worst of it and looked up. *Eight states away, and ten years ago is where we're from.* He didn't dare say that, though. In the short time he met her eyes, there wasn't a trace of give anywhere. Getting testy wasn't the answer. These were good people, doing one Hell of a lot of good for too many people.

A boisterous young girl came bouncing around the corner out of a hallway off to the side of the counter. Fine featured. Firey-haired and delicately freckled. Happy. She froze on the spot when her eyes met his. It was hard to tell whether the look on her face was awe or fear. Whatever it was, it was odd. He softened his face and gave her a reassuring smile. It was automatic by now. The same thing he did for Sammy when he knew the kid was scared and needed to feel safe, even though they weren't.

He didn't like the way the lady behind the counter looked at him.

"Sweetheart, head down to the basement and find your father. He'll be happy to have more help." Her voice was absent the slightest hint of her suspicions.

The young girl spent the entire sentence staring at him as though she couldn't look away, even though she wanted to. Suddenly, she shuddered and looked at the woman behind the counter, confused. Her brain caught up before the lady could repeat herself. "Yes, ma'am."

With that, she was gone and descending a set of stairs out of sight.

He gritted his teeth. Screw his fucking pride. Sammy needed to eat tonight. Breakfast had been too slim already.

"Please, ma'am, can..."

"Son, I can't. I'm truly sorry."

He bit his lip. She was. His smile was sad and defeated. His breath shook when he took it in. "Yeah... I, uh... I'm sorry, too." He looked at the folks in line behind him, shoving his hands in his pockets, unconsciously looking for his smokes and Zippo. "Sorry to use up your time. Thank you." He meant every letter of it. As he fell out of line, the person behind him, wearing an impatient look, stepped in.

He looked around the tiny church building. It had been a church a long time ago, but the city had grown, and the world moved on. The shelves weren't full, but by no means empty either.

The thought of grabbing a few things and making a run for it took hold of him. He didn't know if he could get to the car and pull out safely before the elder men of the congregation got to him. Most of all, he hated himself for thinking it; stealing from those who already have next to nothing. *No. Never, ever.*

Bowing his head, shoulders hunching in, he tried to meet the eyes of some of the waiting patrons as he left empty-handed, but he couldn't hold it. When his boots hit the gravel, he stopped. Sammy was sleeping in the back seat, and he didn't remotely have his shit together. One smoke, maybe two, and he'd have himself steady enough he could put on a smile and show Sammy patience and care instead of irritation. He took a deep breath, sending the hurt in his heart out with the exhale, and tapped a smoke out of the pack, lighting it.

Getting it lit was as far as he got before his eyes and mouth twisted up so badly he had to yank the cigarette out from between his lips or drop it. If he couldn't find help with food tonight, there was only one thing for it: a mouth and throatful of nothing he could eat. The sob he was biting down on hurt his throat. The instant he knew it wasn't coming out, he had to breathe. In... out, and again.

"Hey!"

Dean hardly heard it above the sound of his clothing rustling as he swiped tears away from his eyes.

"Sir!? Hey!"

Dean frowned. The steps up to the food bank intake door were empty. Whoever it was, they were young, female, and definitely talking to him. He turned in the direction of her voice, seeing no one. The side door near the back of the building creaked open, the light inside spilling across the gravel in the near-twilight of a deep grey, rainy, late afternoon. She peeked barely half her face out before she realized he'd heard her and ducked back inside, quickly reappearing with three full bags of groceries in hand. Much more than your average ten-year-old should lift.



She waved him over frantically, about to be caught. That snapped him out of it. Dropping the unsmoked cigarette between his fingers, he darted over, picked up the three bags in one fell snatch, and backed away.

For some reason, his gaze was fixed on her brilliant green eyes. The same red-haired, fine-featured sprite from earlier. The care and love he saw there made his eyes water. "Thank you." How raw and vulnerable his voice sounded shocked him. The little girl smiled, glad of what she'd done, what the rules of adults said be damned. There wasn't a shade of doubt in her eyes. She disappeared.

Turning on his heels, he hauled the bags to the car, throwing open the back door. Christ, those hinges needed oil. Sam jolted awake when the bags hit the floor. Dean knew he didn't have a moment to spare.

Still, he looked up to the cross atop the dilapidated one-time church and something in his heart soured, shrivelled up, and dropped off the vine. It hadn't been God who answered his need for help. It was one pure-hearted, brave human girl who recognized when her elders had done wrong. Because of his mom, how she'd believed it beyond doubt when she'd told him angels were watching over him, he'd always kept space in his heart for the possibility that what she believed was real.

Not anymore. He was done begging a God who didn't give a shit about what he'd done to their family for a goddamn fucking thing.

What he did believe in was right here on earth: humanity, the kindness in that little girl, and whatever guided her to save them from starvation a little while longer.

Loud voices from inside the mission spurred him into action. His ass hadn't landed on the seat yet before he had the key turned in the ignition.

"Dean...?"

Sam was scared. "Buckle up."

Without a moment's hesitation, Sam did. There was such a good soul in that kid. It would be a cold day in Hell before he let the worst of life they were forced to live anywhere near it.

Throwing the gear shift into reverse, he thanked his lucky stars the parking space beside them was empty. He gave Baby just enough gas to

swing out of the spot fast enough to throw Sam sideways in his seat, but not so much her wheels only spun in the gravel. He floored it to the driveway mouth, his foot on the brake for a fraction of a second until he knew the narrow side street was empty.

A quick look in both directions, he chose to turn toward the side streets that looked empty of traffic and gunned it out of the parking lot, burning rubber before the furious pastor who flung open the side door of the mission could gather his wits enough to remember what Baby looked like, or what their license plate was...

Crouched atop the church roof's shingled spine, steadying himself with one hand on the cross, his wings resting softly on the roof, tucked down to keep from catching the storm-bearing wind, Castiel smiled down on the boy he cared for better than anyone he would ever know, grateful Dean would be spared this scar on his mind and heart. Dean had to be allowed to make choices of his own free will, and to experience what followed from them, no matter how it shattered his heart to bear silent witness. He knew the night Mary burned, he couldn't prevent all harm, but for twenty-four years, he would never fail to whenever opportunity arose...

The heavy metal door slammed closed. She jumped at the sound. "What did you do?" her father demanded.

Taking a deep breath, she held on to the truth of what the angel had told her about the boy and his brother. "I gave him food I know he needed."

"You know him?" The tone of her father's voice took on a darkness she didn't remotely like.

"No."

"It's a sin to *lie*, Anna." She'd never liked the righteous authority with which he nearly always said it. She would find herself in confession for this. That was *wrong*. The fire in her heart told her so. She had nothing to confess. Her actions were God's will.

"He's a good, selfless person. He saves people!" Her father was taken aback by the force with which she said it, perturbed by the words she used. Oddly... specific for a child her age.

"You said you didn't know him." The severity in her father's voice scared her, but she stood firm.

"I don't." Her eyes were watering.

"You know we serve many, many people in this city who need every scrap of food in this church! Someone will receive less than they should have or go hungry because of what you've done."

"He's starving right now! So's his little brother. He doesn't deserve help less than our neighbours. They turned him away *empty-handed at the desk!*" Not until the sentence rose to her mouth did she become well and truly angry that he'd been treated this badly.

Her father visibly twitched when it clicked for him that they might have his name in the mission records. "Stay here, young lady." He ascended the stairs two at a time, leaving her alone in the half-darkness and silence.

"God, am I crazy? Did I get it wrong...?" the short, slightly cherubic girl asked. Doubt wracked her so viscerally she couldn't hold her hands still.

The angel's soft, kind laughter found her ears. "No. Your choice was right and good. You have my word, Anna." His voice was deep, its sound rich. Like thunder, but with kindness instead of violence.

Anna started, turning on the man who professed to be an angel guised as a human, angry. "Why didn't you *tell them?*!"

The angel sighed. "Things... aren't that simple, Anna. They would have made certain... assumptions. Reacted badly. You'll understand when you're older."

"They would have thought you were a bad man. Trying to hurt me."

The angel's lips and eyes smiled sadly—regretfully. "Yes."

"Tell me the truth: did I do a good thing?" Tears welled in her eyes, her high, tiny voice warbling. "Did I make a difference?"

For someone so young, she bore the burden of her blessing with astounding grace. Something she would see and admire in Dean, and he, in turn, in her, when the time came.

His smile was small and soft. Then, the angel's watering eyes fixed on hers, boring into her very soul. The sound of his voice poured into the passage they made, his broad hand resting comfortably on the side of her arm, taking both her trembling hands in one of his. "Yes. More than you'll ever know. *Thank you.*" She stared, wide-eyed. He was gratitude incarnate. The shaking in her hands... stopped, and he... he smiled. She believed.

The man wearing a shabby tan trench coat quietly stood and turned away, looking around the surrounding shelving. All that needed to be said and understood had been. Enrapt by the sight of him, she stared in awe. Not at his striking blue eyes, the sharpness of his jaw and nose, or any other mundane thing that might have drawn her gaze and stirred emotions and sensations she couldn't comprehend yet.

It was the corona of *light* around his head; the look of it akin to images she remembered seeing of flares erupting from the surface of the sun, but there were distinct rings, and many. Such was their arrangement and movement that no matter which direction he looked, he always seemed to have a fluctuating, many-pointed, webbed crown of light. A "halo"... this is what an *angel's halo* looks like, she realized. Not some ridiculously gaudy, man-made golden ring, but pure light. The first of God's creations adorned upon the second. There was a weak shimmer of the same bluish-white light in his eyes' irises. Despite the light emanating from him, the room stayed dimly lit. It was light, but not the kind she usually saw.

She shook herself and looked down, getting control of herself. Her eyes were sore from just looking at it. She rubbed them and kept her head bowed. It felt as though she'd seen something private human eyes ought not see. She looked up when the man stepped deeper into the room. He walked slowly, his footfalls quiet, made by leather soles on shiny yet scuffed black shoes. The sound weighed heavier on her with his every step. Looking along the shelves, his gaze was intent as they were empty.

"Everyone's having a hard time right now. No one has much to give." It wasn't her fault, but she felt profoundly ashamed. She needed to explain it. Here, among them, was an emissary of God, and this paltry-stocked pantry laid plain the depth of selfishness in them all.

The angel smiled back at her. “Don’t berate yourself, little one. Those who have plenty—more than they could have use for in a human lifetime—give nothing, and only take more. Those who already have next to nothing give anyway, remembering well how those without struggle.” His laugh was quiet and rueful. “Something I know not how to change. Though, like you, your father, and everyone here, I will do the one small thing I can... *give*.”

His hand touched the vacant metal shelves beside him. Light appeared between the palm of his hand and the cold metal. Empty boxes on the shelves... *shifted*. Some rattled and jumped. A box beside her suddenly tipped over with a thud. She jumped out of her skin, stifling her cry so as not to draw attention from adults. Cans of meat rolled out and clattered to the ground. Someone was bound to have heard *that*. She picked up a can. It wasn’t liquified and canned meat she knew was less than desirable. It was the *good* kind. Tuna fish. Salmon. Chicken. She stared at the side of the box. Empty. They had emptied it before the doors opened that morning. It had been *empty* before he...!

Footsteps—her father’s and someone else’s—sounded loud coming down the stairs in a hurry. She looked for the man but... nothing. No one. Nowhere. She ducked, checking through the rows of shelves, moving boxes, searching for him. Gone without a trace. She knew one thing for certain: she didn’t want him to be.

“Anna! What are you doing? You could have knocked something down on your head and hurt yourself!” Her father quickly checked her over, his wrath dissipating into concern. The worst of his fears allayed, he turned stern again, though not truly mad anymore. “Come upstairs. Now.”

“Reverend Milton!” Anna knew the boy speaking to her father. A young congregant named, quite unoriginally, Matthew.

“What is it?”

He put down the box in his hands and started frantically peeling down the shelf, opening box after box as he went. “Where did all this food come from?”

Her father turned to her, his expression severe. “Anna, where did this come from? Who delivered it?”



She beamed joyously. Blinking as she tried hard to meet her father's gaze unashamed, dilute, blood-reddened tears fell from the inside corners of her eyes. Her father recoiled, one hand going up to his mouth.

"The angel." His daughter's awestruck expression and tone sent a chill down his spine. It looked halfway to madness. "It's a miracle." She looked around the broken-down, cobwebbed basement as though she'd never seen anything more wonderful in her life. Going down on both knees, her father brought out his handkerchief and wiped the tears from her eyes before she could see herself in a mirror. He pulled his daughter into a dearly tight hug, placing a firm, chaste kiss on the crown of her head.

Bewildered, he watched as the young man held out yet another box, emptied this morning before they'd opened the pantry's doors, now full again.

Reverend Milton looked up at the boy, at a loss, whispering, "Praise be..."

His expression turned grim as he scanned the room, his heart heavy with guilt.

The boy they'd turned away...

*Never should have been.*







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Surveying the farmhouse living room dispassionately, Castiel walked over to the yellowed ivory phone on the end table beside the couch, waiting for its ring. Absentmindedly, he picked up the TIME magazine sitting beside it, flipping through with quickly waning interest. When he'd perused every headline article inside two minutes, he and his gaze wandered around the rest of the room. From the walls to the carpets, couches, curtains, cushions, rugs, and throw blankets, it was as though this hunter and his wife had referenced a dark piece of toast when choosing the colour palette for the space. Unfortunately, this had more to do with decades of tobacco and cigarette smoke clinging to every surface in the room, rather than the actual paint, floral wallpaper, wood and upholstery.

Seeking any object that might harbour a well-defined echo of its owner, Cas' divining hand came to rest on the back of a still-fragrant recliner that was, no doubt, the favourite seat of Joshua Armstrong. Castiel listened so long as he could to the jumble of inane but comfortable conversation between the hunter and his wife of thirty-plus years. Water welled in his eyes and a knot tied itself tight in the centre of his chest, when he considered the prospect of conversation alike in nature, many, many years down the road... with Dean.

The phones rang, the tinny sound of old phone bells issuing from five locations around the house. Collecting himself, Castiel answered the call, attempting his best imitation of Joshua's southern drawl.

"Uh... hi. Is this Josh?" Sam inquired, nervous. His Dad hadn't parted ways on the best of terms with many acquaintances.

It struck Castiel how young and distraught he sounded. "Speakin'. Who's this?"

"My name is Sam. Sam Winchester. You might remember my father—"

"Of course. John. What's this about, son?"

The relief in Sam's tone at not being told to take a hike or sworn straight off the phone was plain in his voice. "My brother. He's... he's in a bad way. I'm hoping you might have some ideas about how to... heal

him," Sam explained, having to break from speaking to keep his voice on as even a keel as he could manage. The weight of his tone told anyone listening who didn't already know: Dean didn't have much time left.

"Hmmmnn. Only two powers in the universe you can petition for that kind of help, boy. The Darkness, or the Light. Each of 'em has its price," Castiel warned the younger Winchester. *Ain't nothin' in this world for free*, Castiel mused silently.

"I'll pay it. I don't care what it is," Sam insisted.

Castiel sighed, shaking his head. If they only knew... "That's foolish talk, son. The kind that gits you killed."

It wasn't a warning; it was a statement. Sam's stomach sank. This man spoke the truth, and Sam knew it. To make matters worse, he couldn't shake the feeling that his words were personally prophetic. At this point, Cas was convinced this kind of sacrificial thinking was hard-coded into Winchester DNA.

"Sir..." Sam had to take a breath to keep from pleading with the man like a child. "Please. Dean's all I have."

"Dean..." He hadn't meant to say Dean's name aloud. In all these years, he'd never had cause to say it. It was such a small thing, but he missed the sound. Falling into a long silence, Castiel's head took on an eavesdropping tilt. The angels were talking. Someone had harnessed an arbiter of Death—a Reaper. Something that powerful at the beck and call of a human being endangered not just the humans in its environs, but any vessel-wearing angel nearby.

"Sir?"

Returning his awareness to the here and now, Castiel responded somewhat disjointedly. "Nebraska. Find a preacher. By the name of Le Grange... off the... the Ninety-Six, on the road that takes you 'round the w-west side of the reservoir, turn west-southwest at the junction of five roads... it's a large white tent, beside a country estate home. There will be signs."

"This 'Le Grange'... why him? How can he help us?"

"Word is, he can help anyone, if the good Lord sees fit..." *The good Lord*. The words left a foul taste in Cas' mouth. "...and has, many times.

Take him there. Do not take 'no' for an answer, Sam. He's the real McCoy," Castiel asserted, his tone as commanding as he could muster.

Sam laughed, half-heartedly. "Heh. You know my brother..."

Softening considerably, Cas answered the boy honestly. "I know his sort. I'm in love with one."

Again, Sam found himself laughing, half out of relief, the other half; amusement. There was no lie in anything this man had said. He had quite the spitfire for a wife if he could make that claim. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You just did. Do as I've told you. It will save your brother's life."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Armstrong. I..." Sam let out breath, relieved. Water came to his eyes, turning everything he saw into a collection of straight, bright streaks of light. His thanks seemed like woefully inadequate recompense, but they were all he could offer. "Thank you."

At the Armstrong home, a clatter sounded in the kitchen, drawing Castiel's attention. The opening swing of a sticky screen door with a loud, whining spring signalled Mrs. Louise Armstrong's return home from the supermarket. "Good-bye, Sam."

With an abrupt clack of static on the other end, the call ended. Sam frowned at the receiver. The good-bye was unsettlingly familiar, yet he'd never met the man before. Shaking it off, he paced the room, running his hands through his hair, trying to keep his lid on. Joy and relief overtook him. The certainty in the man's voice was absolute... but he knew he shouldn't give himself false hope. Even if they got there, Le Grange had a congregation. They were all as badly off as Dean—or worse. How could they possibly have any hope of being noticed, then chosen, from among the throng of worshippers?

None of that mattered now. Dean needed rest. He needed to look at a map, then sleep. Donning his jacket, Sam headed out to the Impala for road maps of the continental United States, committing the directions to memory as he walked. First thing in the morning, he'd break camp, pick Dean up at the hospital, and they'd head for Nebraska.



Castiel lifted his finger off the hook flash. Noiselessly setting down the receiver, he turned toward the mantle over the fireplace. In the centre of it, kept company by two vases filled with wilting wild flowers on either side, sat a small but finely crafted wooden box. Inlaid with a design rendered in mother of pearl, white pine and maple, the body and base were made of bevelled, varnished walnut. A gold, ornately engraved plaque named its contents:

Joshua David Armstrong

w

Born

12th of September, 1946

Died

19th of July, 2006

Not two months prior. Castiel smiled knowingly. Wishing not to be the reason for a heart attack that might send Mrs. Armstrong along to join her husband, in a blink, Cas stood on the front porch of the Armstrong family's modest rural home, gaze turned skyward. Turning his overcoat collar up against the wind and misting rain, he descended the front steps. Next stop: Nowheresville, Nebraska.



Filing into the makeshift place of worship alongside the Reverend's flock, avoiding eye contact, Castiel took up residence behind human camouflage lining the exterior of the tent. Sam and Dean weren't here yet, but it wouldn't be long. They weren't far now. Castiel leaned back into a cold aluminium tent pole, letting out a resigned breath, carefully remaining inconspicuous. Even now, years before he would choose to descend into Hell in search of this man's soul, there was a gravity acting on him like nothing he'd experienced before. He knew now where it was coming from. The angel fixed his gaze on two aisle seats in the second row. Desperate, but not too desperate. The hopeful filed in and seated themselves as if those two chairs weren't there...

Castiel heard Dean and Sam conversing outside well before laying eyes on their faces.

"If you know evil's out there, how can you not believe there's good out there, too?" Sam demanded of his skeptical brother. Cas couldn't help but smile. He might not have the affinity for Sam he did for his elder brother, but he admired Sam's innate sense of the right, good and just.

"Because I've seen what evil does to good people—" Dean responded.

"Maybe God works in mysterious ways," a sweet, lilting voice chimed in from nearby. The brothers stopped, ears perked. Dean's face lit up the moment the voice's owner came into view, dressed for Sunday but wearing her skirt a hand or two shorter than Christian modesty usually dictated.

"Maybe he does. I think you just turned me around on the subject," Dean replied, dialling up the charm despite the fact he was standing there with one foot planted firmly in the grave. Cas smiled, subtly shaking his head. On the precipice of death, and there he was angling for intimacy that, in his condition, would put him in the ground. Some things never change. Not a bad way to go, though...

"Yeah. I'm sure," the young woman retorted. Even her gentle, musical voice didn't do much to take the edge off her sarcasm. Castiel watched the throng, listening as the woman's—Layla's—mother stood from her seat, asking their neighbours to save their seats until she returned with her daughter, currently lingering outside in fresh air. The discomfort Layla felt thanks to her condition—an inoperable brain tumour—made the company of many people in such close quarters difficult to stomach.

"I'm Dean, this is Sam," said Dean, rolling with the punch as well as any he'd ever taken, extending a hand.

Taking and shaking it with one intrigued eyebrow up and a smile, she replied, "Layla... so, if you're not a believer, then why are you here?"

"Well, apparently my brother here believes enough for the both of us," replied Dean sardonically, pointing a thumb at Sam.

"I see."

Layla's mother came up beside her, putting her arms around her daughter, shepherding her back into the tent. "C'mon, Layla. It's about to start."

"All right... 'bye," she replied, her voice lighter and sweeter than any Dean had ever heard—and resentment-free. With a quick wave and a charming glance back at the brothers, she returned, with her mother's arm around her, to their seats.

The moment Layla and her mother were out of earshot, Dean opened his mouth, saying under his breath, "Betch you she can work in some mysterious ways." Sam could only shake his head, roll his eyes and laugh in reply as he followed Dean into the tent.

Dean took in their surroundings as he'd been trained to. The exits... video surveillance... the police present... any churchgoer that might be just a bit too burly... he took note of it all. "Yeah... 'peace, love and trust', all right," he observed, directing Sam's gaze to a security camera with a subtle upward jerk of his head and eyeballs. Sick to death of organized religion's hypocrisies, Dean set his sights on the nearest seats he found.

"No. Not there. Up front," Castiel whispered from the shadows in a dim corner, eyes glimmering bluish white.

Sam was about to follow Dean's lead until something in the back of his mind stopped him. He, in turn, stopped Dean with a hand on the shoulder. "Come on."

"What are you doing? Seats right here," Dean said, not keen on getting any closer to the front of the crowd.

Scanning the tent for the closest seats to the stage, Sam spotted two oddly vacant seats near the front of the makeshift 'pews'. He coaxed a resistant Dean forward. "We're sitting up front... come on!"

"What? Why? Oh, c'mon, Sam!" The exertion of the exclamation made Dean wince.

"You all right?"

"This is ridiculous," Dean griped, almost childlike, but going along anyway. Two short years, and the luxury of such youthfulness would be one this young man could no longer afford. Sam put a protective arm around his brother as they walked up the aisle. "I'm good... dude, git off me."

Obliging, Sam kept his hands away and eyes on their free seats. No one seemed particularly interested in having or saving them. "Perfect."

"Yeah. *Perfect*," Dean shot back. He was not a keener who liked sitting at the front of class.

"Take the aisle," Sam insisted. His brother rolled his eyes.

The two settled into their seats, Dean grudgingly. Within seconds, the Reverend began his sermon. Castiel set his feet in motion, moving clandestinely, unseen, threading his way through the gathered faithful like a ghost. "Each morning, my wife, Sue Ann, reads me the news. Never seems good, does it?" he posed to the crowd, all of whom answered back like robots programmed to respond in the spaces between his words. Seemed as though each one he looked at was sicker than the last. The whole sordid pageant set Dean's nerves on edge, made his teeth itch. "Seems like there's always someone committing some immoral, unspeakable act... but I say to you: God is watchin'!"

"Yes! He is!"

Castiel couldn't help snickering and shaking his head, glancing around the room at this motley collection of souls. If they only knew how wrong they were.

The irony of it? They walked further from The Way here, in a counterfeit House of God, than anywhere else. The powers at work here were unholy, yet they flocked to them anyway. Moths to a flame, with eyes so feeble they were incapable of discerning the difference between hellfire and the Lord's light.

"God rewards the good and he punishes the corrupt...! It is the Lord who does the healing here, friends."

<Dean.> Castiel impressed the thought upon the preacher as he walked. To the Reverend's credit, he didn't flinch, betraying only the barest instant of hesitation.

"The Lord, who guides me in choosing who to heal, by helping me see into people's hearts."

An unsettlingly unanimous chorus. "Amen!"

Smoothly coming to a stop, standing at Dean's left hand, Cas lifted his hand out of his pocket, holding his palm behind Dean's head. Almost close enough to brush the back of his buzz-cut hair, but not quite. Twenty-

two years and some months since he'd last known Dean's touch. The temptation to feel it again was strong. Dean rearranged himself slightly in his seat. He leaned closer to Cas, leaving the angel wondering for a fleeting moment if Dean sensed his presence.

"Yeah," Dean scoffed. "Or into their wallets." The remark drew ire from many in the crowd within earshot, Layla and her mother included. Sam shot a look to kill his direction.

"You think so, young man?"

Dean darted his gaze around the room in confusion, not having intended to speak so loudly. Hell, he hadn't intended to say it out loud at all. "Sorry."

"No, no. Don't be. Just, mind what you say around a blind man—we got real sharp ears." Dean laughed, though not so enthusiastically as the rest.

<Dean,> Castiel repeated, more forcefully this time, a shimmer of grace in his eyes. Reverend LeGrange cocked his head, listening, managing to keep his poise in front of the crowd, his hands on the pulpit steady. It was nothing more than momentary flashes of events to come, but Castiel showed Roy it was not this man's time to die.

The Reverend focused on Dean. There was an aura behind Dean's head bright enough for even a blind man to see, if that man was at all spiritually inclined to begin with. Cas swiftly scanned the room. There were a handful of others who could see a glimmer of it as well—Sue Ann Le Grange, among them.

"What's your name, son?"

Clearing his throat uneasily, Dean responded truthfully, even though he'd definitely meant not to. "Dean." His ill-at-ease feeling grew with every passing second. Feeling like he was caught between the lion's maw and a rat pit had him wanting nothing more than to bolt.

"Dean," the Reverend repeated. Dean frowned slightly when Reverend Roy didn't sound the least bit surprised at the name, nodding in knowing acceptance. "I want you to come up here with me." Murmurs and a crescendo of applause rose from the crowd, but Dean remained in his seat, shaking his head. There were others here suffering much worse.



He was very likely the most un-Godly person in the tent. No way did he deserve healing before anyone else.

*I'm not worth it.*

Others in the crowd, though disappointed they were not called on, rejoiced that someone would find good fortune this day and encouraged him to rise and join the Reverend on stage. "C'mon, Dean. Go on!"

Flashing a disarming smile and with a politely dismissive wave of the hand, Dean stayed planted in his seat. "No. It's okay."

Sam's stunned gaze, riveted on Reverend Roy, turned his brother's way, utter disbelief plain on his face. He'd been shit out of ideas about how to draw the Reverend's attention this whole time! By sheer dumb luck, Dean manages it all on his own, and still, he insisted on being passed over. "What are you doing?" he demanded, aghast.

Confused, Roy stammered out, "Y... you've c... come here to be healed, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but... uh, look, you should pick someone else," Dean replied, having to raise his voice above the bewildered voices of the congregation.

An amused, affectionate smile formed on Cas' lips. Hard-headed as ever. He looked Dean's way and though he couldn't afford to touch him, there were other ways to motivate the stubborn ass. Wispy filaments of his grace emerged from the palm of his hand, brushing against the back of Dean's head, taking root.

Dean twitched his head uncomfortably, eyelids drooping closed for a split second until he forced them open while, at the same time, he felt his resistance give way.

"Oh no... no," Reverend Roy insisted. "I... I didn't pick you, Dean. The Lord did." Dean sincerely doubted that. Letting out breath he'd been keeping in his chest, he looked back over his left shoulder. There was nothing there. Though he also could've sworn there wasn't nothing there.

"Get up there!" Sam pressed, anxious Dean might succeed in putting the preacher off if he kept this up. Dean turned to his wide-eyed brother and, in the end, couldn't bring himself to fathom not going through the motions even if it did break Sammy's heart when this place proved itself a house of smoke and mirrors.

Cas carefully moved his hand away from Dean, cautiously retreating when he recognized the change in his demeanour. Sue Ann invited him forward with a wave. Dean rose slowly, the taser shock having done a number on muscles other than his heart, hobbling up onto the stage. Bringing a supportive arm up behind him, the preacher's wife ushered him up to join her husband.

Confident Dean wouldn't back out now, Cas allowed himself a subdued smile and made his way, undetected, through the faithful and out of the tent. The dark power that would give Dean his life back wouldn't obey a summons with an angel's aura close by. Ducking out of sight between campers parked outside, Castiel retreated through the veil into the space between planes, concealing himself from both the perception of the shackled reaper and angels keeping watchful eyes on Reverend Roy Le Grange and his congregation.





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Cas watched, placidly perched on the curb as the flatbed transport truck sped past, well over the speed limit for residential streets. A pickup truck drove behind it, loaded with steel pipe on its way to new construction at the suburb's outskirts. The seraph fixed his sight on an oncoming car at the crossroad. By Castiel's will, the driver couldn't see the stop sign. The transport driver swerved, laying on his horn and air brakes with a deafening screech. The pickup driver jolted out of his long-day stupor and furiously pumped his brakes, swerving to match the big rig. The straps holding the pipes were old. Too old. Castiel smirked as he walked out into the street.

*Snap!*

The truck hit a pothole that dropped its side, strewing its load across the roadway. Castiel watched as the pipe dug into the asphalt and stood on end, the world about him moving at an almost comically slow pace. Instead of allowing the pipe to continue on its natural path alongside the truck, Castiel stepped underneath as the pliant metal bar bounced up from the pavement, his hand closing around the flexing tube. Every muscle in the vessel he wore coiled and, in a smooth arc, *heaved*. The pipe-turned-javelin lanced through the air, through the windshield, and clean through the heart of the man Dean pursued. His body went taut from shock as he died, bringing the already-braking car to a cold stop.

Dean brought Baby to a screaming halt. Castiel watched transfixed, taking agile, almost reverent steps toward Dean as he exited the car, his steely fury turning to disbelief, confusion, and finally, acceptance of what his eyes had seen. "*Holy...*"

He circled 'round Baby's trunk, moving cautiously. The forget-me-not blue car's engine was still running. Blood dripped from the pipe onto the leather back seat. The man's slack face and vacant eyes came into view. Dean knew immediately—he was gone.

Dean frowned. He'd prayed. It was a split second, and it wasn't even words, really. It was a feeling—a hope. *Please, God, don't let this evil sunuvabitch get away.* He couldn't be sure of what he'd seen, but

something was... off. Heart hammering in his chest, Dean opened the car door, pulled the parking brake and reached for the keys, killing the engine. He thought for a moment, as the cold steel bar kissed his cheek, he could smell something. Something fresh and clean washing the stench of the rapist's death from the air...

*Had something... or someone, really been listening? Heard his prayer?*

He stood and looked around helplessly. Water came to his eyes as he futilely looked around, trying to see something, *anything* that could *explain...* but there was nothing. No one. Whether Sam had been here or not, with Father Gregory's soul presumably at rest by now, this man died. His eyes came to rest on the street sign planted in the ground on the kitty-corner beside the dip where the curb blended into the road. He couldn't focus his eyes to read the sign, but he couldn't look away from the spot.

Castiel stood quietly rooted in place, saved from himself by the strangest feeling. His body wouldn't move. The urge to reveal the briefest glimpse of himself through the liminal divide between them seized his heart and mind so powerfully he'd never felt anything like it. It was terrifying and exhilarating. If he so much as twitched a finger, he would do it, but he couldn't and he knew it. He couldn't interfere. He couldn't risk Dean remembering him when they first meet. Dean had to be allowed to live his life, to make his choices, ask his questions and find his own answers. No matter what his foolish, twitter-pated heart wanted.

He wanted to reach out, to feel Dean's skin and cheeks under his fingers, to feel his body heat against him again after all these years. To be that close to him, and become *much* closer. Castiel breathed in deep, realizing his vessel hadn't been for some time. The awed, open, hopeful look on Dean's face held the angel's gaze captive. Beautiful.

A hand touched Dean's shoulder. Dean started, and the rapture between them crumbled.

"Buddy, you okay?" Dean blinked, disoriented. The pickup driver... right.

"Me? Yeah! Yeah..." Swallowing, Dean wetted his paper-dry throat. "I'm good."



The driver of the pickup sighed, relieved. He would be lucky if this mess didn't cost him his job. "We gotta call the police," he said, shaking his head.

"Yeah... you do that," Dean answered distantly, gaze wandering back to the curb and road sign.

"Man, you sure you're okay?"

Dean chuffed, looking at the dead man slumped in the driver's seat of his car. He smirked. "I'm all good. Don't worry 'bout me."

What a mess. He was a witness. He couldn't leave the scene; leave, and he'd force the cops who showed to ask, "Why?" The one question you never want to give a law-dog reason to ask. Tends to lead to a whole lot more "whys". They would try to find him, and Baby wasn't what you'd call an inconspicuous ride. Dean sighed, eyes rolling as he shook his head, stuffing his hands in his pockets against the chill in the nighttime air as he leaned back against Baby's grille. Unintended, his hand closed around his cigarettes and lighter. He inhaled and sighed, putting his fingers to work on lighting a smoke. What the Hell, why not? It was gonna be a long-ass night...

Hands buried in his pockets, Dean's shoulders and head hung, heavy with the weight of what he couldn't explain, as he took long strides along the slanted sidewalk up to their motel room door. For the barest moment, he hesitated opening it.

Jangled his keys in the lock, and with some difficulty... *chack*.

Dean sighed, stepping in the door. He found Sam packing, despondent. Not just that, upset. He shut the door gently behind him. Didn't hurt, giving the kid space to be angry. More to the point, he had no idea how to say what he needed to say. Ah, hell, there was nothin' for it.

"How was your day?"

Sam gave his head this little shake and kept stuffing washed clothes into his duffle. No, kid wasn't angry, but... somethin' was wrong. *Really* wrong.

"You were right. It wasn't an angel. It was Gregory." Sam tucked his chin down into his chest, seeming damn near like he might cry. Taken

aback, Dean looked on and let out a disbelieving chuff. Sam, the one who believed, had been on the watch that disproved his faith. Here he was, the one who didn't believe in Heaven at all, well... he'd just witnessed what might well be the proof he'd been demanding all along. Or, Gregory had absolved the sins of these sick fucks in confession, and that's how he knew who the bad seeds were.

It stung how strong the urge was to let himself believe. Something in his heart, for reasons he couldn't name, wouldn't give up the holy ghost. Unscrewing his flask's cap, he poured himself a mouthful of whiskey to take the edge off his resentment and the memory of what might've been one cold, hard evening a long time ago, if not for one selfless young girl, not a God worth less than a damn. He passed the flask over to Sam in consolation. Kid looked like he wouldn't say no.

Sure enough, Sammy helped himself. Shucking off their dad's jacket, Dean gave his mouth and nine o'clock shadow a soothing stroke, frowning. He'd spent the drive back to the motel wanting to believe. In the end, no... just the same now, as back then, it was a good-hearted human priest, not some Heaven-sent angel, who'd kept bad things from happening to good people. The rapist in the forget-me-not car had punched his own card drivin' like a fuckin' maniac.

"I just, uh... I wanted to believe, so badly..." The warble in Sam's voice caught him. Dean took a breath in, gaze fixing on his baby brother.

*Whoa. Kid really is about to cry. This ain't about God or angels. What's eating...*

"It's so damn hard to do this... what we do. We're *alone*, and there's so much evil out in the world, Dean. I feel like I'll drown in it. And when I think about where I'm headed, how my life could end up..."

Sammy might be runnin' shy on hope, but they'd always—*always*—pulled through before this time would be no damned different. He wasn't getting all up in his feelings or anything, sitting with his little brother, keeping him company while he was afraid of dying. It'd been a long day. His feet were killin' him.

"Yeah, well, don't you worry 'bout that. I'm lookin' out for you." He was. He always would. Even if Sam didn't, he believed, with everything he had, that there was a way out of this. A way to get this monkey off his

brother's back so he could get back to livin' whatever life he actually wanted.

"Yeah. I know you are." Then, he saw it. The brave face his brother wore, for a split second, showed what was underneath. They weren't kids anymore, and this wasn't some shadow in the closet. The monster that killed their mother... and their father, had designs on *him*, and he couldn't see a way out.

"But... you're just one person, Dean, and I needed to think that there was something else watching, too, y'know? Some higher power... that all this evil is the flipside of a greater good. That maybe..."

Sam choked on what he wanted to say. "Maybe what...?"

"Maybe I could be saved."

Dean looked away. No clever retort. No empty hope. Only the sting of the fact that this was too big, and the faith Sam placed in him all his life, wasn't enough. Not anymore.

"But! Uhh, heheh, y'know that just clouded my judgement and you're right. I mean, we gotta go with what we know. With what we can see—what's *right* there in front of our eyes..."

He could barely hold on to listening to Sam with what came roaring to life and clawed its way up from the back of his mind. Whatever sent Sam after this guy had been right. Even though he'd kept Sam away, the man was dead. Like some higher power wouldn't be denied. The way the angel's mark died... it wasn't right. He wasn't perfectly sure of what he'd seen, and he was no rocket scientist, but every other pipe that had fallen off the rack kept bouncing in the direction the truck skidded. This stray pipe behaved like none of the others and *accelerated* backward, like... like it had been *thrown*. Physics just *didn't* work like that.

Now, maybe the guy had been moving fast enough to catch one through the windshield and end up gored, but he'd slammed on the brakes. He was almost at a dead stop when that thing punched a hole clean through his heart and didn't stop until nearly two feet of it stuck out past the back of a sturdy seat six inches thick, or more. He'd have had a hard time making that shot into a skidding vehicle with a handgun, nevermind a flexing, randomly bouncing ten-foot length of pipe. If Sam

and Father Reynolds had given Father Gregory his last rites, he was at rest when it happened.

Which meant that there was somethin' *else* going on.

The last thing he wanted to do was give Sammy false hope, but...

"Heh. It's funny you say that..."

Suddenly, he had Sam's undivided attention. "Why?"

"Gregory's spirit gave you some pretty good information. Guy in the car was *bad* news. I barely got there in time." He didn't want to say what he'd stopped out loud. Not for Sam's sake; for his. Without the adrenaline rush of the chase, it turned his stomach.

Sam's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"He's dead."

Sam went wide-eyed. After all that fuckin' preachin' about...!

"*You*...?"

"No."

Father Gregory had asked him to kill the man. Dean had made sure he'd be nowhere near the guy when it happened, but he was *still*...

"I'll tell you what, if..." Dean said what came next like he had to pry each word out of his throat. "If I hadn't seen the way he died with my own two eyes, I never would've believed it. I mean, I don't know what to call it..." If he called what he'd witnessed what it looked like, there was no goin' back.

"*What?* Dean, what did you see?"

Dean shrugged slightly, heart racing. He'd seen what he had. There was no denying it. "Maybe... God's will."

Sam took a breath because he had to. He'd stopped somewhere along the way. "Dean, you're the one who stood on the steps of Father Reynolds' church and told me you didn't believe. Just because he's dead..."

"Sammy, I didn't kill him. *She* didn't kill 'im. *Nobody* did. What killed 'im, shouldn't have, but it *did*."

Sam frowned. Dean sounded positively manic. "Dean, quit pussy-footing around it and *tell me*."

Dean sighed hard and gave in. "There was this construction truck carrying some pipes. He was driving way too fast. I was chasing him. An'

for a second, it crossed m'mind, 'Please, God, don't let this evil sonuvabitch get away.' Next thing I knew, brakes were squealin', the truck swerved, he swerved, I swerved to keep from rear-endin' 'im... the pipes the truck had on its rack came loose. One of 'em—just one—hit the guy straight through the heart like somebody'd thrown a fuckin' spear. I mean, he didn't look like he was still goin' fast enough for the thing to go all way through him the way it did." Dean told the story as much with his mouth as his hands.

"You're fucking with me." Sam gave him this sideways look.

"No! I'm not. It went through his body, and *through* the fuckin' seat! And not by a little. By, like, a *lot*. It's not like he ran into the back end of the whole bunch of pipes at top speed. It was just one, it didn't move like any of the others, they were all lyin' on the ground. Didn't end up stuck in his engine block or the seat beside 'im, nuthin'. Sammy, it went straight through his fuckin' heart. I'd have a hard time getting it that precise if I was shooting a moving target on-range."

"Jesus..."

"I don't think so. It felt like there was malice to it, and there was this pungent smell. Clean. Not like you'd expect from a dead guy. He died instantly. His heart didn't even need to stop. He just didn't have one anymore. Sam, he'd been out on a date, and tried to rape the girl with him. That pipe punched his heart clear out of his body."

"My God..."

Dean scratched at the back of his head with a little more vigour than he should've. He left a couple of aching tracts of skin on his skull. "What you said, 'bout angels bein' vengeful... nothing like bedtime stories... this felt like vengeance, and not by the hands of man." Sammy slumped back and lightly bit inside his lip, exhaling like it'd been punched out of his chest. "Sam, I don't want to give you false hope, but..."

"You saw what you saw," Sam finished, taking a couple slow breaths, nodding.

Dean nodded, a consoling expression on his face. "I did, and I can't explain it."

As much as he wanted to give Sam time to get not just hopeful but excited, they needed to get some rack and get the hell outta Dodge. He



turned around and looked out the window, peeking past the lace curtains. "Sam, I had to stay at the scene and give a statement. The police have seen me. They decide to do any sniffin' around, and they might come knockin'. It ain't gonna be long before one of 'em matches my mug to a bank robber on the news."

"Fuck!" Sam whipped the shirt in hand at his duffle bag. It didn't go in.

"Yeah. I know we wanted to chill, and you paid for the week, but..."

"We need a few hours sleep." Neither of them was in good enough shape to drive.

"Yeah. Let's wash, pack up, and set alarms."

Sam nodded, grudgingly gettin' up and gettin' on it...

Settling himself into the branches of the tree overhanging the motel's roof, Castiel chuckled quietly, allowing himself the slightest smile. He never had and never would interfere with Dean's will. Still... stoking some *faith* in his heart couldn't hurt.





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GONG.

GONG.

GONG...

There was a goddamn chiming clock in the house. Of-fucking-course there was. Every stroke of the hellish sounding bells wound every muscle in him that wanted to run tighter, but his feet were rooted to the spot. The ensuing silence was anything but. It was screaming in his ears. Dean tried, with everything he had, to put a look on his face that told his not-so-little brother there was fight in him yet.

"I'm sorry, Dean. I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy."

*Fuck off, Ruby.* He wanted to say it, but showing his bitterness felt like admitting defeat. The words died in his mouth, fermenting an acrid, foul taste. Or maybe that was bile...

ARROOO!

The others, they heard a dog's howl, but him? The sound those things made... blasted the bulwark he'd built up around his heart to smithereens. *I'm going to Hell.*

TACK...

TACK....

TACK.

Claws and heavy paws on the hardwood floor. A low, raspy, warbling growl sounded from the throat of something utterly unnatural.

"Hellhound."

"Where?" He didn't have to turn to see. He could hear the tears running down his brother's face in his voice.

Calling it a hound was maniacally comical. It was no such fucking thing. Eyes lit up red with the evils festering within. Teeth... so many *teeth*. Like no teeth he'd ever seen on a living thing. Sharp and jagged like whoever designed these things had chipped shards of crystalline, glassy rock and driven them into the gums of its masterwork in fear and suffering. Mounted them there to torture their creation as horrifically as its prey. More than one row of them. Its teeth gnashed as it glowered down at him, cutting into its gums and twitching lips. Putrid blood oozed from its



lips and jaws, mutilated and misshapen with dried blood and self-inflicted wounds. The thing stood taller than the doorway.

*Sam... it's teeth! It's fuckin' teeth...!*

Dean couldn't make a sound, let alone form words.

TACK.

TACK.

Sam's heart damn near seized when the old man's body in the chair, and then the whole table *moved* like something gargantuan was squeezing by.

The tone of the snarl rumbling out of the demonic repo mutt changed. Dean broke and ran. Sam and Ruby followed dead on his heels. Dean ducked as the sound of a wall caving and exploding into wood shrapnel and plaster debris met his ears. He bolted through the drawing room doors, slamming one closed, reaching for the other after Ruby, then Sam passed the threshold, not slowing down in the slightest. Dean dug into his inside jacket pocket for the bag of goofer dust and began to pour. The door heaved against his head and knocked a little dizzy into him. Sam and Ruby threw their full weight against the door, bracing it as he frantically worked a line of protection out of the bag. Suddenly, it was gone. Quiet. Dean peeked through the lowest window pane. The hall was empty, but devastation remained in its wake.

His mind raced as he peered through the glass, searching for sight of the abomination hunting him down. Right about now was when he usually managed to pull some batshit crazy escape out of his ass... *Come on! Something! There's gotta be something...!*

Getting to his feet on shaky legs, he ran to one window, then the next. Every ingress he could think of... *fuck!* They didn't have nearly enough of the stuff prepared. He'd have given both testicles to have some devil's shoestring on hand...

"Gimme the knife. Maybe I can fight it off!"

Sam turned on Ruby, perplexed. If she'd been able to fight them off this whole time, then why the *fuck...?* "*What?*" If she wanted something from him, there was no better time to demand it. But, Ruby? She was asking.

"*C'mon!* That dust won't last forever."

Staring at the knife, Sam frowned. Something was wrong. Very wrong, and he couldn't see it. But, if there was even the slightest chance...

"Wait!" Dean bellowed. "That's not Ruby!"

Ruby scoffed. "Do you *want* to die?"

"It's not her face!"

The demon's expression took on a cruel, smiling twist. Sam felt as though his stomach spilled his guts onto the floor. They were just gone. *Lillith*. He pulled back the knife and went for the killing strike. Too little, too late. Her arm was already flying. He nicked her incoming arm but... nothing. Didn't even *faze* her. Then he was thrown and pinned by a force that felt like thousands of stabbing pins holding his body in place. It felt shaped like... a hand. A monstrous, enormous hand. Lillith was much, *much* bigger than the body she occupied and not remotely humanoid.

Dean lunged, and her other arm went up. He crumpled against a gargantuan hand he couldn't see. It didn't just throw him. It lifted him like it was picking up a feather, laying him out on the table like a pinned butterfly, crushing the air out of his chest with a press that might as well have had thousands of nails welded to the underside. He felt his skin starting to break and cried out in agony.

It took every whisp of breath in him to speak. "Rgh! How long... you been in her?" He couldn't keep his terror out of his voice.

She stood there, arms outstretched, hunched toward them like a predator. "Not long," Lillith crooned. When she moved her head to look at the flesh and bones she wore, it was clear *something* unhuman, something more comfortable in it's own body than a human's, was moving it. "I like this much better. It's all grown up... and *pretty*." A half blink and her eyes turned... *white*?

If she kept flattening him like this, his head would pop off and he'd shit and piss himself *before* he died.

"Where's *Ruby*?" Sam demanded.

Lillith's eyes rolled. "She was a very bad girl. I sent her far... *far* away." *No one is coming to save you. Either of you.* The body she wore was taut; under so much strain from containing her being, head to toe, that muscles and bones in her neck snapped and crunched when she



cocked it to one side. Lillith looked down on Dean with disdain, like some woefully inadequate afternoon snack.

"I should've seen it before, but you all look alike to me."

Her face said it, dripping sarcasm, without saying a word. *You wound me*. When her gaze turned on Sam, she might as well have been glaring at a tomahawk steak. "Hello, Sam. I've been wanting to meet you...for a very, very long time..." All he could do was radiate the disgust he felt at what the look on her face wanted. It seemed she simply acted on what the body she wore felt for him, fascinated by its novelty.

She came close enough, and when she spoke, the smell carried on her breath was death. In all ways that mattered, the body she animated was already dead and *reeked* of it. Still, she kissed him like a lover, holding him in place by an inescapable vice grip on his jaw.

Their lips met. Her tongue slipped out of her mouth across his. She wasn't kissing him, she was fucking *tasting* him. His face twisted up, sick with her stench and revulsion at the sexual advance. He didn't care if he wound up breaking his jaw to get away. He couldn't take another second of it. It took every scrap of self-control he had not to vomit.

"Hm... *soft*." The way she put weight on the word turned his stomach, making clear what she thought of him. *Weak*. A plaything.

One side of her mouth snarled up in amusement. There would be time for what she wanted... *later*. There might only be rotting flesh waiting for him inside her, but defiling him with that putrescence before discarding this used-up husk would be half her fun.

He steeled himself as he wrenched himself free and she released her hold, loath to damage her prize... yet. "All right. You have me. Now let my brother go."

The look she gave him spoke her mind. *Why would I ever do that?* "Silly goose, if you want to bargain, you need to have something I want... Tsk, tsk, tsk."

"Is this your big plan, huh? You drag me to Hell, kill Sam, then become Queen Bitch?" Lillith scoffed. Sam's eyes started to water. They were at her mercy; it was already over. Still, Dean was trying to keep her off of him every second he could.

"I don't answer to puppy chow." Her mouth hung loose, but her eyes grinned an *evil* smile as she let him feel the weight of every step she took toward the door. A twist of the handle and the door swung open wide, swiping away the dust; his last vestige of protection. The other door crunched and broke as the rancid behemoth shouldered its way through.

"Sic 'im, boy."

Claws splintered the flooring it walked on with every step. More than one seemingly growing from each cuticle on the foot of a seething, writhing mass of putrid, coiling muscle and protruding, obsidian bone. Nothing could grow from something alive and look like *that*. No matter which way it swung or swiped its limbs, something sharp enough to snag, rip, tear, or cut protruded to make every movement flesh-rending. The wood under its feet bowed, snapped, and splintered under the thing's bodyweight and its claws' traction.

The hound brought its head through the doorframe, rearing up to its proper height, its eyes' focus never leaving his. The torn flesh of its throat flapped with the rise and fall of the thundering growl filtering through its viciously bared teeth. The distinct impression that it was looking down at him with contempt born of keen, malevolent intelligence sent something above and beyond fear tearing through his heart. Water blurred his vision. This creature was death and suffering incarnate. His one-way ticket to Hell.

The demonic doberman growled and lunged. It ripped him out from under Lillith's crushing grasp, taking a tentative bite of his leg, whipping him down onto the floor with dizzying force, as though it was taste testing him to see if it would like what it was about to eat. Pain like nothing he'd ever felt before. This was just the entrée. Worse awaited him in Hell.

"No! STOP!"

*Sammy... it's killing me.*

Another bite ripped into his thigh, and the thing gave its head a shake, as though daring him to show any signs of life. *It's killing me. Why's it...?* "Don't...!" Dean pleaded. It let go, glaring down at him as though considering where to get a taste next. Sheer terror rolled him onto his front. Had him trying to drag himself away with his arms alone. His legs were tattered. Useless. As if he'd taken one grasping arm too far, the

hound angrily slashed his back wide open. Dean was thankful for small mercies. He couldn't feel the bottom half of his body anymore. He still felt it when its paw crushed him down to the floor, keeping him still so that it could take a tenderizing bite of his arm and shoulder.

"Stop it! NO!"

Sam...?

"GRAAAGH!"

*Screaming. Someone was screaming... Sammy. Had to be. Where is he?! I've gotta help him!* With primal dread, he realized, *No, not Sam. Me. That's me screaming. I'm not in my body anymore.*

Done gnawing that part of him, Lillith's lapdog rolled him onto his back with a backhand swipe of its barbed paw. Ripped his groin and stomach to shreds. He looked. Parts of him that were supposed to be in were out...

There were no words anymore, only pain and screams. It pawed at his chest, sliding him back toward it like a pup with a chew toy, gouging deep tracts into his flesh, cutting his ribs to pieces. His screaming went quiet. Without air to leave the body, there's nothing to carry sound, and his air was leaving through his shredded chest rather than his throat. He wheezed out with the last air he had, "Sam..." but it made no sound.

Then, row upon row of jagged teeth sank into his chest, his collarbone, and throat. The hound chomped and shook him. His strings snapped. He willed it, but his body wouldn't move.

Cold. All he felt was cold. Then... nothing. *This is what dying feels like? Heh. It's not so bad...*

Sam fought to free himself, no matter how it hurt.

Satisfied her hound would finish Dean Winchester, Lillith turned on his younger brother.

"Don't! Stop this! No...!" Sam screamed futilely, all impotent fury and no hint of what power he had locked away inside of him. All of it, now hers for the taking.

A sweet, menacing cackle trickled out of her lips. "Yes."

Sam's gaze snapped away from his brother and locked onto Lillith.

She prowled toward him, one hand rising, pointed at him. A blinding white light sparked and quickly blinded him. He closed his eyes, turning his head away.



Ruby © JJPADTK | [In](#) | [R](#) | [Tw](#) | [T](#) |

Shaking, Castiel held himself immobile, crouched on the moss-speckled, tarry shingles of a nearby rooftop as Dean's last shallow breath left him, and his stout heart beat for the final time. Castiel watched, confused, as Lillith turned on Sam. He couldn't fight back. Pinned. Trapped, with no understanding of his untapped power. He couldn't even reach it. He writhed in her grasp in agony. Unable to think, let alone resist. Lillith's intent turned to killing him; to obliterating all of him but the seed of power in his immortal soul. Sam... Sam wasn't stopping this.

*He couldn't.* His vessel and soul would break before the walls that kept his ability to fight back beyond his reach.

Castiel took off from his rooftop with one giant wingbeat and, in one great leap, landed atop the roof, directly above Sam.

Sam blacked out.

Lillith may have thought herself powerful compared to her degenerate unholy kin, but she was an infant, no older than the earliest Christian stories. It was time she knew the might of angels—the kind of power born of eons. Kneeling, open palms pressed flat against the tarry rooftop, Castiel erected a barrier between the Winchester boy and his nemesis; severed her pinioning hold on him entirely. The barrier dissected her demonic arm below the elbow from her spirit body.

A wail as could deafen a banshee shattered the evening quiet in this sleepy, painfully quintessential suburban American neighbourhood. Believing themselves to have heard a woman scream bloodcurdling murder, the houses surrounding the home where Dean lay drowning in his heart's blood, his lungs filling with more of it every passing moment, turned into hives of worried speculation, debate and hushed, concerned calls to local police.

A smell like no other hit Sam's nostrils. Whatever hope he'd held out broke. "*Dean!*"

Sam's agonized cry for his brother shook Castiel like a slap to the face. His whole face quivering, Castiel held back tears threatening mutiny against forced composure.



It was done; the suffering of Dean's earthly body finished. Twenty-four years watching over him, preserving his life, only to witness it end at this precise moment in time. His breath trembled as he took it in. Dean's feet stood firmly planted on the path that would bring them together. Without the Hell he would know through the coming months, they would never meet. No rebellion would come to pass in Heaven. Some mistakes would never be made. A feckless, uncaring God never cast down, with Jack never enthroned in his place, and empowered to break his chosen father free from the Shadow's eternal torment. Dean's friendship, his love, his touch... without everything to come, he would never know any of it. They could never be. There was nothing he could do to change or prevent the cruelty awaiting Dean...

Castiel let his forcibly stilled face fall into shadow and hang low as tears, large and many, fell from eyes wide open and aching, breaking open on the shingles beneath him, splattering against his polished shoe leather. There he stayed, crouched on his haunches, as Sam laid his brother down, made for Baby's trunk and came away with a gas can in hand.

Looking down, eyes now wide and unblinking in horror, the angel watched as Sam doused the room around Dean and Ruby's lifeless bodies with gasoline.

He was done with this life. *Done*. It had cost him his mother, his father, now his big brother. There was nothing left for him here. He wasn't so far gone from school that he couldn't go back. Re-take the SATs and apply again. Probably score even better this time around. All that tied him to this life—his brother's remains—would burn, as their mother had. He would be free to live whatever life he chose and *never* look back.

With a one-handed trick, Sam snapped open and lit his Zippo.  
*NO.*

Not a word; a potent, arresting feeling. He could hardly see the flickering flame through his tears. All of him but his shaking hand holding the lighter, froze.

Castiel's heart thrummed out deep, hard beats in his chest. His

breathing turned jagged. Without a body to return to, the last of Dean's ties to this plane would be severed. He could never be risen. One errant twitch of the wrong muscle and Sam could drop the lighter.

He couldn't speak to Sam. If he did, the boy would recognize his voice when they met.

The agony and misery of grief cut up Sam's heart in ways he'd never thought possible. Something—someone—who had *always* been there, been the foundations he built himself on, who'd always made him feel at home, who had *been* his home...

*Gone.*

"Sam! What's gotten into your head, boy?" Sam started, snapping the lighter closed like he'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Bobby...!?" Sam's throat seized up on him. Still, he tried to force it out. "*He's...!*" Dead. Gone, and bound for Hell. He couldn't say it.

Sam dropped the gas can and lighter and came at Bobby. Bobby didn't even think, he just wrapped his arms around the boy and held on tight. Sam was *bawling*, and it seemed to Bobby that he was a lost, scared child again. His mother had burned to death while he watched. He was too young to retain any concrete memory, but a thing like that leaves a mark on the soul. His father had died to buy back his brother's life. Now his brother had been torn to shreds before his eyes. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't *fucking fair*.

Eyes locked on the sight of Dean's body—the boy seemed oddly smaller than he remembered—Bobby let out a sob and held his son in his arms even tighter, tears finally falling.

Bobby shook his head. "Not here, son. Not like this. He deserves better."

A police siren sounded in the distance, jolting Sam out of his tears. He fought to get his breath back. Not a word needed to be said between them. Police were minutes out, if that. Meeting Bobby's gaze, Sam nodded. The aging hunter couldn't help carry his brother. He wiped his eyes and nose with his sleeves. Frantically searching the floor, he found his lighter. Handing Bobby the gas can, Sam rolled Dean's limp, lifeless

corpse onto his back, pinned his feet in place with knees bent, and in one near-backbreaking heave, slung his brother over his shoulders.

"Guh!" Tears still streaming from his eyes, wide with grief, flushed in angry red splotches on his face from exertion, Sam steadied himself. Stepping inches in one direction then another, he held his breath until Dean hung balanced over his centre of gravity. The reek of gasoline stung his nose and eyes. The stench of shit, piss, blood and the breath of the dead saturated his senses. He could taste it. His dead brother's blood and effluence soaked further into his clothes by the second.

Sam gritted his teeth. "*You stupid sonuvabitch!*" He growled out a sob, blinking tears out of his vision, holding his brother tighter to him. The way Bobby looked at him begged him to meet his gaze. *Hold on to me, son. I've got you.* Sam nodded, sucking back a nosefull of snot before it ran down his face.

"Bobby. Grab the keys."

Setting aside the jerrycan, Bobby dug into Dean's shredded jacket pockets. Grimacing at the smell, he came away with Baby's keys in hand. Without another word, Bobby picked up what he could carry in two hands and ran for the car quickly as he could for his age and with his back as it was. Sam carried his brother to the front door, waiting until the Impala's headlights were in sight to step onto the porch, sparing Dean impact against any doorframe, as though he might feel it. Which he never would.

The sob shot out of his mouth. There was nothing he could do to stop it. He held tight to his brother's sleeve as he made his way down to the sidewalk. Bobby opened the trunk.

"Open the back door."

Bobby clenched his teeth together, hesitating.

"*Open the fucking back door!*" Sam hadn't meant to rip into him like that. It broke his heart even more to see the way Bobby flinched. The elder hunter nodded, understanding in his eyes. He dug out the bivouac tarp, laying it out on the back seat so that Sam could lay Dean's upper body on the seat, and pull him the rest of the way into the car with it.

The way Sam wrapped the tarp over his big brother, like he was wrapping him in a sleeping bag, not his death shroud. Closed the boy's

eyes. Turned his head to lie against the seat back, like he was sleeping. *Godammit!* Dean looked like a boy again, barely out of his teens. As though death had washed his face clean of the stresses and weight of his living years. A pair of tears fell. He wiped them away from his eyes, letting out a hard sigh. Dean was gone, and the brother he left behind would end up jailed for the carnage inside the house if they didn't keep their shit together and haul ass, *now*.

"Sam..." Bobby said it gently. Sam's expression went taut, nodding, reticent to take his hands off where his brother's lie, peacefully crossed over his heart under the bivvy tarp. Sam stood, closing the car door, marching around behind the trunk. Sam looked him dead in the eyes.

"Keys." Wasn't a request.

"Son..."

"You need to figure out where we'll find a coffin, then bury him, and give me directions." By the set of Sam's jaw and hardness in his eyes, this wasn't a discussion.

Sighing, Bobby nodded, handing over the keys. Sam was right, and sirens were close.

Something burned in the boy's eyes Bobby decidedly did not like.





# Dean Winchester



Horror © TheFriendlyPigeon | B | In | P | Sq | Tw | T |



## Willow Tree Motel, Topeka, Kansas - May 2008

Distant thunder rolled as Castiel let the motel door swing closed behind him.

A memory echoed through Castiel's mind.

*"What were you dreaming about?"*

He still didn't know what Dean had dreamt of that night. Dean never answered the question.

Castiel cocked his head to one side as he stared down at the empty, neatly turned-down motel bed, unconcerned with doing anything. It existed so far removed from the last time Dean occupied it, there was nothing of him in it but a memory that hadn't yet come to pass. He'd lain down to sleep above the comforters, curled up on his side, exhausted, worried and out cold. Dean had tucked his leather jacket snug around his shoulders, hair scruffed up from tossing and turning, boots still on, smelling of clothing worn for too long, dirt, dust, coffee, soft drinks and fast food; smelling like the road.

*"Mmnuh... Cas..."*

Dean had mumbled his name in his sleep. Cas' blood burned through his cheeks as the angel recalled seating himself beside Dean, drawn by curiosity as much as by a feeling he didn't learn the word for until more than a decade later.

A moment that, from his point of view, happened nearly forty years ago, that hadn't yet happened. It was extraordinarily strange, but... comforting. Death—Hell—wasn't the end. It was their beginning, if they truly had one.

Coming back in time... this was *his* choice. It wasn't God's grand design. There was no *plan*. Yet here he was, drawn and moved by a calling and instinct he couldn't explain or quantify, brought to exactly where he needed to be, exactly when he was needed. It wasn't destiny or fate. It simply was. The beauty of the artfully subtle order to chaos was

*breathhtaking*, even now. The angel's lips parted. He took a breath to top up his lungs properly.

There was an elegance to it. It wasn't fate that brought him here—it was the current of Life itself. Even with every reason to choose to love differently, he hadn't. Even if given the choices again, and again, and again, the decisions would never be different.

He was no longer needed here.

The seraph upended the contents of the plastic shopping bag in hand onto the foot of the bed. A sixty-cc plastic syringe. A catheter tube purchased on five-finger discount from a hospital. Scissors. A razor. Two litres of bottled water. Face cloths. Nail clippers. Gloves—the kind that snap against your wrist before a medical exam. Vaseline. Soap—mild, natural, and earthy; the one least affronting to his senses, and, hopefully, appealing. Toothbrush. Toothpaste. Something for his underarms and something subdued and fresh-scented for his skin when ready. Everything he needed to present a human body in such ways that another might enjoy it.

His clothes had to be washed. He untied his shoes and slipped them off, tucking a sock in each one. Castiel tossed his coat, then jacket down onto the bed. Leaving the lights off in the outer room, he flipped on the soft, uncleanly yellow bathroom light. He turned on the shower and let it run steaming hot in the chill of a long-empty room.

Teeth brushed and mouth rinsed, Castiel put a hand up to wipe clear a swath through the condensation on the mirror. He flattened his palm on the glass, holding it in place. Lean, lithe, strong digits... broad hand, a pronounced network of veins. Moving his fingers, he watched as the joints, muscles and tendons slid and rolled until they naturally settled flat, their sheath of skin wrinkling in the places to which it was accustomed.

Cas blinked, and the feeling of Dean weighing on him, the Impala's hard edges digging into his backside, was as present in this time as it was then, and it stole his breath. The seraph pushed his hand across the mirror, leaving his reflection visible, warped by streaks of water. He let it fall away, the tips of his fingers carving downward-arching streaks through the condensation on the glass.

James Novak looked a dead ringer for his grandmother on his father's side, rendered in the masculine. One more step back in time—that's all it would take. To bring Dean back... a gift. A woman—raven-haired, fine-featured, with fierce, steely blue eyes. Someone who could make moot the anguish his cravings for a man's body inflicted. To be able to hold him with a woman's hands, wrap a woman's body around him.

He'd paid it little mind then, but Castiel remembered it now. Pressed hard against the groove where his leg joined his pelvis and the inside of his thigh. A thick, unbelievably hot swell, pulsing in time with the beats of Dean's heart, getting harder, longer, fuller with each one. He could bring back a woman through whom he would kiss Dean's cockhead with labial lips' arousal-slick softness. Envelop his penis in sweltering, taut, ribbed and slippery flesh it craved to the ends of its deepest roots. Fill his hands with the kind of full, pillowy breasts that had drawn his gaze all his life. Return to him wearing a body able to create and carry new life.

His gaze wandered and settled on the lips Dean's eyes so often found, without conscious understanding of why. Eyes into which Dean couldn't bring himself to look, at first. Jaw and cheekbones that had known the tender, cradling touch of Dean's hands; hands that willed him to live, to come back to him every time, even though he had been foolishly trusting, or prideful and overreaching. No matter what his sin, he'd known better love and forgiveness at the hands of a damaged, selfless human man than from his own high and holy Father.

He braced himself on the counter when, taken unawares, the sensation of Dean's hand around his penis, firm and sure, stroking him through orgasm damned near flinched his knee out from under him. The feeling was nearly as real and potent now as their first night. It took everything he had to keep from emptying himself right there and then. Remembering stoked a sharp ache in his heart.

If his knee hadn't slammed into the cabinet door, he'd have gone straight down. The angel gave his head a shake, unable to contain a burst of laughter. No doubt, one of the many reasons sex was best had on a soft, horizontal surface.

Weaving a little and chuckling at the ridiculous nature of the quandary he was in, he let the memory fade. One of God's mightiest

creations—a seraph!—weak-kneed for the touch and kiss of someone so infinitesimally *small*...!

Laughter fading, when he met his own gaze in the mirror again, his expression turned placid—all uncertainty fled. He wanted to feel it *again*, with this vessel. None other.

Blinking and topping up shallow air in his lungs, he exhaled the tension holding his shoulders up tight. He reached for his tie, swaying it loose and pulling it off. Undoing his shirt buttons as he turned, he headed back out into the bedroom. Untucking his shirt, he took hold at the back of the collar and off it came, overhead.





## He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

William Butler Yeats

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.





# Off The Deep End



A loud, cap-gun snap sounded from the air in front of him, jolting Dean out of his memory. The smell of ozone wafted into his nostrils, stinging like an ignited match's acrid kick. Castiel had disappeared and returned inside a nano-second—too quickly for any human being to perceive his absence. Before Dean's eyes, Cas' serene, comforting expression and penetrating gaze, in an instant, changed to shaken, wide-eyed awe. The striking intensity gave Dean a start. Castiel was suddenly breathing heavily as if he'd been running at a sprint. The hands pressed to the sides of Dean's face tensed and shook, slowly pulling away. Cas slumped back against the Impala, exhausted, loosening his tie.

Frowning, Dean pointedly asked, "*What* was that?"

Cas shook his head to indicate that he didn't have the breath to answer and that he wouldn't even if he did. Languidly pulling his head up out of a slump, Castiel looked up to Dean as though he was seeing him for the first time. The rush of relief overcame him. Leaning back under the influence of vertigo, he pulled his tie all the way loose, undoing the collar button of his shirt, and put a hand to his chest, wincing. "Agh! Ow... *it hurts*. Heh. It feels *heavy*—like there's a cannonball inside my chest..."

Reaching up, Dean reflexively put a hand over Cas' heart, feeling its roaring beat through ribs, muscle, and clothing. An affectionate smile upturned the corners of Dean's lips, a single amused chuckle escaping him. "A heart's a heavy burden."

Castiel laughed as his pained expression morphed into giddy, unrestrained joy and amusement. "One that makes the rest of me feel like I'm flying." Somehow, a simple touch from Dean salved the pain in his

chest. He laid a hand over Dean's, holding it to him. If Dean thought his hand on Cas' chest felt hot—the angel's was *on fire*.

Dean closed the distance between them, embracing the seraph, resting a hand around the back of Cas' head, fingers combing up into his hair. "For the life of me, I can't figure out what someone like you sees in me," he near-whispered.

Castiel clamped his arms around Dean's torso, tight. *Wild horses...* Water blurring his vision as he laughed, overjoyed at being held close rather than pushed away, Cas replied, awed, "Regardless of how hard, or how many times you were hit... no matter what life *takes from you or breaks*, Dean, you get back on your feet—*every single time*." Dean felt the arms wrapped around him cinch hard enough to lift him.

His expression twisting sadly even though he was smiling, Dean let out a pained, wordless burst of breath. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"Yes. You *have*," Cas assured him, pulling back, looking for Dean to meet his gaze.

Instead, Dean looked away, tears pooling on his eyelids. Drawing back, unwilling to let go but unable to look Castiel in the eye, Dean shook his head, ashamed. "Not this time. There's only so much a guy can take. Guess I can't take losing you."

Still holding Dean, though not tight or close, Cas smiled despite the pain that twisted his expression. "You're resilient, Dean, not unbreakable. This *will heal*."

Dean shook his head. "I can't do it again, Cas. I won't do it again. Ever. Understand me?"

*Do not leave me behind again.*

Nodding, Castiel acknowledged Dean's ask with uncanny serenity. "You'll never have to. You have my word."

Dean scoffed. "Just like that?"

"I nearly gave my entire existence for you. If you would rather be allowed to perish than left behind, so be it," Cas replied with ease and grace Dean wasn't sure he fathomed.

"Cas, after all the things I've done, I don't deserve—"

"And I'm Mother-fucking-Teresa?" Dean started, taken aback. "It's not about what we *deserve*, Dean. No God's design defines our destinies anymore, but there *is* an order to the universe. It is now what it always should have been; the current of an ocean, not unchangeable fate. Something defined in words and etched in stone. It only takes us to where

we want to be if we choose, and let it. Who we are for each other has only ever been about the *choices we made*. I choose you... *whatever* that looks like for you. Whichever way you *want* me, you will have me." Castiel's hand had found its way up around Dean's back as he spoke, not pressing him closer, just resting; assuring and soothing.

Dean stared at Cas, wide-eyed from a potent mixture of awe and carnal fear. He was suddenly keenly aware that he was slumped up against the angel and pinning him against the side of the Impala from breast to thigh, with nothing but need to blame for the heat and swollen, stiff flesh standing cozy beside his in much the same state. He needed badly for there to be no clothing between them. The rush of want forced him to breathe in deep, put him in a daze, and weighed his eyelids down. With a slight turn of his head, no longer looking at Cas sidelong, Dean instead ventured closer to a kiss with every passing moment.

*What he needed...*

Dean scoffed. "You're off the deep end," he accused under his breath, speaking from near enough to feel the angel's breath on his lips.

Castiel smiled, laughing, without a care for the fact it moved his body against Dean weighing down on him. An appropriate description of where he was currently treading water in his emotional reservoir. "I am, and there's nowhere else I choose to be."

It came over him again. A diffuse wave of pressure poured over Dean from behind—the harbinger of a rising tide—washing him up onto the shoreline of the angel in his arms and depositing him there. Cas closed his eyes, letting himself be kissed, drinking in the taste of Dean's lips and tongue. He breathed in the scents of him—sweat, dirt, grass, jeans, leather, whiskey, fear, overwhelming lust, and all—like it quenched a potent thirst he should have died of long ago. Dean's hand wandered down, finding its way into the small of Castiel's back. The moment Dean pulled their hips together, he ground his hardening cock into the angel's pelvis, weak-kneed for the feeling of Cas' penis, hot, hard, and bulging beside his.

"Mmph!" Castiel's moan mixed with a cry of surprise muffled by Dean's forceful kiss. The angel's pelvis jerked back, having been thoroughly unprepared for the electric jolt of sensation stimulation sparked.

Dean pulled back and let him loose, shocked by the sound and recoil. "Sorry! Did I pinch...?"



"No!" Cas replied quickly, chuckling slightly, short on breath. "No. It... hm, surprised me. Heheh. Do it again?" The question came out softly, riding the last of his breath. Castiel's smiling lips chased his, looking for more.



Sleep, Perchance to Dream © Winchester-Reload 2021 | [In](#) | [P](#) | [R](#) | [T](#) |

"Sure," Dean replied, laughing through an easy smile. Unable to resist the temptation to tease, he ducked Cas' lips for a moment before giving him precisely what he wanted. The angel was laughing darkly when their lips met again, eyes falling gently closed. Dean's hands went under his coat and jacket. Cas half-opened his eyes, sneaking a peek at the man, as Dean held him close by the hips, then a firm, massaging grasp of his backside. Keeping Dean in his arms, the angel let his head fall back. Dean's kisses migrated to the tender skin under his jaw and behind his ear.

The pace of Dean's grinding kicked up for a few seconds before he stopped himself, shaking as he backed himself down from cumming. As

good as he felt, it wasn't enough. Not nearly. He wanted to be inside Cas—not in his mouth, hand, or anywhere other than cocooned in his body. Then, let go there—to leave something of himself behind. Dean's movements turned frantic. Cas' tie was off before the seraph caught his breath. Pulling him off the side of the car, Dean quickly had his coat and jacket off his shoulders, arms freed, tossing the bundle of clothing over Baby's roof.

Dean's hands went for his belt tongue, then the buttons on his shirt. Cas put his hands over Dean's, stopping him and leaving the man no choice but to look him in the eye. Half-clothed and over-too-soon against the side of the Impala, bent over the hood or trunk, was not how he wanted things to go down. Castiel didn't have to say anything, and Dean understood.

Dean kissed him tenderly. Taking controlled, measured breaths, he backed away, awed at the loving feeling flooding from his heart. "Gimme a minute."

Cas nodded, stood up off the side of the car, opened up the door to the back seat, tossing his coat, jacket, and tie into the back. One shoe and sock were off before he set foot inside. He climbed in, tucking seatbelt buckles away, seating himself with one barefoot leg up. Undoing his buttons halfway down his shirt, Cas recoiled, surprised and snickering mischievously as a string of condoms and bottle of lubricant flew past his face, landing on the panel behind the back seat. His shed boot and sock preceding him, Dean ducked into the back seat and, looking up, froze. Castiel paused when he saw Dean's expression—an odd mixture of disbelief and sheer excitement.

"I... uh..." Dean let out a low, slow whistle. "Not quite what I'm used to seeing waiting back here when I break out the love-gloves."

"I can fix that." Smiling and chuckling, Cas took hold of Dean by the lapels, hauling him bodily into the back seat.

"Wuh... whoa! Haha...!" Still laughing, Dean found himself pulled into a firm, hungry kiss he had no desire to fight. As crushing as Castiel's mouth was, there was a tenderness to the way he wrapped his hand around Dean's head; his fingertips applied a raking, massaging pressure to a place at the base of Dean's neck that melted and drove him wild at the same time. An open, tongued kiss made his heart skip beats, emptying his lungs of breath by the time it was over. Dean pulled back, hastily shucking off his jacket and overshirt.



Reaching back and latching his toes into the door handle, Dean pulled it shut behind him. They were already overheating enough to turn skin slick from a bit of over-the-clothes action. Castiel stripped off his last sock, beginning work on his belt buckle. Dean put a heavy hand down over Cas'.

The angel looked up, reading him in his unabashed way. Flushed and eager, his heart pounding, stiff enough under his jeans to rival an actual tent pole, and still, Dean had stopped him. "There's next to nothing I wouldn't do, Dean, including refraining from *whatever* you don't want."

Surprise and a lopsided smile appeared on Dean's face. "I *want* to do it myself."

Cas, surprised in turn, drew his hands away and lie back, preparing to lift his hips and move his legs as needed. Dean's subdued smile balanced itself out as he undid Cas' belt, unbuttoned his slacks' waist, and unzipped the fly. Cas settled onto his elbows, compliant, enjoying being undressed and assessed by Dean's intense stare and kneading grasp in a way he never had with anyone who'd come before.

Dean pressed his palms and fingers into the tight-knit muscle of Cas' backside and thighs as he worked his pants down to above his knees. The prospect of what those abs, that ass, and these thighs could do for him had Dean flushing genuinely *red* in the face. To say nothing of the swelling arch the angel's boxers were doing little to restrain and no longer entirely concealing.

Blinking, Dean realized he'd stopped what he was doing in favour of getting lost in kneading at Cas' thighs and hamstrings, taking in the sight of him. He looked up to see the devious smile his shameless enjoyment of the angel's body had inspired. His breath left him. Taking in a deeper, steadying breath, Dean closed the distance between them, planting a kiss on the angel that left Cas feeling drugged.

"Dean..." Cas trailed off when Dean met his gaze with a look and smile in his eyes that said he *knew* what Cas intended to say and, unspoken, said it in kind. A smile formed on Cas' lips, turned to a Cheshire grin, then became exulted, mad-as-a-hatter laughter. The increasingly unstable edge to it made Dean uneasy. Sensing it, Cas reigned himself in, tears leaving shining trails down his face from the outside corners of his eyes. Reaching up, resting his hand on Dean's cheek, Cas apologized, "I'm sorry. I'm all right. It's... that was... whoo! *This*, is... it's *real*." His last few

bouts of easing laughter petered out as he wiped water away from his eyes.

Resting a hand over the one Cas had on his cheek, Dean ever-so-slightly smiled and nodded. He scooted back on the seat, slipping the cuffs of Cas' slacks past his heels. Castiel sat forward the instant he was freed from his pants, running his hands up underneath Dean's T-shirt, turning it inside out as it peeled over his head and off his arms. The sight gave Cas pause. Moonlight and the rising humidity in the car gave Dean's edges an ethereal, radiant quality, as though surrounded by a glowing haze. Along with the memory of Dean's unspoken "I love you", Castiel etched the moments into his memory for eternity. He would remember them with perfect clarity until he ceased to exist.

The admiring, loving look on Cas' face lit something in Dean that burned clean through his self-restraint. He had his jeans and briefs down below his knees before the angel could offer any help. Cas laid back, never taking his eyes off the sight of Dean kneeling on the seat, flushed, stripped, *hard* and dripping, the back of his head and neck butted up against Baby's roof. Pushing his boxers down far as he could without the flexibility of a contortionist, Cas lay his engorged cock bare, arched straight back onto his stomach, dark-skinned and blushing deep red.

Dean froze, fixated on the sight; torn, not by whether or not he wanted to sex the angel in front of him silly, but by whether or not he wanted to give, rather than receive, a blowjob for someone he *loved* for the first time. Anything and everything he wanted to do to the angel woke up; every last one of them determined to be first in line. With no clear frontrunner, he could do nothing other than stare.

"Dean..." Cas' voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Huh?"

In a low voice, chuckling, Castiel assured him, "This won't be the last time." Dean's heart seized in his chest; it didn't sound like a promise, more like statement of fact.

Dean believed him. A slight smile and a gentle laugh escaped Dean as he reached down, taken over by an odd peace, sliding the last piece of Cas' clothing off his legs on his way to lay over the angel. Their cocks enveloped, side by side, in a burning space between their stomachs, Dean captured Castiel's lips with a slow, hungry kiss. He ground his groin against Cas, their kiss breaking at an involuntary moan from them both. As if the sounds had a taste, their tongues, each, in turn, went looking for

more, rewarded with the little noises they uttered with nearly every press of their hips.

Cas surged beneath him, on the ragged edge of release. Dean put a hand on the angel's hipbone, stopping things. Not yet. There was something he wanted first. He met Cas' quizzical gaze, giving him a quick peck on the lips. "Help me." Dean sat back against the door and worked with Cas to remove his remaining footwear and clothing. Cas tossed his jeans over the front seatback and brought his hand back, drifting to Dean's stomach, letting it slide, following a trail of shorthair down to his groin. The angel rested it there, moving his thumb and fingers in subtle, massaging ways, cradling Dean's hard-on between his thumb and forefinger. Enjoying the feeling of his hot, sweating skin, his wavy, thick yet soft shorthair and full gonads, pulling themselves higher into the firm, heated caress of his palm.

Cas looked up to him the moment Dean shivered, losing his remaining breath to a sigh. Dean wanted this so badly he couldn't keep breath in his lungs before even getting started. His cock twitched in Cas' hand, eager, his hips moving against Cas' grasp. Far and away beyond shame, his body and soul needed this and nothing else mattered. Reaching over the back seat for a packet, Dean tore it open, sleeving the condom onto his middle two fingers, waiting while Cas' hand explored how to pleasure him.

Dean's touch found the angel's forearm. With wordless understanding, Castiel laid back, legs full-spread, taking his balls in hand, lifting them clear, alternately kneading them and stroking his hard-on, unhurried. Dean drizzled gel onto his cock, smoothing it around, and leaving himself so well coated he was dripping.

His gloved digits covered with gel as well, he pressed his palm against Cas' taint, rubbing the pads of his fingers around the cinched skin and muscle he aimed to relax. Dean enjoyed listening to the angel's pleasure for a minute before he let himself go any further, dabbing kisses onto the seraph's breast. Cas' hand left his sack and began to feel its way down over Dean's, pressing.

Chuckling, Dean ducked down, planting a kiss on Cas' solar plexus. The angel's skin jumped under his lips. "Tryin' to tell me somethin'?" Dean asked, mischievous.

A pleased growl sounded from Cas' mouth. "Yes!" rolled out of his throat over gravel rougher than anything Dean had ever heard from him.

An impish smile formed on Dean's face. If rumour proved true and Cas was enjoying himself so well now, he was *definitely* going to like what came next. Dean pushed his fingers through and in, earning the side of his head a caress he leaned into, as Cas let out a surprised, ecstatic cry. Dean kissed the wrist slipping away from him as Cas slackened, immediately setting his fingers to work in the soft flesh he knew he'd find a buried pleasure trove behind.

Castiel quickly realized the intention of the exercise: to Dean's surprise, the angel's back gate relaxed entirely. If Cas thought he was getting off the hook that easily, he was mistaken. Dean pressed deeper against a stiff bulb near his fingertips. It rolled out from under his touch when Cas recoiled in shock. Chasing it down, Dean had his fingers do a firm, tight dance on and around it. The sensation contorted a body that clocked in a little better than a couple hundred pounds with unbelievable ease.

A loud moan burst out of the instantly wide-eyed seraph, his chest and stomach heaving as Dean persisted at messing with his bud and engorged cock from inside. Then, Cas started moving, rocking himself over the ends of Dean's fingers. It occurred to him the angel might very well have found a spot he *really* liked. His fingers took to harder, tiny strokes that left the seraph feeling like an overheating electrical wire threaded from the piece of him Dean insisted on playing with, through his body, had wrapped itself around the core feeling in his chest, winding itself down tight.

Unthinking, Dean dropped his head. With a twist of the neck, he darted out his tongue and picked up the head of Cas' oozing boner in his mouth. Immediately taking in an almost panicked breath, Castiel let out a restrained, enrapt cry. He picked his head up to look at what Dean was doing as though what his nerves reported back to him couldn't be believed without being seen, taking deep, heaving breaths that fled too fast leaving him dizzy. The angel let his head drop onto the back seat, rag-dolled from head to toe for a moment by a slick caress from Dean's tongue at the neck and around one side of his cock's head.





Backseat Fun © The Friendly Pigeon | P | Sq | Tw |

Not a moment later, a run of caresses and a press to the walnut-shaped bundle of pleasure inside him left the angel in a moaning daze, his body shaking and jumping with pleasure.

Play that lasted only minutes seemed much longer. Dean felt the kind of twitch he knew full-well heralded orgasm and geared himself



down instantly, letting Cas' spit-slick organ fall from his lips, giving his fingers a soft, slow-kneading rest, away from Cas' hotspot, petting the root of his penis instead.

His tone desperate, voice quaking and halfway to a whisper, Castiel asked, "What do you want from me?" In that moment, the man he loved could have asked for the keys to all Creation, and—God help him—he would have given them over without hesitation. Cas wondered for a moment if Dean's answer was the salty kiss he received until...

"Take a ride on me?" Dean breathed into his ear, taking the lobe into his mouth for quick, teasing suckles and gentle nip. Cas' eyes rolled, and breath seized as a pleased shiver went for a contorting crawl down his spine. Cas heard it as a question but understood it wasn't. *Whatever* Dean asked for in answer to his question, he'd have done, and Dean knew it. The seraph guided Dean's lips back to his, and his only response was the deep kiss he held Dean into until they both needed air.

Dean's playful fingers strained to be inside him to the hilt and stilled as they kissed. Unable to resist a meandering stroke as Dean slipped out of him, he swiftly discarded the condom into the shadows and cast-off clothing obscuring the floor. They moved.

A solitary instant passed for Dean, when Cas turned away in their reverie, leaving him alone in his memories, only to reappear, awestruck and breathlessly in love like he hadn't been the moment before. Castiel, on the other hand, lived twenty-four years during the fraction of a second he'd gone back in time.

Astride Dean's legs, Cas let himself sink onto Dean, facing Baby's front seat, gradually enveloping him, safeguarded from going too fast by Dean's broad, spreading, supporting hands—one on each cheek, his pinky fingers pressed to where Cas' flesh slowly swallowed his. The ecstatic intimacy proved every second of all twenty-four years worth the wait. A euphoric shiver started in his thighs, spreading to his abdomen and arms, the more he took in. There was mild pain. To the relief of his backside's aching flesh, he found it vastly outweighed by pleasure saturating him.

Chest heaving and his heart pounding, Cas went slack, taking Dean's hardened organ full and deep. Lying back into Dean's chest, his head fell back over his shoulder, his cheek resting against the side of Dean's neck. Letting out a sound that was at once a moan and blissful

sigh as Cas' weight settled onto his thighs, Dean lifted himself into the angel, unable to help or stop himself.

The unexpected spike of ecstasy cut Cas' strings, the high leaving him laughing the way a tickle would. He lifted a hand, looking to reach back and caress Dean's face but found his arm already behaving as though numb. Dean wrapped his arms around him, holding him close, his breath both hot and breezy on his shoulder. Working at rocking beneath him, he laid a kiss on Cas' neck, on the soft skin beneath his ear. Whichever nerves Dean was hitting inside him set off a firework every time he plowed forward.

Picking up Cas' fallen hand from underneath, Dean intertwined their fingers. Bringing their hands to rest front and center on Cas's pelvis, Dean curled his fingers down tight. "Show me."

Cas' affectionate laughter, sounding right beside his ear, sent shivers through him. *Someone had done his homework*, Cas mused, shifting his hips to angle Dean's erection forward, getting at his feel-good flesh even better. The man's lips parted against the plane between his neck and shoulder, allowing a sharp intake of breath in at the new friction on his string and cleft. His lips opened wider still against Cas' skin, the touch edging dangerously close to an outright bite. Turning and covering Dean's hand with his own, Cas moved their hands to rest underneath the tails of his shirt and his throbbing hard-on, pressing their exploring fingers down deep into the flat of his pelvis.

A shaking moan escaped Cas' lips, and a new tremble started at his center, rippling outward. The two intuitively understood they'd found what they were looking for. Trusting Cas to guide him around the front, Dean moved his hips underneath the seraph and found himself rewarded by contractions in the muscle enfolding him, shaming even the tightest snatch he'd ever enjoyed.

Pleased, wordless utterances were all that sounded from Cas until he whispered, blissfully dazed, in the space of a slow reprieve, "Can we...hmnnnh! Stay like this *forever*...?" Castiel trailed off, giving himself up to the euphoric fog taking him over, heading lolling into Dean's. Hiding the words under his breath betrayed the fact that it was a thought—a prayer—he hadn't meant to say aloud.

Smiling and quietly laughing against the slope between Cas' neck and shoulder, Dean slid his hand down Cas' pelvis, through drips of precum running down his skin, wrapping his fingers tight around the base

of the angel's rigid cock. The grip elicited a sound akin to a growl. "Don't know about *forever*, but, mmn... heh, I'll do what I can to help this last." Renewing his efforts, Dean brought his other hand 'round Cas' front, finding its massaging place again. He mercilessly played at the angel's prostate from both sides. Cas, in turn, rocked and lifted his hips when he could, riding Dean's straddled lap, keeping time with his movements.

Heart racing madly in his chest, the feeling building behind the cinched fingers wrapped around his cock curled his back and hooked Cas' head backward over Dean's shoulder. His vision blurred, and soon, Cas was in the grips of a burning tingling in the furthest extremities of his limbs. His cock, colored a dark, purpling red, still tied at the base by Dean's unyielding, steely grasp, became nearly agonizingly swollen beyond normal measure. Dean's hand gave his cock a tight, short tug with every stroke's recoil; a sweet, maddening agony. As little as he wanted it to be over, the body he occupied needed what came next as inevitably as it obeyed the laws of gravity.

"Dean..." Cas breathed, somehow both taut and slack with pleasure. "Let go." Dean released the fingers circled tight around the angel's twitching, precumming organ, giving smooth, quick, caressing strokes instead. Wrapping his hand over his angel's pubic bone he held Cas' body close against the fast, steady rhythm of his canting pelvis.

The creeping ember-burn in Cas' feet, hands, the back of his head, and groin seemingly hit the edge of an accelerant. His whole body shuddered as it burned, hips frantically snapping forward then back, his cock tapping his stomach in the throes of the highest peaks of ecstasy. The angel arched his back, uttering unrestrained, pleasure-induced cries that only ceased whenever he needed to breathe again. Dean never stopped moving. In the heights of the seraph's release, he drove into him relentlessly, pushing out another burst of cum with every stroke until no more than drops were left to squeeze out.

Castiel tried to wrap one hand around the back of Dean's head. Moving as if made of soft rubber, his hand gently found Dean's cheekbone. Cas used that as his guide, running it back over Dean's ear until he could set his palm to rest on the back of his lover's head, his fingers raking through Dean's hair as they curled in, holding him close.

Hot breath from Dean's quick bout of deep laughter hit Cas' skin. "Right behind you. Keep it tight for me."

Cas nodded languidly, still mostly gone on a wave of pleasure. A hand on either side of Cas' chest coaxed him into leaning forward, with one arm draped over the back of the front seat, the other braced against it, breathless. With the freedom of an extra inch and some to move, Dean let his hands fall to rest on Cas' hips, withdrawing his pelvis while rocking the angel forward for every stroke. He pulled them back together with a speed and steady rhythm that swiftly sent him over the edge, cumming into the delicate, searing warmth wrapped tight around him.

Making no effort to restrain his bucking hips or ecstatic, grateful moans, Dean wrapped an arm around Castiel, latched a hand on the seatback in front of him, and drove himself closer and deeper with every surge of release. Each one lifted the seraph.

Gripped by euphoric, breathless panic as jolts of pleasure from that incredible node within tangled up with the rush of Dean throbbing *hard* inside him, moved by unfettered need and without shame, Cas finally snapped. Collapsing, the angel hung limply over the front seat, letting himself be buzzed and moved by Dean's chaotic, feverish rutting until his need ebbed.

Laying one arm over Cas', Dean laid himself to rest on the angel's back, sweat dripping down off the back of his neck, the underside of his jaw, darkening spots on the dress shirt between them. His breathing shaking along with the rest of him, Dean nestled into Cas, making space between their bodies as nonexistent as he could manage. His other arm found its way to resting over Cas' leg.

He took the seraph's softening cock in hand and gave it a few slow, tight strokes, running a caressing finger over and around Cas' retreating tip. Dean let his hand remain where it was and go limp, fingers wrapped around Cas' penis, the very last of the angel's cum collected on and dripping from his fingertips.

A briny, meaty smell not his own wafted to him on the air. Dean filled his lungs, getting to know it, every fiber in him going limp as he exhaled, eyes watering. Cas. He closed his eyes and let go, floating on the swells of the still-heaving back underneath his cheek and the euphoria of emptying himself to the last for the first time in days. His strokes ever so small, Dean's hips kept moving, in love with the quietly squelching, sweltering cum-lubed slide back and forth.

Their ecstasies gradually subsided, and neither felt the urge to separate. Castiel brought his feet in to rest on their soles rather than leave them awkwardly splayed out on the floor. The movement elicited a grunt from Dean, whom, still inside Cas, had been unexpectedly squeezed. The shot of pleasure gave him the jolt he needed to wake up, sit up, blink his vision clear, and look around the car interior to find enough clothing to form something soft and raised lay their heads on.

Nerves still buzzing, Cas reached back for his shirt collar, pulling the soaked, sticking garment off overhead, depositing it in the front seat. Dean's arms wrapped around his abdomen as he led the fall into lying on their sides in the afterglow. Spreading Cas' overcoat over their lower halves, Dean reached over their heads, cracking open the window. He settled into lying together with the angel in a space now conspicuously absent the sounds of sex.

Biting the inside of his lower lip, a muted laugh moved Dean as he rested his forehead against the back of Cas' head and sighed. "This back seat has seen somethin' new."

"Mmn. Is that a good thing?" the seraph asked, a little dopey, enjoying Dean's brief kiss on the back of his neck, the shiver Dean's breath on his spit-wet skin gave him, and Dean's cheek's warmth smothering it.

"Mmm-hmm," Dean murmured, chuckling. "Very." The word's deep timbre landed on his ears like honey. Chilled air wafting in through the cracked-open window provided welcome contrast to the heat kicked out by two human furnaces sprawled out across Baby's back seat. Inside and out, Dean serenely accepted that he now looked back over his personal Rubicon's waters from the shore opposite where he'd stood at sundown.

Water started to pool in his eyes in the moments preceding a question that just popped out. "How?" Dean's meaning required marginal intuiting at most.

"Jack. He, uh..." Castiel laughed and squirmed closer into Dean's chest and embrace. "He spent the better part of eight thousand years mercilessly pranking the Shadow. Eventually, the Shadow gave in to releasing me—no strings attached."

A fond smile curled Dean's lips up as he heartily chuckled. "Chip right off the ol' blocks, huh?"



"He certainly is. My favourite one involved a boobytrapped vat of Hell's effluence. I will be *shocked* if It ever gets that stench out."

Dean's hand wandered up and covered the side of his face not wedged down between their clothing and Cas' head as he replied in disbelief, stretching and laughing. "*What the fuck?*"

"Mmm-hmmm. A particularly inspired one involved blackstrap molasses—a lot of it—and goose down feathers," Cas recounted, sniggering all along. Laughter was shaking both of them now. Dean sighed, trying to recover his breath. "I believe the exact words It shouted after us were: if I ever see your face again, I will vomit your ass right back out. I *don't* care where you spend your afterlife, *but you will never spend another instant here!!*"

"Hnh. Heh heh. An' how does that work, exactly?" Dean asked, his laughter cooled down despite his amusement with a slight frown on his face.

"I'm not sure. Seems I'm... something of a celestial no-fly zone. Even my brothers and sisters are giving me conspicuously wide berth. Haven't caught so much as a whiff of hellspawn..." Distracted, Dean began to lightly run his fingers over the angry red handprint discolouring the skin under Cas' shoulder blade as he took in his story. It was *in* the skin—a rebirthmark—he would carry it for life. The ruddy-colored skin was more sensitive than the rest. Dean's feather-light touch of fingertips and fingernails running around it gave Cas a hazy pleasure that dropped his head onto their makeshift pillow, eyelids drooping closed.

Swallowing down the urge he was feeling, Dean continued tracing his fingers over Cas' skin along lines of muscle and bone. It took a minute before he realized he was absentmindedly nuzzling his nose and forehead into the back of the angel's head.

Eyelids closing as a half-smile turned up his lips, Castiel relaxed completely into Dean's embrace and let him have whatever his lover's touch came to him looking for. Dean's hand wandered to his chest, fingers toying with the nipple squeezed between them. A pleased shiver and subtle moan were Dean's reward. He folded the arm Cas was lying on, resting his hand on the angel's head, threading his fingers back through his damp, dark hair.

Pressing his rump back into Dean, asking an unspoken question, Cas smiled when Dean tightened around him from head to feet, sucking in a hitched breath. Head pulled back, throat exposed, letting his eyes fall

closed, Castiel rubbed himself into the hand on his head, all the while enjoying the fact that Dean's other hand seemed to be working its way closer to his groin.

That hand pulled him close, fingers sinking in dangerously close to his prostate. Dean pressed his pelvis forward, his hardening cock moving between Cas' cheeks. Moving like that tended a persistent itch he couldn't resist scratching—again, again... and again. Suddenly, Dean stopped himself cold, clearing his throat, giving his head a violent twist and shake as though trying to shake something off. His neck popped. "Cas, assuming this is your, uh, first time—"

"It is."

Forcing himself to relax, Dean tried to breathe normally again. He failed. "Are you good..." Cas flexed his ass against his dick. He bit down on his words to keep a moan in. "Good to go again?" Dean asked through heavy breathing. The drive to continue had him shaking.

"I don't have a choice..." For him, both in needs of heart and body, there wasn't one, but Dean didn't understand it that way.

Dean went wide-eyed, dismayed. "That whatever-you-don't-want thing goes both ways, Cas. You *always* have a choice. This isn't just about what I want. If you're too raw—"

Turning his upper body so that he could look Dean in the eye sidelong, Cas reached back over his side with one hand, looking for and finding Dean's. "If I want you to stop, I'll tell you." Drawing up his knee, he offered what Dean asked for, the remnants of the last round dripping down his skin.

Eyes closing, leaning his forehead into the side of Cas' head, Dean nodded gratefully, helpless against the drive to have the angel again as he'd never been with anyone. Dean rose to his knees, wrapping one arm behind Cas. Taking hold of him by the side of the neck, he could feel the angel's pounding pulse beneath the skin.

Cas moved to turn himself down, having guessed that Dean had wanted him as he was the first time because he wasn't comfortable looking him in the eye during the act.

"Wait. Don't," Dean said. Cas cocked his head to the side, complying, blindsided and gratified by how rapidly Dean seemed to be scaling his learning curve. Confused for a moment, as though forgetting something, Dean's hand snatched up the lube bottle, sparing nothing as

he poured it over his cock, hand underneath, cradling himself, to catch any drips.

Dean closed in for a long, deep kiss, initiating their return to intimacy with his free hand. The very same act buried him, thick and throbbing, inside his angel. Gentle and slow at first, Dean gave in, thrusting his hips down hard with deliberate and fluid control. Every stroke landed like a drumbeat, with a reverberating force that churned Cas' innards, setting off a chain reaction that snaked through his nerves and culminated in an ecstatic grunt emanating from the bottom of his chest. Dean's kisses never stopped. He took his breath when he needed it, but their lips never fully parted. The air in every breath he took belonged to Castiel before him.

When Dean drew away at the last to brace and chase down release for his angel, then himself only seconds later, Castiel found he cared somewhat less for breathing without Dean's immediate warmth and smell in the air. A smile formed on Cas' lips when Dean returned to them, the instinctive jerking action of his pelvis needing no further conscious guidance. Cas found himself kissed hard and moaned into when Dean unexpectedly struck his own nerve—one that made him believe there was another release in him to have if he wanted it badly enough. He unquestionably did.

Because of and with utter disregard for the hypersensitive state of his cock, Dean went after the sensation his sparking nerves had promised him with an intense vigor that both amazed and burned the angel beneath him alive. Dean certainly wasn't averse to making some noise. Still, a handful of the cries that escaped him had a pitch, volume, and uninhibited expression of pleasure in them that made even someone as shamelessly sexual as him thankful only one person on the planet could hear them.

Soon, the question became not whether or not he could find release again, but rather if he could stave it off long enough to give Cas something for it in return. The moment remorseful doubt flickered across his face, Castiel put his hand to feverish work on his cock.

A new shuddering in the soft walls and lasso of muscle tight around his hard-on told Dean they'd done it; the quaking spread throughout the body in his arms. He let himself go over the edge in the moments that followed. Dean collapsed on top of Castiel, breathing hard, sweat

dripping off of him, so tapped out he could hardly move, hips still moving on their own.

Dazed and in awe of the loving feeling permeating him, Cas wrapped himself around Dean in every way he could, holding on to him as if there had never existed and never would exist a soul he loved more thoroughly and wholly.

Dean took in a sudden, sharp breath and made a noise that sounded distinctly painful. His hand, hanging off the seat's edge, lifelessly limp, came back from the dead, taking hold of the muscle on the inside of his leg.

"Dean...? What's wrong?"

His breathing now pained, quick, and shallow, Dean, unable to help laughing, responded, "Shit! My penis thinks I'm twenty-five again. The rest of me thinks I'm an idiot." Inhaling sharply, Dean grimaced. One bitch of a charley horse was trying to take over his leg. Cas couldn't help chuckling along with him. Castiel reached a hand down to work a little angelic magic on the cramping muscle.

Pushing it away, Dean pinned his hand down on Baby's back seat. "Forget it, Cas. You couldn't heal the cuts and bruises you showed up with. No way am I letting you spend yourself on a few tweaking muscles."

"What can I do—?"

Dean smiled. *Persistent son of a bitch*. "Holy water in the trunk. Grab it. All of it." Without another word, Cas began picking up pieces of clothing, looking for his boxers. The fact that they were dark didn't help with locating them in the slightest. Dean dug into the pile of clothing under their heads for his jacket, then the keys in the pocket.

Keys in hand and barefoot, Cas exited the car door and made his way, limping quickly, over the irregular gravel to the trunk. Ignoring the cold air and the way rivulets of sweat running down his skin everywhere made it feel much chillier, Cas rifled through the trunk's contents and quickly found a couple of holy water flasks and a small hand-held jug besides that.

He returned to the Impala's warm, humid interior, closing the door behind him after brushing a few stuck pebbles off the soles of his feet. Tossing one of the flasks onto the upholstered shelf behind the seats, Cas unscrewed the cap on the other, handing it to Dean. Draining a whole flask was barely enough to wet Dean's throat and take the edge off the

gravel in his voice. Cas swallowed a mouthful from the jug himself, intent on leaving the contents of the flasks for Dean.

Having left himself uncovered, a beckoning wave of Dean's hand invited Cas back into bed. Dean cleared his throat, his voice returning to normal after a few words. "Whether it's a good idea or not, *please* take those off," he asked, referring to Cas' underwear. He wanted *nothing* between them. Seconds later, with a quiet laugh and naught on but an amused smirk, Castiel crawled back onto the seat, fitting himself in front of Dean. Contact with Dean's cramping leg made the man gasp and wince, and Cas reached down for the leg again. Dean seized his hand without saying anything.

"I don't want this to be unpleasant for you."

Oddly, it was a nod and a smile that prefaced Dean's reply. His breathing was deep and controlled, belying that he was putting his considerable focus and force of will to the task of releasing taut muscles. "I'll recover the good ol' fashioned way." He paused, considering how to explain himself. "You know how something sour and sweet tastes better than something that's one or the other?" Dean asked as he visibly relaxed, having managed to extricate himself from the worst of the spasm.

"Yes." Nodding, Cas made the last adjustments to his body that brought them as close together as he could manage.

"Same deal," Dean replied, pulling Cas' coat and his jacket over them, glad to be keeping heat in again.

"It tastes as good as it does because of the contrast. Not despite it."

"Bingo." Smiling and laughing, Dean relaxed and let the second flask fall to the floor, empty. He'd managed to stave off the cramp entirely and loosen his leg up again. Relief from the pain brought on a dizzying high of its own. Still, he was wary of a flare-up.

A momentary frown showed on Cas' face, as he recalled something learned long ago. "I understand." Slapping someone you love—inflicting pain—during sex made considerably more sense now.

Dean wrapped an arm over his chest, settling down to rest. Castiel interwove his fingers between Dean's, his thumb unconsciously taking to stroking along bone and tendon. Lying together in silence, each let the other know they were there with them in whatever minuscule way they felt the urge to—a brush of the nose to the back of the neck, grazing fingers over skin, leaving a tingling sensation wherever they went. Rubbing



the top of a foot behind the other's calf with toes curled around them. Butterfly kisses to whatever skin was handy. Curious fingers combing down wayward tufts of hair, above and below.

Soon, Dean couldn't fight back the drowsing taking him over anymore. "I'd stay awake with you, Cas, but I'm fading fast."

Chuckling fondly, Castiel replied, "I would *sleep* with you, but..." Sighing and smiling contently, he lay his head down to rest with Dean's. "I can't," he murmured. Dean had gone limp and let go of consciousness before the angel finished what he was saying.





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# What Matters...

"What matters ain't who's baddest, it's the ones that keep you from fallin' off your ladder."

~ The Heavy's "Short Change Hero" ~

"Lady, I'm Tolstoy."

On a cold January night in 2021, a pissed-off muse with his heavenly lover in tow barged into my mind, pointed a commanding finger at me and said, "Siddown, *start typin'*. We've got a story to tell."

Something happened, then, I did not expect. It wasn't long before it became apparent: he intended to prove in minute, painstaking detail, he's no beach read.

That day, a story unlike anything I've ever read began telling itself to me—through me—and I *have* to write it down. A hard, broken, untravelled road has been my constant companion since the moment I wrote this story's first words. I've stumbled, made mistakes, endured the worst social immolation of my life—one whose scars I still carry. Taken the wrong fork in the road, then found the right one, only to find myself staring down the barrel of a daunting sixty-two thousand word incline before I could even start telling the story proper. It begins in earnest in chapter five.

Lev Nikolayevich (Leo) Tolstoy's War and Peace has been counted at five-hundred-eighty-seven thousand, two-hundred-eighty-seven words. The release of Tread Softly and Off The Deep End marks the eighty thousand word point of this estimated **one and one half million** word epic, projected to be told in seven books, each with its own distinctly themed story arc.

Writing a story like this takes... someone somewhat out of the ordinary (read: unhinged). That by itself, isn't enough.

*No one accomplishes something like this alone.*

Throughout struggling to get this far, *what mattered*, what kept me on my feet, kept me writing, kept bills paid and a roof over my head when I was desperate, was found family and fandom friends who didn't abandon or shun me in the face of something terrible happening. People who cared enough to listen before judging, and chose to form friendships that have lasted to this day.

The people who thought it might be worth taking another chance on me with a fandom event, even if it didn't turn out in the end. People who apologized. Those who made an effort to include me once they realized something had gone very wrong, and those who've showed interest in everything I've teased and previewed from the story during the last four years. The Lucifer beta who casually dropped news of Castiel's confession into a Discord writer's circle and by sheer dumbass luck, brought me to these beautiful bastards and their love story. Those who've waited for *four years*. The people whose paths crossed mine in just the last few weeks and offered to help support me to the end of this leg of the marathon.

Every artist who's enthusiastically allowed me to borrow their work for digital editions of the story I will *never* put behind a paywall. These editions are free for the fandom to share with whomever they choose as if they could snap their fingers and magically duplicate a paper copy of a liked—dare I say? Loved—book. Someone who can't afford a trip to the bookstore doesn't deserve to experience this less than someone who can.

I owe these people a considerable debt of gratitude.

I don't have to list names. They know who they are.

Behind the scenes, I've walked a razor thin edge for four years, skirting malnutrition and playing chicken with homelessness. The amount of time it takes to accomplish something like this—according to a beta who's seen me work—is “incredible”. This person hasn't even seen the ongoing information gathering that's going into the project. Watching the series and taking meticulous notes. Trawling the fandom for scraps of



information, analysis, theories, and sometimes prompts (looking at you, Bob Wess) that have helped the story become as rich in detail as it is and will continue to be. Creating a custom searchable digital library for it all, as well as the myriad puzzle pieces of the story I've written in the last four years that have not, in any way, allowed themselves to be written in some kind of neat and tidy, start-to-finish order.

Creating three digital editions with Alt Text and Text-to-Speech accessibility built in. I'm hoping to one day record an audio book.

There's so *much* more I won't bore you with.

I'm one imperfect person doing the lion's share of work that's done by a *team* when a book or television season gets published or broadcast, supported thus far by volunteer betas I'm thoroughly grateful for.

Some things you see in Dean's experience of growing up in poverty—nothing of the worst things, I promise—feel so viscerally real because I've seen it and recorded it. Used fiction to tell you the truth.

This isn't a story I can strip identifying names from and publish. Ever. If I'm not telling the story of Dean, Castiel, Sam, Eileen, Charlie, Stevie, Donna, Jody, Benny, Garth, and The Next Generation of Hunters and Letters who will live and learn in "The Bat Cave", there's no story to tell. I'll die penniless and rot in the ground before I take Dean and Cas' story away from them, *again*. It's their story. Not mine. I'm just the messenger.

It's a story I'll write, no matter how rough the road ahead is. Though, I'm not certain I can finish in a reasonable time frame without help.

I've asked for all the support I ever should from those who've kept my head above water this far. They've been here for me better than my family by blood. Now that *Tread Softly*, the brick wall standing between me and a number of chapters that are already written, is released, it's time to look to this story's readers. The Supernatural Fandom Family knows better than any other: when many, many people work together and chip in a little, incredible things become possible.

If you feel like you've read the first volume of a story you'd gladly walk into your local book store to buy, and would, perhaps, buy the remaining volumes for years to come if you like the story well enough, I'm thankful for it.



If you've got my back, I can go the distance. ;)

You can find me on [Patreon](#) or, if you prefer to skip the internet's various middlemen and associated fees, by secure e-transfer at [pandorakiin@proton.me](mailto:pandorakiin@proton.me). Each and every contribution is deeply appreciated, no matter the amount. As with any other transaction, your personal information is safe with me.

THANK YOU, for coming along on this odyssey with me.

~ Pandora

P.S. If there is sufficient interest in the story, there are people in the fandom I would entrust with back-ups of the entirety of the rough work and the spaces I've used to manage writing it should something untimely happen to me. If they accept, they would be tasked with publishing every last letter of what I manage to accomplish. I will do my best to ensure you never have to wonder how this story would have finished. The last word on the last page is already written. My task now is to knit together what comes in between.

[“If you could read my mind, love, what a tale my thoughts could tell.”](#)

~ Gordon Lightfoot's “If You Could Read My Mind” ~

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\* Not a typo. An affectionate nickname.

\*\* “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”