

## Chapter 1: Faith & Rage

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*Rage is easy.*

*It slithers in quietly, wraps itself around your spine and pulses through your veins like borrowed fire. The moment you taste it — truly taste it — you're undone. Because it feels like power. Like purpose. Like clarity. For a second, you finally understand the world. Even if you're wrong. **Especially if you're wrong.***

*Your muscles tighten. Your thoughts sharpen. You begin to believe in things that were never true — because they're easier. Cleaner.*

*You are **right**.  
They are **wrong**.  
You are **whole**.  
They are **broken**.  
You see **clearly**.  
They're all just... stupid.  
And you hate them for it.*

*Because hating is simpler than feeling. It's armor. It spares you from the weight of hope, the ache of vulnerability. Hope is a knife — beautiful, but sharp. And so, you throw it away. You trade tenderness for fury, trade warmth for control. And suddenly, you don't need anyone.*

*You speak in knives now.*

*You hurt people just to keep them from coming closer. You push. You shove. You destroy. And the more you do it, the easier it becomes. It starts small — a word, a silence. Then it grows. A shove. A lie. A corpse. You shed your softness like skin.*

*Weeks pass. Maybe months. Maybe years. The metamorphosis is patient, methodical. You become cold. Not just cold — empty. You call it strength. But you know, somewhere deep inside, it's just fear. A fear so old and so deep it's fossilized into your bones.*

*And still, you keep going.*

*You kill what's left of the person you used to be. And then, anyone who reminds you of that person — they go too. Because memory is dangerous. It might wake something up. Something soft. Something human.*

*But you don't want that.*

*You are hollow now. Numb. On the edge of something bottomless. The idea of death doesn't scare you — only the idea of feeling anything again. It's easier to bleed others than to sit in a room alone with your own reflection.*

*You're just a wounded thing in a world full of hunters.*

*So you become the hunter first.*

*No questions. No apologies. Just blood before betrayal. You break them before they break you. It's not about survival anymore. It's about silence. About making the world as broken as you are — so you don't have to feel so alone in it.*

*And the tragedy?*

*You'll never see the bars of your cage. Never notice the prison made of your own skin, flesh and bone, your own breath. Every heartbeat is poison now, a slow drip of death that started the moment you mistook rage for redemption.*

*You're not living. You're lasting.*

***A dead man walking.***

*And Heaven?*

*It stopped waiting for you a long time ago.*

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### **[Castiel]**

The room is hushed but for the candlelight's flicker — low, golden, nervous. Wind murmurs through the broken panes above, rustling the edges of something holy, or something pretending to be. Castiel kneels in the center of the dim space, barefoot on the cold concrete, hands clasped, head bowed not in shame, but in reverence.

"Give me a sign... Show me you're there." he whispers into the silence, voice low, like a secret. "I have been trying so hard, Father. I've been faithful, haven't I? You know what I've done, what I've given. Mommy. Daddy. That was for you. All of it."

His eyes open slowly, blue and glassy, trained on nothing and everything.

"These are offerings, signs of my faith, of my love towards you! I know you must be proud of me: I am doing your work, your promise. I'll give you everything and everyone you'll ever want. Like I always did... I gave them peace, didn't I? For you! They were broken and I—I saved them."

A trembling sound cuts through the quiet.

He exhales, disappointed.

Behind him, a girl — no more than seventeen — whimpers against the gag in her mouth. She's tied to a worn wooden chair, limbs trembling, cheeks raw from salt and terror. Castiel doesn't turn at first. He closes his eyes again, pressing two fingers to the scar just under his collarbone, a quiet invocation.

Before he does his artwork he takes a few moments to confess. It's his way of reaching out to God and telling him, explaining to him the truth and real goal of his actions. He is cleaning the world, taking out one evil human after another, making the beautiful but poisoned Earth into a neat home.

He is on a holy mission.

"She's not crying because she's sorry," he says aloud, voice dry. "She's crying because she's still dirty." Another whimper reaches his ears, followed by a sniff. "Like this girl... Lord, she is sinful, so sinful. To be what she is, to become what she became, it's a stain on your divine work. She has to bleed. Only her own blood will wash her clean!"

He rises.

The candlelight flickers against his pale chest as he crosses the floor, slow and barefoot, until he's towering above her. She won't look at him — and that, somehow, offends him more than anything else.

A slap, sudden and sharp, echoes in the stillness.

"Stop that." His hand is around her jaw now, tight enough to hurt. His breath is hot and frantic. "I'm talking to our Father."

She sobs harder, eyes shut tight, trying to escape the penetrating paranoia in his eyes.

Castiel releases her jaw with a shove and steps back, breathing through his nose. His gaze drifts upward to the fractured skylight, where moonlight spills like silver milk across the concrete floor. He stretches his neck until it cracks, letting the cold of the room run its fingers across his bare skin. It calms him. Refocuses him.

"This world," he mutters, almost to himself, "it used to be pure. Then the rot came. And now it festers in everything... in everyone." He gestures vaguely toward her. "Especially you."

She's shivering now, a trembling little thing in nothing but her underwear — her clothes torn, discarded in the corner. He'd watched her for days. Followed her home. Studied her. Memorized her sins: the late-night boys, the slutty clothes, the pills, the laughter that sounded too much like freedom. She wore shame like perfume and didn't even know it.

He bends closer. She tries to lean away but can't — the ropes hold.

"I didn't want it to be you," he lies softly. "But you were so loud. You begged for this in ways you don't even understand."

His hand moves through her hair with disturbing tenderness, like a lover or a priest, fingers brushing the tears from her cheek as if in benediction.

A cold waft dances through the air making the flame of the candles lose their balance and Castiel smiles widely at the sensation he gets from the soft breeze.

It's time.

"Don't cry," he soothes. "This is mercy. This... this is healing."

She shakes her head — violently now — but it's too late.

The knife glints in the low light as he draws it from behind his back. Its edge is clean, reverent. An instrument of purpose, not chaos.

When he moves, he does so gently. A whisper of motion. A stroke. A sigh.

The room is filled with nothing but the sound of gurgled breath and the slow draining of sin. Castiel watches her, face unreadable, as the final shiver leaves her limbs and the light fades from her eyes. When it's over, he cradles her cheek one last time, like a child put to bed.

"You're free now," he whispers, lips close to her ear. "I gave you peace."

He stands, bare chest rising and falling with a breath that feels too clean, too holy for the thing he's just done. He looks up at the moon again, pale and perfect and so very far away.

"I will give them all peace," he says.

And he smiles — serene, beatific — as the last candle gutters out.

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**[Dean]**

Dean's not about to try anything new. He's always liked being the god in someone else's hell — hearing them beg, giggling as they run, tasting the way their blood tries to bloom before the end.

The street he's now walking smells like piss, weed, and cheap liquor — a signature blend of rot that never really leaves the back of your throat. Dean walks through it like a hymn, the kind of tune only the damned whistle. His bag hangs loose on his shoulder, half-zipped like it doesn't care if someone gets curious.

But no one does.

They see him — and they look away.

He's been here before. Enough that the paint on the old buildings seems to peel slower when he's around. Enough that the cracks in the sidewalk have memorized the weight of his boots. But today isn't about getting high or slipping into someone else's skin for a while. Today, it's about blood. About a message. One of these bottom-feeders thought they could circle Sam like a fly on a wound — and Dean doesn't let anyone touch what's his.

Benny's leaning against a rusted-out truck, cigarette glued to his lip. Dean flicks him a two-finger salute, a half-smile cutting across his face like a scar. No fire for the minnows. He's here for the shark.

The old house at the end of the block looms like it knows its own sins. He doesn't take the front — he never does. Just a quiet slip around the back, hands already moving like they've done this a thousand times. Zipper, click, silencer. Gun's ready. The smile's gone.

The back door breathes open. The living room's empty, but Dean's heart is already ahead of him. He knows this layout. He's done work here before — some dirty cop that needed erasing. Mr. Cooper had called him in like a janitor for gore. Dean usually doesn't take those kinds of jobs, but on the other hand, Cooper had offered him a three-month supply for free. It was good for him, generous and stupid for Mr. Cooper.

Dean moves through the shadows, hugging them like an old friend. A hint of adrenaline pumps through his veins as he hears footsteps closing in on him.

The first guy rounds the corner with no idea he's already a ghost. One squeeze of the trigger and he folds like bad origami, blood blooming across the floor like spring came early. Dean watches him twitch, then still. He breathes in, slow. Blood and metal. A unique perfume he'll never get sick of.

A bracelet on the man's wrist catches the light — skulls, tiny and ridiculous. Dean slips it off, smiles. Number nine. He slips it into his pocket like it's a love note. A reminder of his growing list of victims.

The next one dies with his dick out. Dean finds him in the bathroom, earbuds in, pissing away his last few seconds. Dean doesn't shoot him — not yet. He wants something different. So, his belt comes off. Leather tightens in his grip. Then, quick as a blink, it's around the man's neck. Dean pulls hard and doesn't even flinch as the guy thrashes. His face turns a cartoon red before going slack.

Dean steps back, barely breathing hard. “Put some pants on, man,” he mutters, eyes flicking down with a smirk, as he checks the man’s length. “Jesus.”

There was only one left: Mr. Cooper.

Dean moves like smoke. Finds him in the study, where the walls are stained with sweat and cheap cigars. The man turns in his chair like a pig on a spit, eyes already wide.

“Mr. Cooper,” Dean singsongs, his gun back to being his companion. “What? You thought you could try and mess with my little brother, and I wouldn’t come here to get some payback?” Dean tilts his head to the right with a wicked smile on his face.

“Winchester.” The name hits the air like a slur. “Put that down.”

Dean laughs darkly, “This thing?” He lifts the gun, just enough to remind him.

“That thing.”

There’s a moment of silence until Dean pulls the trigger. The shot rings out — one, clean, through Cooper’s hand. He squeals like a stuck thing, already grabbing for it.

“I’ll tell you how this is going to be.” Dean steps in, gun low. The copper tang of blood curls into his nose. “Pants off, Cooper.”

“W-What?”

“You heard me.”

There’s a moment. Then compliance. Old man skin and shaking legs. While he starts doing what he was told to do, Dean looks around the room, always keeping an eye on the man in front of him. His lip curls as his eyes catch something — a baseball bat in the corner.

Thick. Solid. Personal.

He picks it up. Rolls it in his hand like a prayer.

“Bend over the table.”

“You’re insane.”

“And you’re stalling.” Dean raises the bat an inch. “Bend over that table or I’ll blow your fucking brains out!” He raises the tone of his voice as impatience is starting to get to him.

With two shaky naked legs, the old man does as told. With a sudden hint of courage and rage, he growls his threat through clenched teeth, “My guys will find you and tear you apart, kiddo. Mark my words.”

Dean’s grin widens.

“You tried to fuck my brother.” The bat comes down. Crack . “With your filthy little cock.” Another hit. Blood sprays. “You die!” One more swing — and Cooper’s skull folds in like rotten fruit.

He laughs at the last part, feeling blood splashing on his face. Then, the room goes quiet. Just the drip of blood and Dean’s steady breath. He stares at what’s left of Cooper and feels... good. Better than good.

He wipes his face with a sleeve. Plays a little more with the bat before dropping it next to the body. Smirks at the mess. Spits on the corpse. Then, like it’s just another Tuesday, he grabs a menthol candy from the crystal bowl on the desk and pops it into his mouth.

As he walks out — blood drying on his shirt, gun tucked away — he hums ‘*What a Wonderful World*’.

Because it is.

## Chapter 2: Origins

[Castiel]

*13 years before*

“C’mon, Novak, what are you afraid of?” Uriel’s voice rings out sharp and mocking, echoing through the damp walls of the pool house. The senior’s grip is iron around Castiel’s biceps, fingers digging through the fabric of his shirt like talons. “Is the little baby afraid of water?”

“Just let me go.” Castiel’s voice is a low grunt, stripped of fear but shaking with restraint. He tries to pull away, muscles taut with panic, but Uriel doesn’t let up. Neither do the others.

They’re all around him — the football team — a wall of jeering faces and stifled laughter, the air saturated with the scent of chlorine and testosterone. Since his first day, they’ve made him their target. He doesn’t party. He doesn’t flirt. He keeps to himself, preferring silence over the meaningless noise of teenage rituals. A loner. A freak. An easy mark.

“Jump in, tiny,” Uriel barks again, this time dragging him closer to the edge. The water laps against Castiel’s bare feet — warm, deceptive. It gleams like glass under the yellow overhead lights, but he knows what it hides.

“No.”

“Go on!”

“I said no!”

Their laughter builds. “Aw, poor baby doesn’t know how to swim?”

He’s shoved harder now, the slick tiles beneath his feet offering no traction. His toes hang over the deep end. He struggles, not with screams or pleas, but with every ounce of quiet desperation lodged in his bones. He flails, elbows connecting with air, wrists twisting against the grip.

Then, more hands are on him. There’s a final shove and the world tilts.

Castiel crashes into the pool.

There is no impact. Just silence. The water envelops him in a crushing embrace, dragging him down like a hand around his throat. His clothes balloon and flutter around his limbs, slowing his every movement. He kicks upward, once, twice, but the surface recedes like a dream. The distorted ceiling above him trembles with light and movement — the silhouettes of boys walking away laughing.

His lungs scream. His head pulses. The pressure in his chest is unbearable.

After a while, he stops fighting.

Sinks. Down and down he goes — until his feet touch the tiled bottom. His eyes are open, burning, locked on the fractured beams of light dancing through the water. His body, suspended, begins to still. His throat convulses, and he opens his mouth. The water floods in, bitter and invasive, slicing through his insides like ice. He doesn’t feel his tears, only the sting behind his eyes.

And then... Stillness. A moment of unnatural peace, cold and deep. A silence where nothing hurts anymore. Where there's no laughter. No fists. No noise.

Just calm.

And in that quiet, as the world turns dim a shadow fractures the surface.

Someone dives in after him. And before the darkness pulls him under completely, Castiel sees it: a body slicing through the water like a spear.

A hand outstretched. Reaching.

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### *Present Time*

The windows of the natatorium are fogged over, a thin film of condensation clinging to the glass like breath held too long. Castiel stands still behind it, hands in his coat pockets, eyes fixed on the figures slicing through the pool with mechanical grace. Water churns and shimmers under the overhead fluorescents. Six men swim in perfect synchrony, a coach's voice barking out rhythm like a metronome.

He watches them with a hollow intensity — not envy, not hate, exactly. Something colder. Something older. Maybe it's contempt.

Or maybe it's the way their freedom mocks him. They dive, they breathe, they swim. Effortless. Unbothered. Unburdened.

He knows exactly where the security camera is mounted on the outer wall, and angles his body just right, staying beneath its field of vision. Ghosts aren't meant to be recorded. He's been one for nearly a decade now — a name buried, a face forgotten, a presence only felt when the lights flicker and the air turns thin.

The coach calls out another command, and one by one the swimmers file out, dripping and laughing, their voices echoing down the tunnel toward the locker room. The coach lingers behind, disappearing into a small office tucked just beside the pool's edge. Castiel waits until the splash of water fades and the building hums with the silence of transition.

Inside, the hallway smells of bleach and old tile. Somewhere down the corridor, the showers hiss with steam and the muffled chatter of half-naked boys fills the space. Castiel moves like water himself — gloved hands ghosting across door frames, footsteps soft against the linoleum. He opens a service door and steps through a shorter hall. The pool reappears in glimpses through round windows embedded in metal doors, glowing faintly blue in the artificial light.

He sees the office. The coach is still inside.

Castiel draws his gun from the waistband of his jeans and advances, silent as a shadow.

Inside, the man is hunched over paperwork, scribbling notes, oblivious. A whistle rests at his collarbone, his posture that of someone used to control, to being the one giving orders.

"Coach Oakley?"

The voice startles him. He turns — and freezes.

A pistol stares him down. Behind it: a face carved from memory.



“Novak...” the man whispers, his throat already dry.

Castiel’s mouth twitches into something like a smile, “So... a swimming coach. Never thought you’d land a respectable job, Uriel.”

The name lands like a stone dropped into deep water. Uriel flinches.

“I— I...” The words stumble. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to catch up. You know,” Castiel gestures vaguely with the gun, “some bonding. Man to man.”

“Castiel—”

“Fine, *fine*, I’ll tell you what we’ll do.” His voice cuts like wire. He begins pacing, each step slow and deliberate. “You and me? We’re going to have a little conversation. Out by the pool. For old times’ sake.”

“If this is about—about that day—”

Castiel halts. A twitch of his wrist, and the barrel presses against Uriel’s temple. The smile is gone.

“Your time of redemption is over, brother. So, if you even try to apologize, I swear I’ll put a bullet in your skull right now.” He grits out, a darker glint replacing the normal coloring of his eyes. “Try that again, and I’ll decorate this office with your brains.”

Uriel nods, trembling now.

Castiel pulls a notepad and pen from the desk, shoving them toward the man.

“You’re going to write a note. Make it believable.”

“Castiel—please—”

“I won’t ask twice.”

The pen trembles in his fingers. He begins to write, slowly, sobs catching in his chest. Castiel watches with the stillness of a serpent coiled under a rock. When the last line is scrawled, Castiel finally sets down the heavy duffel bag he’s been carrying. He unzips it and pulls out a length of thick chain, testing its strength with a brutal tug that clinks through the silent room. Then—

“Do you have a gym? Somewhere your swimmers train?”

Uriel doesn’t look up. “W-why?” The muzzle returns to his skin — a cold, blunt command. “Yes! First door on the right. In the main hallway.”

“Perfect.” Castiel nods. “You’re coming with me.”

He hauls the man to his feet and marches him down the corridor. In the gym, Castiel selects several iron weights, then orders Uriel to carry them. The man obeys without question, fear leaking from every pore. His legs are weak beneath him. He can’t stop shaking.

They return to the pool. The water lies still. Silent.

A perfect mirror.

Castiel drops the chains. They land with a metallic thud that reverberates through the space. His gun remains steady in one hand.

“This is a special day, Uriel,” Castiel says softly, nudging the chain with his boot. “Do you know why?” Uriel subtly shakes his head, afraid any of his movements might make him snap. “Thirteen years ago, in this very pool, an ugly, fat, pretentious, arrogant coward tried to drown a kid who had never hurt anyone. Today is the anniversary of my rebirth.” He grabs Uriel by the collar, yanking him forward until they’re eye to eye. “Ironically, I should thank you,” he breathes. “You opened my eyes. You showed me what this world really is — and who has to fix it.”

He lets go, and Uriel stumbles. Castiel turns back to the bag, securing the chain around the man’s waist with a rusted lock. The other end is fastened to the weight. A crude anchor.

“But you... you’re different from the others. You’re not an offering.” He holds up two keys, nearly identical. “You’re my trophy.” Uriel is shaking so hard it looks like he might collapse. “I’ll give you a choice,” Castiel says. “One of these opens the lock. The other opens nothing. I’ll toss them to opposite ends of the pool. You pick one. You dive. That’s more than what you have given me.”

He walks to the edge. Drops one key. Walks to the other. Drops the second.

Water laps softly in the silence between.

“Top or bottom?”

Uriel sobs. “Please—don’t—don’t do this. I was just a kid—”

“What did I say?” Castiel’s voice cracks like thunder. “You get two choices. Jump, and maybe you live. Stand there and I shoot you — and you definitely don’t.”

Uriel sniffs, eyes wide, panicked. Then, quietly, he whispers, “Bottom. I choose bottom.”

“Good.”

He lifts the weight into Uriel’s trembling arms. They walk to the edge. The water waits, patient and cold. Uriel turns to him, eyes begging. Castiel sighs, as if bored of the drama, and shoves him in.

A heavy splash. The chain unspools. The water churns, then begins to still.

Neither key works. Castiel never intended to let him go. But the illusion of hope was the leash he needed to walk the man straight to his grave.

He watches, unmoving, as the pool returns to calm — waiting for the last ripple to vanish.

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*3 months later*

He strips off his trench coat, fingers quick and methodical, and stalks toward the shower without ceremony. The night still clings to his skin. Violence has a way of lingering—behind the ears, under the nails, in the lungs. Cold water slaps against him, but he barely reacts. It’s not about cleansing. It’s about control.

Minutes later, droplets still trailing down his skin, Castiel walks naked into his bedroom. The lamp is dim, barely casting light against the wall—**his wall**. A shrine of sorts. He sits on the edge of the bed, staring at it. Eyes half-lidded, mind racing.

The wall is covered in photographs. One face repeated over and over, in different lighting, different expressions, different crime scenes.

### **Dean Winchester.**

He's everywhere lately. On the news, in grainy cell phone or CCTV footage, in the hysterical monologues of news anchors who don't understand what they're really witnessing. Dean doesn't hide. He invites the spotlight, dares the world to blink.

Castiel watches him from the shadows. From static TV screens. From silence.

Dean Winchester is the embodiment of everything Castiel despises: chaos wrapped in charisma, bloodlust without purpose. A walking contagion. And yet... Castiel can't stop watching.

He gets up and walks to the chest of drawers, one hand running absently across the scattered photos. One in particular catches his eye—Dean mid-laugh, gun raised, the frame frozen just as a woman's body buckles under the impact of the bullet. It's theatrical. He *smiled* when he pulled the trigger.

Castiel lifts the photo, stares into Dean's grinning face, and then lets it fall. The picture hits the floor face-down.

He moves to the window. The glass is cold against his forehead, grounding him. His breath fogs the pane, and still, he stares—outward, inward. He has hunted men before. Studied them. Broken them. But this one? Dean Winchester moves like he's untouchable, like the world is his playground and death is just a toy in his pocket.

He doesn't follow rules. He *mocks* them. And yet, there's something else in Dean's eyes. Not just madness... **Joy**. A wild, lucid euphoria. Like he knows exactly what he is and takes pleasure in it.

A predator who knows he's being watched—and enjoys putting on a show.

Castiel's hands curl into fists against the window frame.

"I need to be bold."

## Chapter 3: Welcome To The News

[Dean]

*5 months later*

People kill people every day. Madmen snap. Spree killers go off like fireworks — loud, messy, short-lived — until someone else ends it, or they do it themselves. The whole idea of a safe world? A pathetic lie. A bedtime story for the fragile. And the fact that most people swallow it down like gospel just proves how fucking deluded they are.

But Dean? Dean doesn't lie to himself. That's what makes him better. That's what makes him *real*.

He still remembers the first time. Not the petty killings, the survival ones - like his father -, or the paid hits. The first *real* time. The bastard who tried laying hands on Sam. He hadn't planned it like some elaborate ritual. No candles, no masks, no tidy cleanup. It was meant to be quick. Efficient. A message.

But rage doesn't care about efficiency. It crawled up his spine, took over, and by the time the red cleared, the place was a goddamn mess. Blood on the walls, under his nails, footprints in the carpet. Sloppy. Amateurs leave scenes like that. Dean knew better — he'd had *practice* — but that day, instinct overruled experience.

And since then? No peace.

The cops came sniffing fast, like flies to a wound. He was on every bulletin, every station. America's newest monster. And God, did that make him grin!

He should've stopped. Gone underground. Laid low. But instead... he leaned in. Hard. Because Dean discovered something that day — something fascinating.

He likes it.

Not just the killing — though that, too. No, he likes the *chase*. The attention. The spectacle. He's not hiding anymore. Doesn't bother with gloves, doesn't avoid cameras. Hell, sometimes he *waves*.

He wants them to know. Wants their fear. Wants their awe. Let them see what he's capable of. Let them *remember his name*.

Dean Winchester: artist of flesh and fear.

And he's only just getting started.

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The door shuts with a click that echoes too loud in the stillness. Dean locks it out of habit, not fear, and lets out a slow, satisfied breath as he steps into the gloom. The place reeks of mildew and disuse — four walls and a leaking sink in a nowhere-town — but for now, it's home.

He walks past the bed like it isn't even there. A stained mattress and questionable history, thirty feet from him. God knows how many strangers have fucked, puked, or died on it. He doesn't care to find out. The couch, with its sagging cushions and decades-old upholstery, is where he's been sleeping — or at least lying still with his eyes open. It feels more honest.

He drops onto it with a grunt, flicks on the TV, and flips to the news. It's a ritual at this point. Every day, a fresh update. Every day, a new variation of the same breathless panic.

They gave him a name now. Not his favorite — a little theatrical, a little lazy — but he's not picky. A name is a brand, and brands carry power. So he keeps it. Wears it like a second skin.

He kicks off his boots. Places the gun on the coffee table with something close to reverence. Then he rises, barefoot, crosses to the minibar, and pulls out a cold beer. Pops the cap. Doesn't bother with the trash — just flicks it toward the sink and listens to it clatter like punctuation.

The news anchor's voice drifts from the screen.

*"...Police recovered the body of the mayor who vanished three days ago. The corpse was found near the train tracks, five miles out from the station. Surveillance footage shows him entering the area with an unidentified man believed to be Castiel Novak..."*

Dean pauses mid-sip. His attention locks.

*"...Suspected of killing his parents and at least two other victims, Novak disappeared following those murders. With us today is Special Agent Spencer Reid—"*

Dean raises a brow.

"Castiel Novak, huh?" he mutters, mostly to the room, mostly to himself. He scoffs. "Poor kid..."

Sounds like another reckless amateur with too much trauma and not enough brains. The kind that flames out in a blaze of body bags and crying mothers. Dean's seen it before. Hell, he's *killed* it before.

But he doesn't know half of it. Not yet.

He finishes the beer in one long drag, wipes his mouth, and turns his back on the screen. The real work is behind the wardrobe. He shoves the doors open, pushes aside a row of shirts, and reveals the shrine.

A wall-sized board, layers thick. Maps. Photos. Strings like veins. Notes scrawled in blood-red ink. Drawings — some rough, some detailed — of his next masterpiece. No victim yet. Just ideas and deadlines.

Dean's become a sculptor. A painter. A performance artist with flesh and bone. Each kill, a message. Each corpse, a signature. He's been leaving bodies behind like postcards, a trail of human canvases across state lines.

He's on borrowed time. Always is. But art takes time.

The voice on the TV cuts through again.

*"This isn't the work of some deranged loner," says Reid. "Well — he is deranged, but he's trained. Methodical. If left unchecked, he'll be our worst nightmare."*

Dean glances back over his shoulder, eyebrow twitching upward.

*"He's bold. Fearless. Committed to the work."*

Dean smirks. Damn right he is.

Then the woman asks it — the question that makes him freeze.

*“Is there any chance this man is working with the well-known Hell’s Torturer?”*

He scoffs, loud, offended. “Please.”

*“We don’t believe so,”* Reid answers. *“I’d say they’re enemies.”*

Dean’s face twists. *Enemies?* He doesn’t even *know* this Castiel guy. Never thought about him twice. Didn’t plan to.

*“People need to understand,”* Reid continues, *“that when two heavyweights are in the spotlight, eventually they’ll want to prove who’s the true artist. And from my analysis... Novak let himself be seen. That footage wasn’t a mistake. It was a message.”*

Dean’s eyes narrow.

*“A message?”*

*“Yes. The note at the crime scene read, ‘The game is on.’”*

Silence.

Dean doesn’t move. He just stares. The words repeat like a ticking clock in his head.

*The game is on.*

He’s already back on the couch, TV bathing him in cold blue light. They replay the grainy footage — the clearest freeze-frame they could pull. It’s rough. Night-vision. A smear of shadows and outlines.

But it’s enough. Dean studies the face. The angles. The posture. The way the guy moves like he doesn’t give a damn who’s watching.

And slowly, the corners of his mouth curl up.

“Well then...” he murmurs, low and electric, gaze gleaming with something unholy. “Let’s play.”

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### [Castiel]

The door creaks open, old hinges whining against the frame, and Castiel slips into the saloon with his head bowed beneath the brim of a worn cap. He moves quietly, deliberately, making himself small in the corner of the room. The air is thick with sour beer and stale breath, the floor sticky beneath his boots. He doesn’t mind. Places like this have their uses.

It’s been two days since his face first flickered across a television screen. Two days since he offered the world an invitation.

He waits.

They call the other one *The Hell’s Torturer*. Five months of nightly reports, five months of dismembered bodies and breathless speculation. Dean Winchester is a spectacle. A beast

performing for the crowd. He kills for pleasure. For the high. For the applause. A glutton drunk on his own mythology.

They say the two of them might be working together. The thought turns Castiel's stomach.

They have nothing in common. Dean is chaos. A butcher. A virus in the shape of a man. Castiel has a purpose. A design. Each kill a note in a hymn. He doesn't kill for joy — he kills for absolution.

The bartender stops in front of him, says nothing. Castiel orders a glass of water with a single word. No pleasantries. No eye contact. The man walks away.

Above the counter, a television hums. A show is playing — glossy models walking a neon runway, their faces blank masks of beauty. Castiel stares through it, eyes unfocused. He checks his watch. The news should begin any second.

As if summoned, the channel shifts. The usual headlines: a fire, a lottery win, three car accidents. Background noise. He starts to lose interest. Perhaps Dean has nothing to say. Perhaps the invitation was ignored.

And then—

**“Hell's Torturer Strikes Again.”**

Castiel straightens in his seat.

*“Last night, the Hell's Torturer attacked a gas 'n sip in Maine. The victims include the night clerk and two customers. No cash or goods were stolen. Viewer discretion is advised — the following footage contains disturbing content.”*

The footage rolls. It's clipped, censored, but not enough. A girl collapses, her blood painting the tile. Her arm is gone — Castiel notes that detail, even in the half-second flash. Then *him*.

Dean.

He walks into the frame like a man arriving on stage. Calm. Confident. He bends to retrieve something from the floor — a trophy, no doubt — and then looks directly into the camera.

And smiles.

It's radiant. Too perfect. Too white. The kind of smile meant to disarm. On anyone else, it would seem charming. But Castiel knows better. He sees the hunger behind the teeth. The invitation. The answer.

Dean lifts his gun. Winks. Points it at the lens. The footage cuts. The anchor returns, her face unreadable.

*“Parts of the victims are still missing. Authorities are actively investigating. We'll continue to bring you updates as the case unfolds.”*

Castiel lifts the glass to his lips and drinks. The water is warm and tastes like metal. He barely tastes it.

His eyes roam the saloon — dim lighting, scratched tables, broken jukebox. It isn't elegant, but it will serve. At the far end of the ceiling, he spots a security camera. Perfect. He wants to be seen. The message must be clear.

Four patrons. One bartender. Five sinners.

He sets the bottle down and lowers his gaze. His lips move in quiet prayer.

“Grant me strength, Father, as I do Your work.”

Then, without another word, he rises.

“Hey!” the bartender barks. “You haven't pa—”

The door slams shut. Castiel turns slowly, cap now gone, face exposed beneath the flickering fluorescent light.

Recognition hits. The men near the counter freeze. Their eyes widen.

Yes, they've seen him. *Good.*

He approaches without rush, steps measured and silent. He slides onto the stool between them and smiles — not like Dean. His smile doesn't reach his eyes.

He draws his favorite blade, slow and reverent, like a priest lifting a relic.

And then, softly, as if asking about the weather:

“Tell me... what are your sins?”