



THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES



Story by Tasha ([AO3](#), [tumblr](#)).

Art by Jay ([LJ](#), [tumblr](#)).

*Beta-read by Lore ([mischievousart](#)), Lis ([clotpoleofthelord](#)), and
Kieran ([cockteaseofthelord](#)).*

This story wouldn't exist were it not for Team Peen Please (you know who you are) and your rampant, overeager encouragement and cheerleading, and so: this story is for all of you.

AU after Season 8, episode 6, "Southern Comfort." Dean goes to sleep in a motel room in Texarkana, and he wakes up 17 years old, in his childhood bedroom in Lawrence, Kansas, 1996. He has no idea how he got there, why his parents are still alive, why his brother is an adorable freshman with no memory of his adult life, and why the only ally he has in this place is the angel he left behind in Purgatory – somehow also 17 years old. They have to get out, that's the important thing. Only, falling in love with his angel wasn't a part of the plan....

Dean Winchester/Castiel, Sam Winchester/OFC

111,000 words

Content warnings: Non-explicit discussion of previous prostitution, depictions of drug use (specifically marijuana), drinking, swearing, explicit male/male sex, homophobia, violence and assault, abuse of a minor, bullying.

Part One



It was like being buried in suffocating dirt, or plunging into icy waves – maybe like the air had been sucked out of the room.

Whatever literary cliché that hack Chuck could come up with, *that's* what it felt like.

Dean thrashed, limbs tangling in his bedsheets, humidity and warmth bringing sweat to his skin. If he could just –

Dean! DEAN!

He reached for something that wasn't there, arm flailing out into the darkness in his desperation. His nightmare rushed to a conclusion with a resolute *snap!*, and his eyes shot open as he hurled himself upright, gasping for air.

"Cas," he gasped, hand still held out in front of him.

It closed on nothing and he let it sink to the bed.

He joined it a moment later, falling back and letting his breath slow, forcing himself out of the nightmare-induced haze. After a few minutes, he blinked and took in his surroundings.

This *wasn't* where he fell asleep last night.

In a flash he was up and out of bed, stock-still and observing with keen eyes. This was a *bedroom*. A bedroom that he remembered fairly well, but a *bedroom* nonetheless.

He'd gone to sleep in a shitty motel in Texarkana.

So *why* was he waking up in his childhood bedroom in Lawrence, Kansas? (Because despite the *Houses of the Holy* poster in front of him and the *Se7en* poster from across from it, it was *unmistakably* the room he'd lived in during the first years of his life.) And more importantly, *where was his brother?*

Quietly, because who the fuck knows what could be lurking in the shadows, he stood, creeping across the carpet before he opened the door and inched down the hall. Long-forgotten floor layouts bubbled their way into his conscious mind, muscle memory carrying him toward the bathroom. He hadn't even been five when this house burned to the ground, but he could remember the path from his bedroom to the bathroom –

where he'd automatically gone every time he'd had a night terror – like it had been just yesterday rather than almost thirty years.

Dean turned around the corner and let his hand drag against the wall, catching the switch and flooding the bathroom with light. Lurching toward the sink, he let water run from the tap into his outstretched hands and splashed it over his face before looking in the mirror.

An unfamiliar face stared back at him.

No, not unfamiliar – *young*.

It was the face of himself, just before he'd dropped out of high school.

Dean felt panic begin to force its way up his throat, and he was just about to give in to it when he spotted a movement behind him. He spun in place, arms coming out in an automatic defensive position before he saw who was behind him.

“*Mom?*” he gasped, letting his arms fall to his side. Which was *stupid*, really, because in his experience there were a veritable shitload of *things* could be impersonating his mother, including the Grand Poohbah of Purgatory and any number of Heaven and Hell's denizens.

“Honey, did you have another nightmare?” Mary Winchester stood behind him, arm resting against the

doorjamb and a small smile on her face. She didn't look like she had in the few pictures Dad kept of her – there were more crow's feet, more lines around her mouth, and her blonde hair had a touch of gray at the temple, but it was still *unmistakably* his mother.

Somehow, the signs of age convinced him that this was real in some way. If some creature really wanted to fuck with him, it'd be a picture-perfect rendering.

Even the *djinn* hadn't got the aging right.

And she was talking. Talking to him like this was *normal*, like he hadn't somehow got shot to a world where she was alive. Like everything was *okay*.

Dean prided himself on his adaptability, but this was so far *beyond* his experience that he just stood there and took it in a sort of stunned amazement. This had to be a dream.

“I know you're nervous after everything that happened last year, honey,” she said, reaching up (God, he was taller than his mother, how weird was *that?*) and patting him on the cheek. “But everything will be fine. Everyone's had the summer to cool down, and really, it's high time everyone stopped being so sensitive about things like this.” She smiled at him, understanding some situation that was completely beyond Dean's grasp. “It's your *senior year*, honey, the first day of your senior year,

and you'll be *just fine*."

He could vaguely hear the sound of his breathing. It was harsh, loud, and possibly inappropriate to the situation. Hell if he knew.

"Yeah. Nightmare. No big deal," he said. His voice sounded young, not yet laden down with the experience of years and Hell and Purgatory. *Fresh*. He blinked in the unnatural brightness of the room. "I'll be fine."

"Of course you will. Don't worry, your father will come around," she said, patting his cheek again as she turned to head back toward the room that she, presumably, shared with John Winchester. "He comes from a different time, and you know how military men are about this sort of thing. Ruins the machismo." She let loose with a chuckle as she dusted off the front of her white nightgown. "Everything'll work itself out."

Dean had no idea what she was talking about but he swallowed and nodded anyway, drinking in the sight of her.

"I'm gonna go check on Sammy," she said, tossing the comment over her shoulder absentmindedly. "You know how nervous he is about starting high school."

"Yeah, right," Dean replied, still staring at where she'd been. He blinked as he listened to the sounds of his mother, his *dead mother*, cracking open the door to

the nursery (*no*, Sam's room *now*, *not just "the nursery"*) and checking on his little brother's sleep. Slowly, he turned back toward his reflection.

It was just like he remembered it. Lord knows he'd stared at it enough times back then, trying desperately to pretend well enough to fit in with the other high-schoolers and protect Sammy from their mocking; the same smattering of freckles across his otherwise even skin, the same dirty blond hair that lightened out as it reached the tips, the same green eyes, the same pouting lips. It was the same almost-too-pretty face that had stared back at him from the mirror for the majority of his teens and early twenties, and he *hated* it.

He glanced down. No anti-possession tattoo. No hand-print scar over his arm. No scratch mark from the werewolf back in 2004. None of his scars from Purgatory, either, and good *lord* had there been plenty.

He did some quick mental math, something he'd always been pretty good at despite Sam's joking assertions that *he* was the smart brother. If he was starting his senior year, he was seventeen-almost-eighteen, which meant that *this* (whatever *this* was) was the latter half of 1996.

So he knew *when* he was supposed to be, and *how old* he was supposed to be, and that his brother was

safe and asleep in his room.

But the question remained: *why was he here?*



The rest of the night was spent utterly sleepless and he slapped his alarm off at six the next morning in an exhaustion-induced haze. He stumbled through a shower and struggled into clothes that were unfamiliar to him before grabbing a backpack that other-him had apparently packed the night before.

Senior year. He *remembered* senior year. Or rather, he remembered trudging through it until he turned 18 at the beginning of 1997, took his GED, and got the fuck outta dodge. It had been a string of one-night-stands and ignoring his homework and occasionally ditching school outright to go hunting with Dad, interspersed with raising his younger brother and turning the occasional trick to keep a roof over their heads.

So it was unsurprising (to him) when he trudged into the dining room that he froze at the sight of John Winchester sitting at the table and eating a plate of eggs.

Everyone at the table froze equally at the sight of him, so at least he wasn't alone.

“Oh, for God's sake,” John said, irritable and cranky. “I'm not going to rip your head off, son. Come eat some goddamn breakfast.”

Dean didn't trust himself to say anything, so he just nodded and set his bag down near the door before heading toward the kitchen.

Sammy looked the same as he had back then, too, but he didn't look at Dean with anything other than his usual teenaged cluelessness. Dean took this to mean that this wasn't *his* Sam. This was a Sam that knew nothing of life or demons or his older brother sacrificing his soul to hell to save him.

He wasn't sure which he liked better, to be honest.

Mary set a plate of bacon, eggs, and hash browns in front of him. He stared at it blankly for several minutes before John spoke again, his voice low and gruff.

“The kids'll make life a living hell today. You should eat. While you have the chance.”

Dean blinked and glanced at his brother; both Mary and Sam wore matching dirty looks. Huh – looked like *bitchface* was an inherited trait.

“*What?*” John demanded of his family. “Look, I

know, I *know*, enlightened times, it's the nineties, *I get it*, but this is *Kansas*. It's not like kids come out as *bi-sex-u-al* and *don't* get treated like shit by the other kids, okay? Eat up, Dean, you probably won't get lunch today."

Dean gaped at him, a sinking feeling settling into his stomach. Somewhere at the back of his mind he was amused at how his father pronounced the word "bisexual," but more to the point – it was being applied *to him*. By his *father*. Who he'd taken pains (*great* pains) to never, *ever* show that side of himself to.

Mary's face softened slightly and she sighed. "He's probably right, Dean."

Sam coughed. "Ummmm...Jeremy called last night," he said, glancing up at Dean with an apologetic expression. "Their parents shipped Cody off to his aunt's place in New Hampshire." He screwed his nose up. "I mean, I know you guys broke up but I thought you should know he won't be there today."

Dean had no idea who Cody was. He nodded anyway and began to eat.

Sam ran upstairs after breakfast to brush his teeth, and Mary began washing the dishes. It was so mind-bogglingly *normal* that Dean immediately began suspecting that this *was* another djinn, that he'd been

trapped and he had to fight his way out somehow.

But the djinn had never been able to change *his* appearance, had never thought to take aging into account, had never confused him *properly*. Something else was up.

The front lawn was exactly the way Dean remembered it, and it brought a lump to his throat as Sam stepped outside with him. The Impala was in the driveway, shining in all her glory, next to a pickup truck and a rather battered-looking Honda Accord.

"I'll work on the Honda today while you're at school," John said from behind them, and both Dean and Sam turned to look at him. "For now, I'll just drive you in the Impala."

Dean nodded slowly. He wasn't sure what about all of this pissed him off more: that he was being forced to relive his high school days or that he was driving a shitty *Honda*.

"Shotgun!" Sam crowed as he dashed toward the car. Dean sighed and rolled his eyes, trudging toward the all-too-familiar car at a more sedate pace.

"Dean," John said, quietly from behind him. "I'm trying to get used to this, okay? I'm *trying*."

Dean swallowed. "It's okay," he said, not trusting himself to say more. Begrudging tolerance was probably

a best-case scenario that he'd *never* allowed himself to envision every time he thought about coming out to his father; in fact, he was pretty sure that had this sort of thing happened while they were hunting, he'd have been tossed out in the rain. Mary Winchester, apparently, did wonders to ease the worse parts of her husband's personality.

There was a beat of silence before John spoke again.

“And maybe next time you decide to hook up with your boyfriend – or girlfriend – consider doing it... well, not in the locker room. That'd be a good start.”

Dean couldn't help it: he laughed.



Lawrence High School wasn't actually a school Dean had ever attended. Back when he was still paying *attention* to academics, they'd been on the road almost constantly, stopping into schools for weeks or months at a time before taking off again. The closest to a home base they'd had was the two or three years when they attended the schools in Sioux Falls on a fairly regular basis (although never consecutively).

The Lawrence High School front facade was imposing as shit.

Christ. May as well turn in his man-card now: He'd faced down vampires, demons, *Satan himself*, and he was terrified of a senior high school.

Fuck this, man.

"Dean!" Sam hissed from next to him. "If you ditch on the first day, Dad'll find out and he'll *kill* you."

Dean glared at his brother. "Shut it, *Sammy*," he said.

"Ugh, don't *call* me that," Sam complained. He crossed his arms. "Seriously, dude, don't skip first day. Maybe it'll be better than you think."

Dean rolled his eyes. He *knew* high school: he remembered that song and dance. In fact, he clearly remembered his junior year, when a gay couple had come out. *It gets better, my ass.*

No, he knew what to expect. Still, he wasn't actually worried about what a bunch of teenagers thought of him. He was more worried about the fact that if he was *here*, at *Lawrence High* all day, then he wasn't out *there*, trying to figure out what the *fuck* had happened to him.

"Hey, *faggot!*" a voice called from behind him.

"Bite me!" he called back cheerfully, not bothering to turn and check who it was. Sam smiled at him.

“That's the spirit,” he said. The expression on his face was very nearly worth it: Sam had been *adorable* before he'd shot up and started looming dramatically all over the place.

The two of them trudged toward the main office, following the general traffic in the hallways, where they picked up their class schedules.

“Calculus first thing in the morning,” Sam commented, looking over at Dean's schedule. “You engineering nerds are all the same.”

Dean glared at him, feeling just a bit intimidated: he'd managed to flunk algebra four separate semesters his first time through high school, so getting stuck in *calculus* looked like it was going to be hell on earth.

“But hey, there's only the one calc class, so you know you'll have at least one friend,” Sam continued. He beamed at his older brother and turned to head towards his World History class. “Give 'em hell, Dean. They'll knock it off eventually.”

Dean watched his younger brother depart, a sinking feeling in his chest. Mentally he considered whether or not to just take off anyway and look for answers, but he didn't know what was going on and how long he'd be stuck here and he *really* didn't want to answer to the authority figures in this new, strange life of his. He

glanced down at his schedule, which had all of his information on it – name, birth date, phone number, address, GPA –

Whoa. Since when did Dean Winchester have a 3.3 GPA? And why was he taking *two honors courses*?

This was weird. *Really* weird. Not only was he stuck in some weird bizarro-world, but he was going to *flunk out of high school*. Hell, at least the first time he'd dropped out of his own choice. This was going to be a fucking *disaster*.

He let out a frustrated sigh and looked up in time to spot a familiar – although *considerably* younger – figure. Dark, messy hair and intense blue eyes and, hilariously, a tan trench coat. The kid looked to be the same age as Dean and, also like Dean, was clutching a class schedule; he looked utterly bewildered.

“Cas?” Dean said, uncertain.

The head turned toward him, uncomprehending for several seconds before the eyes widened.

“*Dean?*” The other boy – and Dean could now tell that Castiel was wearing a young Jimmy Novak, could spot the man he'd eventually become underneath the layer of youth – stormed toward him, grabbing his upper arm and ducking the two of them around a corner to an unused hallway.

“*What's going on?*” Cas demanded. Dean stared at him and let him continue. “I was in *Purgatory* and now I'm apparently seventeen years old and *human*. I'm living with someone who looks and sounds like *Balthazar* only he *isn't*. I don't like this. *Explain.*”

“Dude, I have *no idea* what's going on but thank *fuck* you realize how wrong this is,” Dean gasped out. “I woke up in the middle of the night and no one, not even *Sam*, realizes what's going on. As far as they're concerned I'm some sort of engineering geek with a fucking three point three GPA and who the hell even *does* that in high school, anyway? Besides –” at this point, Dean realized that he was looking at Cas, honest to God Cas, and he froze. “Cas? You were in *Purgatory.*”

There was a brief moment of silence as Cas regarded him. “I'm glad to see that your observational skills haven't suffered in my absence, Dean.”

Dean stared at Castiel for several seconds in amazement. “When the fuck did you learn sarcasm?”

Cas sighed. “*Dean.*”

“I'm sorry, it's just – last time I saw you –”

Castiel regarded him some more before wincing. “I keep forgetting to blink,” he said, irritated at himself.

Dean snorted and tossed propriety out the window, throwing his arms around the other teen's shoulders and pulling him into a hug. "I don't know what's going on, man," he said. "But I am *damn* glad to see you again."

Cas let out a sigh but allowed the hug. "Dean, don't we have a mystery to solve?"

Dean pulled away from Cas and quirked his eyebrow. "Whoa,



Scooby Doo, hold up. We're *teenagers*." He reached down and pulled Cas' class schedule out of his hand. "Yeah, see? You're still only seventeen, just like me – hey, your birthday is on Christmas, that's fucking *hilarious* – and we can't just wander around without being stopped every ten seconds by the Man."

"I'm older than any being in this building," Cas said. He was clearly striving for dignity, but he just sounded... well, *indignant*. "In fact, I'm older than all of the stones that make up this building. There is no 'Man' who has authority over me here." Oh *God*, he was still using those damn air quotes.

“Yeah, well, are you all mojo'd up?” Dean felt this was a reasonable question.

Castiel let his shoulders fall with a sigh. “No. This morning I attempted to fly and – something is blocking me. I don't know, precisely, what could be powerful enough to block my powers, Dean, but I doubt it's good.” He brightened then. “I can still read souls, though. That's how I knew it was *you*.”

Dean was about to say something in response when there was a loud dinging noise overhead. Castiel jerked in alarm and brought his hands up defensively. Dean snorted and put his hand over one of Cas'.

“Calm down, man, it's just the bell. We have to head to class or we'll be late.” He glanced at Cas' schedule. “Hey, you're in almost all of my classes. Although you have..uh, *Latin*. While I have auto shop.” He snorted. “Anyway, handy. Let's go.”

Just like old times, Dean thought: Dean leading the way, Castiel following behind without a second thought. A shiver ran down his spine as he approached his class.



Thankfully, Castiel understood math.

“Mathematics form the basis of creation,” he said, as the lecture at the beginning of class wound down toward when the students were expected to work on problems. “Everything – science, art, mechanics, even sex – at its base level, it's numbers.”

“Right,” Dean said. “So, um, help a dumbass out, here, Cas, and explain this shit to me.”

“You're not a dumbass,” Cas replied, frowning.

He then (in ten minutes) broke advanced Calculus down into bare bones mathematics that anyone could understand. Dean stared at him for several seconds before grinning.

“Cas, you are *awesome*. Have I ever mentioned that? I hope I've mentioned that. Because you are. Awesome.”

Cas rolled his eyes and turned back toward his own paper, but his cheeks were tinged slightly red.

Dean grinned as he moved to work on his own paper. Cas had just simplified what an entire career in the public school system couldn't, and for once Dean didn't feel quite so stupid. Within minutes, he had half the worksheet done. *Piece of cake*.

“Hey, Cas,” he muttered, reaching his foot out and nudging Castiel's with it. “I think Lawrence has a library with a section about supernatural stuff. We should go

after school lets out.”

“Good idea,” Castiel replied. He had finished filling in his own worksheet; a glance at his paper showed Dean that Castiel had a bold, angular handwriting that was so consistent that Dean suspected his friend had downloaded a handwriting font rather than learn how to write on his own. He snorted.

“Of course it's a good idea, I'm a genius. Apparently,” he said, grinning again.

Someone slapped him upside the back of his head. “Hey, *faggot*, stop flirting with your boyfriend. It's making me *sick*.”

Dean whirled around and glared; a pair of angry brown eyes glared back. They belonged to the most unfortunately unattractive, beefy football player type Dean had *ever seen*.

“I am gonna *kick your ass*, Beefaroni” Dean promised him.

Beefaroni, which is what Dean decided to call this asshat for the remainder of his sentence in this – *whatever* – reared back from Dean. “Ugh. Wouldn't wanna catch all your *gay*, Winchester.”

Dean grinned and leaned over the back of his chair, letting saliva pool out of his mouth. If Sam were here he'd be squealing about how disgusting Dean was; as it

stood, Dean simply drooled all over Beefaroni's hands.

"Too late, you're gay now," Dean said, cheerfully, turning back toward the blackboard as the asshole behind him started bitching and moaning and frantically wiping Dean's spit onto his jeans.

He let his eyes drift toward Castiel, who was looking at him skeptically.

"Sexual orientation isn't contagious," he said. This was uttered with Castiel's usual earnestness, which was adorable when his face was de-aged back into a teenager. "It's a combination of genetics and psychology and is *far* more than mere bacteria —"

"Geez, Cas, *I know*," Dean said, sighing as he turned back to his paper. "Douche canoe back there, though, I don't even know how he got into this class cuz basic biology seems pretty damn beyond him."

"It'd be redundant to drool on him anyway," Castiel said, cocking his head. "You are merely bisexual; he is *clearly* homosexual."

Beefaroni let out an alarmed noise as Dean started laughing. It was probably for the best, however, that the teacher told them all to shut up and their papers were due in five minutes, because the other student looked *pissed*.

Dean was pretty sure that, muscles aside, he could

have taken this bozo in a fight (fair or otherwise) if he were on his A game. But Dean had been in this body for something around 8 hours at this point, and he knew one thing: he was *not* on his A game. Not even his B game. Possibly not even his D or E game.

This, he decided, was going to have to change.



His parents, he discovered, would have been more right about his lunchtime activities if they'd known he'd spent his first high school career exploring creative ways to avoid the other students.

Cas and he had separated for the second period and then met back up for third and fourth before the school broke for lunch. It wasn't much different from anything Dean had experienced *before*, but the fact that he was experiencing it with an adult's mindset was, frankly, disturbing.

"Best years of our lives, my ass," he muttered, as the two of them got lunch from the cafeteria.

"What."

Cas didn't even make it a question. He was too busy being disgusted at the food offerings.

“Come on, Cas, any day now,” Dean sighed.

“I'm not certain *any* of these options are palatable, Dean,” Cas said. Which was a fair point. The angel was surrounded by an aura of desperation that Dean had become intimately familiar with over the years: he wanted Dean to rescue him.

“Just get the mac and cheese and let's go,” Dean muttered. He could see a group of beefcake football players surrounding Beefaroni from his current vantage point, and their eyes were starting to swivel toward Dean and Cas.

Five minutes later, they'd collected their lunches and expertly dodged their would-be tormentors, settling down to eat in an empty, hidden spot near the student parking lot.

“This is *disgusting*,” Castiel said, glaring at his food.

“It's cafeteria food, Cas, not fine dining,” Dean said, shrugging as he shoveled mac and cheese down his throat. In his defense, he had an entire lifetime's worth of shitty food experiences behind him and comparatively, LHS's cafeteria fare was perfectly average. “Just eat it fast; you won't taste it as much.”

Cas sighed and began to emulate Dean.

They were quiet for several minutes before Cas spoke again – Dean noticed, however, that he carefully

washed his mouth out with the bottle of water he'd found in his backpack first.

"I'm at a loss," Cas began. Paused. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Dude, you are *not* the only one," Dean said, prodding at the melted-looking brownie on his foam tray. "I have *no idea* what's going on. I can't just go up to Sam and be like, oh, hey, tell me about my entire life because I don't know who I am. You know what I found out this morning? Apparently last year, other-me got busted screwing some dude in the locker room. *What the fuck, man. What the fuck.*"

"I suppose that explains the homophobia," Castiel said. Absently, he brushed a fleck of lint from his jacket. "It's only 1996, and Kansas has never known itself to be very open-minded about alternative sexualities." This comment almost pushed Dean to his limit of bullshit tolerance. The BS-o-Meter was tapping out, leaving Dean angry and annoyed and oh *shit*, this was fucking puberty all over again. He remembered this, remembered the taste of it. He remembered the feeling of barely being in control of his emotions, and rage, and how every little thing seemed like the end of the world. At least this time he had some perspective and a greater issue to deal with.

“That's the problem,” Dean said. “It's *1996!* Fresh Prince reruns are still on and *TLC is still a thing*. This is not right, Cas, not right at *all*, TLC was shitty music and *no one* should have to live through that twice.”

Castiel sighed. “As usual, I don't understand that reference.”

Dean hunched over his now-empty tray (hey, he was hungry, and he was ninety-five percent positive the school wouldn't try to feed him something that would *actually* kill him). “You don't have to. Look, Cas, all I'm saying is that someone – or *something* – is forcing me to relive high school in a freaky alternate reality where I actually give a shit about academics.” He sighed. “And I'm glad you're here, but this is basically Hell on Earth. Sorry, dude, you jumped from Purgatory right back into the Pit.”

Cas cocked his head at him and Dean sighed.

“Figuratively, Cas. *Figuratively.*”



The rest of the day flew by, and Sam caught up to the two of them at the end of the school day. He seemed subdued when he muttered, “Hey, Cas.”

That brought both of them up short, and Castiel's cautious, "Hello, Sam," was a testament to Castiel's adaptability to any situation. Dean really, *desperately* wanted to clap him on the shoulder and tell him he was doing great, but he was pretty sure everyone would think that was weird.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked.

Sam shrugged. "Just got some shit today, that's all." He brightened slightly. "Rumor has it that George Ellsworth caught you flirting with Cas and wants to pound your face in, though. So, you know, *day made*."

"You're a dick," Dean informed him. Sam laughed.

"Hey, *I* know you wouldn't be caught dead flirting with your best friend, man, but the world's full of idiots. Don't let the asshole catch you alone, though, cuz I think he meant business."

Dean shot Cas a smirk: apparently, no matter what universe they were in, Dean 'n' Cas were best buds. This seemed to both amuse and alarm Castiel, so Dean turned back to Sam.

"Well, that would be because Cas took the time to inform me that I couldn't spread my gay to Beefaroni there, since he's *already* gay."

Sam looked at the two of them and burst into laughter. "Are you *shitting* me? You're *shitting* me." Sam

spluttered for several seconds before gasping out, “Oh my *God*.”

Dean grinned.

The three of them were brought out of their discussion when a familiar honking noise sounded behind them. Dean whirled around and, sure as shit, there was their dad, standing next to the Impala.

“Come on, boys,” John said, waving them over. “Is Castiel coming?” His voice was casual, almost *too* casual; he was trying too hard.

But still, he was *trying*, which meant something to Dean.

“Actually,” Dean said, opening the back door of the Impala (which felt fucking *wrong* but whatever, he wasn't going to make Cas sit in the back with Sam for company). “Cas and I wanted to go to the library.”

John regarded the two of them through the rear-view mirror. “I can take you to the library, son, but you have to come home first. Your mom's convinced I'm going to bring you back to her in pieces.”

Dean sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

Sam turned and made a face at him over the chair seat; he was getting pretty tall, actually, and if Dean's memory served he'd be shooting up sometime in the next year or two and suddenly tower over everyone.

Meanwhile, Dean would still be sitting around, looking like a fucking twink.

Yeah, this had to stop.



Mary Winchester was a pretty stern woman, but she was so relieved that her eldest had gotten through his first day back to school in one piece that she insisted on making them a snack. If Sam's expression was anything to go by, this was something she hadn't done for *years*.

"Hi, Cas," she said, smiling at him. "The usual?"

Castiel blinked. "Um, sure?"

Dean snorted. Mary frowned at him before turning to busy herself in the kitchen. This whole thing struck Dean as odd: his mother had been a badass hunter and actually *wanted* to be a housewife. He understood the allure of an apple pie life; hell, having lived it with Lisa he could even say it was enjoyable, but in his experience once you'd started hunting, you never went back. Either you fell into it, paranoid all the time, or it came crashing into your life whether you wanted it or not.

"Go ahead and put your things away, I'll bring

everything up when it's ready," Mary told them.

Dean and Castiel headed up to Dean's bedroom in silence. As soon as the door shut behind them, however, all bets were off.

"Dude, *what the fuck*. My mom's a Stepford Wife."

Castiel stared at him like he'd lost his mind.

"I know, I know," Dean said, sitting on his bed and gesturing for Cas to take the chair at his desk. "You don't get that reference. Trust me, it's not a good thing. My mom was a hunter, Cas. She kicked my ass when you sent me back to the seventies, and right now she's making Hot Pockets. *What the hell*."

Castiel sat down in the chair, looking more uncomfortable than usual. Then again, this was Cas. He looked uncomfortable pretty much all of the time. Dean figured it was because the skin he was wearing wasn't really his. Which made him think of another thing.

"Hey, is Jimmy still kicking around in there?" he asked.

Castiel immediately looked *sad*. "No," he said. "Not that I can sense, anyway."

"So, what, whoever sent us here kicked him out?"

There was a knock at the door and they both went quiet. Mary appeared shortly after with two heat-and-eat pizzas, the frozen microwave kind that Dean was

intimately familiar with. Years of living in shitty motel rooms with limited kitchen facilities had that effect on people.

“Here you go; meat lover’s for Dean, mushroom and olive for Cas,” she said, handing them each a plate. Dean grinned his thanks at her, hoping she'd leave quickly, but instead she turned to Cas.

“I know your uncle wouldn't let you come over much this summer, Castiel,” she said. “After what happened with Dean and Cody. But you're *always* welcome here.”

Castiel looked startled. “Th-thank you,” he said. He darted his eyes toward Dean.

Mary chuckled and patted Cas on the shoulder (he barely managed to contain his flinch). “Besides, it's not like you don't basically live here half the time anyway. Ever since you two were in the second grade, I've had three sons instead of two.”

Cas managed to look gratified, which was a strange expression on him. Dean decided he liked it.

“Alright, enough with the chick-flick moment, Mom,” he complained. Mary laughed.

“I'm sorry, Dean, I know how allergic you are to feelings,” she teased. “If you boys need anything, let me know.”

“We were hoping to go to the library this afternoon,”

Cas said.

She smiled. “Sure thing. Lemme know when you want to head out.” She turned toward Dean. “Your dad’s working on the Honda right now. He wants it running so you have it tomorrow; gotta be in at the garage early so he won’t be able to drive you, and I’m due back at work too.”

“Did he say what’s wrong with it?” Dean asked, curious.

She nodded, smirking. “You really did a number on it, hon. One of the valves was stuck closed; the heat and friction snapped the camshaft right in half.”

Dean winced.

“But Accords are a dime a dozen, so he picked one up cheap at the junkyard. He fixed the valve this morning – you’re lucky we didn’t need to retool it, mister – and he’s putting the camshaft in now.”

“Remind me to say thanks,” Dean said, fervent. Replacing a camshaft wasn’t really a big deal, but a valve job was a tricky thing.

“You won’t get away with *not* thanking him,” Mary replied, opening the door. “I didn’t raise my sons to be ungrateful.”

Cas looked very much like he wanted to interject, but Mary closed the door behind her and the opportunity

was lost.

"I hate you," Dean said, glaring.

"You're being hyperbolic again," Cas replied.

"I don't know what that means, but sure," Dean said.

"Anyway, spill on the Jimmy thing."

Cas managed to look both shifty as fuck and sad at the same time. "Before I was sent here, I was trying to open the portal again. I wanted to send Jimmy home."

"*Huh*," Dean said. "Okay. So do you think he got there?"

"I *hope* so," Cas said. "The alternative is that he's here somewhere, or that his soul was destroyed."

"*Ouch*," Dean said, wincing again. "I hope he went home."

"Me too," Cas said. He cocked his head in thought. "Either way, I somehow managed to pass through the gate, which shouldn't be *possible*. I'd like to research that topic, specifically."

"I don't think the Lawrence Public Library has a Purgatory How-To in stock," Dean said. "Might be a little hard."

"Most libraries are better-equipped to deal with the supernatural than one would think," Castiel said. "Why do you think your brother spent so many hours in them on cases?"

“Uh, to look up records and shit,” Dean said.

Cas smiled like he knew something Dean didn't, which just served to irritate Dean more. He glared at the angel and shoved a slice of pizza in his mouth, cursing when the melted cheese burnt his lip.

“I hate you.”

“Hyperbole, again. Twice in one conversation. You're getting desperate.”

“Okay, what the *fuck* is hyperbole?”

Cas just smiled some more. Irritating bastard.



The planned trip to the library was put on hold shortly after, when Castiel's apparently-now-his-uncle Balthazar called and requested that Castiel come home. *Right now.*

“This is *bullshit*,” Dean raged as Mary packed the two of them into her pickup truck. He'd picked up enough from Mary's comments earlier and figured out pretty quick that dear old Uncle Balthazar apparently didn't approve of Castiel's friendship with Dean after the last year. “Homophobic *dickwad*.”

“Watch your mouth,” Mary said, frowning at him.

She sighed as Cas settled down to his right – Dean hated sitting bitch but Cas was getting out at his house so it made more sense for him to sit at the door.

“I'm sure Cody was just the final straw,” she muttered as she turned the key in the ignition. The truck roared to life and Dean winced at the noise. “Balthazar never liked you, Dean, and now he thinks he has a reason to keep Castiel away.”

“It's a stupid fucking reason,” Dean muttered, crossing his arms and sinking further into his seat. He was perfectly aware that he was acting like a pouty teenager, but for fuck's sake, he *was* a pouty teenager and he needed Cas' help. And now Balthazar (seriously, whoever chose his role in this? *Fucked in the head*) was separating them and they needed to find a way out of here.

“*Language*, Dean,” Mary repeated. “Not that I don't agree with you, honey, but Castiel's still a minor.”

“For three months,” Cas said. He sounded mutinous; no doubt he was pissed that any incarnation of Balthazar, *ever*, could boss him around. He'd been in charge of the other angel for a long time (that's the feeling Dean got when Cas talked about him, anyway) and he was willing to bet that this turnabout was chafing in places that Cas didn't realize *existed*.

Dean felt slightly better about acting like a pouty teenager. If a seven-billion-year-old angel could do it, he damn well could as well.

“Well, you'd better cover your ass for three months, then, Cas, because I don't need those charges on my record,” Mary said, glaring sternly at him. “Imagine the headlines: 'DCF Employee Arrested for Assault.’” She let up off the brake and depressed the clutch in a movement so smooth that Dean found himself impressed.

“*Language*, Mom,” he parroted back in response. She rolled her eyes.

The ride back was uncomfortable and silent; Castiel was staring at him like he was trying to have some sort of conversation with Dean, only he was speaking like ancient Greek or something and Dean wasn't even fluent in *English*. Dean was staring back at him helplessly and trying (*failing*) to understand what the other teen was trying to communicate. Finally Cas sighed, reached into his bag, and grabbed a notebook and pen.

Just before they pulled up in front of Cas' place (a shady looking apartment complex that *Dean* wouldn't even sleep in, and he'd slept in just about every scuzzy motel room in the continental United States; he

wondered if he should call Health and Human Services on the place, have it condemned) Castiel thrust the note into Dean's hand. Dean crumpled it up and shoved it into his jeans pocket, making a face as he spotted not-Balthazar standing off in the distance, watching the drop-off.

“Ugh,” Cas said, like he was *human*. It was adorable, and Dean resolved to never, *ever* tell him that.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” Dean whispered instead, reaching over Cas and pulling the lever to open the truck door. “Try to find out as much as you can and I'll do the same.”

Cas nodded as he stepped out of the car, slinging the strap of his backpack over one shoulder. It was not done with any ease whatsoever and made it painfully obvious to Dean he'd learned the move from some teen movie Sam had probably made him watch. God, his angel was so *awkward*.

“Tomorrow, then,” Cas said. He stood there for several seconds before apparently remembering that some sort of etiquette was required, and he closed the door and waved jerkily at Mary and Dean before turning and walking back toward the apartments.

“Balthazar's a douche,” Dean pronounced.

Mary snorted, but sort of nodded agreement

anyway.



The phone number on my schedule is (785) 555 – 3452. I spotted yours earlier. Will try to call later. Do not attempt research on your own.

Dean outright laughed when he finally read the note (after he'd retreated – strategically – to his bedroom and away from Mary). Cas didn't even sign his name, just some weird squiggly thing that Dean thought might be his name in Enochian.

Several hours later, after dinner and homework and Mary getting called into work (DCF, Dean discovered, meant Department of Children and Families. Quite the eye-opener), Dean got bored and decided to sift through the books in their library. Yeah, the Winchester household apparently had a library and that was a *massive* surprise to Dean (well, it was a library slash office slash storage room, but *still*). He found several books on the supernatural, quietly smuggling them upstairs to show Cas at school tomorrow, but what he was looking for specifically he found near one of the bottom shelves. It was a book he remembered from his

childhood, because his mother used to show him the pictures when she gabbed on about angels watching over him. Oh God, she'd been *right*, and wasn't that just creepy as shit?

There it was – ANGELS. That's all the cover said, and it was falling apart, but he snagged it all the same. Next to it was a considerably newer-looking book entitled *A Dictionary of Angels*, which he also liberated.

He wondered how he was going to get all of these books to school tomorrow. He'd have to do it like, a few at a time. It would take forever.

Dean sighed and shook his head as he rounded the corner into his bedroom, closing the door firmly behind him before settling down on the bed with his loot.

There was a wide array of information here, from his two angel books to three exhaustive tomes on demons; there was a scarily thorough dictionary of all of the gods and minor deities of the world, as well as a general hunter how-to. Hell, he'd encountered some of these books *before*, in the Campbell library. This made Dean positive that his mom here was the same Mary Winchester who had been trained to be a hunter. How did she pull this picket fence crap off? He'd tried for a year and failed miserably.

The books had been scattered throughout the

library, in no real order, and Dean wondered why Mary had even bothered putting them there. To be fair, most of them read like Harry Potter books, so it was easy to believe that she may have thought they'd find them interesting and very *fictional* family mementos. But still: his mother was no fool. Did she leave them around for a reason?

He hid the books in his room, selecting the book on deities and the hunter how-to to take to school tomorrow and stashing them in his backpack.

The angel books he left on his nightstand. He had a best friend allegedly named after an angel. They were innocent enough to have.

Then, with some trepidation, he turned toward his desk.

It was a nice enough desk, with a decent-sized workspace where he could do homework if he wanted to. Sturdy, even, none of that crappy Wal-Mart piece-together shit. But the furniture didn't perturb him.

The computer sitting on top of it did.

It was ancient. Fucking *ancient*. Well, probably damn close to top of the line for 1996, but Dean had problems occasionally using Sam's damn *Mac*. This thing was going to frustrate him beyond belief.

Sighing, he reached out and flipped the switch. The

Windows 95 (oh *God*) logo greeted him as the computer cycled through its ten-minute start-up process.

He'd just began navigating the ancient operating system when there was a light tapping at his door. He spun around in his chair to be greeted by Mary's worn countenance.

He was struck again with the fact that she was *here*, she was *alive*. He stared at her for several seconds before shaking himself to awareness.

"Hey," he said, smiling.

"Hey, yourself," she replied, opening the door wider to enter. "Are you on the Internet again? Just because AOL is switching to unlimited access doesn't mean you can spend all day with your head online. We bought you that computer for *school*, not chat rooms."

"Uh, no. Not yet," he said, darting his eyes toward the computer. "I just started it up. Can I go online later?"

"Sure, honey," she said, ruffling his hair as she came to stand next to him. "Just try to keep it to an hour. We're not at unlimited access quite yet."

They were quiet for a minute or so until Dean got his bearings again. God, communicating like a normal person was hard, way harder than he remembered.

"How was work?"

"Horrible, as usual," she said, sinking down to sit on

his bed. "I had to give a 13-year-old a pregnancy test, Dean."

He winced. "That *sucks*."

She nodded, looking down and fiddling with the zip on her jacket. Which she still hadn't taken off. Dean was aware that this meant she'd immediately ducked in to make sure *her* children were safe, even if no one else's were. "It does. But at least it's over for now, you know? I've been assigned her case."

Dean blinked. "So what'll you do?"

She shrugged, disheartened. "The usual. Group home until we can find a more permanent foster situation for her. Ideally, adoption, but most people don't want the ones that fall between the cracks, you know?" She sighed. "People don't mean to do it, but the victims of incestuous rape usually wind up branded for the rest of their lives. Marked as damaged goods." She sighed again.

"That... *really* sucks," he offered. He'd spent his entire life trying to kill monsters, but with nearly every case he'd been reminded that humanity bore within itself the seed of its own particular brand of monstrosity.

"Well, that's why I do what I do," she said. She shot him a sad smile. "It's the business. You see the absolute worst things, the horrible, *terrible* shit that people do to

each other... but sometimes you get to send the monsters to prison and rescue someone. You have a chance to make it better.”

“Yeah,” he said. He knew exactly what she was talking about. He smirked. “You’re a regular super hero, Mom.”

Her smile cracked into an actual grin. “Supermom. I like that.”

He laughed.

They were quiet for several more minutes, both contemplating various things within their own minds, before Mary spoke again.

“How was today?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Name-calling, mostly. Drooled on a football player so he’d catch the gay. The usual.”

Mary laughed.

The phone rang downstairs and Mary stood up to go get it. “It’ll get better, Dean. I know it will.”

He smiled at her and turned back toward the computer. He fully intended on sorting out what little he remembered about Windows 95, but Mary called up the stairs to him before he could.

“Dean! Cas is on the phone for you!”

Dean shot out of his chair and bolted down the stairs. “Thanks,” he said, taking the phone from her. He

put it to his ear. "Cas?"

"Dean," Cas whispered. He sounded hunted. "I'm sorry for calling so late. I had to wait until Balthazar fell asleep."

"Right. Any ideas?" Dean asked.

"One. While sifting through my bedroom I discovered a journal that I apparently kept. It contains a great deal of detail about my life. You might consider looking to see if the other you kept one as well."

Dean was skeptical. "I dunno, Cas. I'm not exactly the Dear Diary type."

Castiel let out a huff of laughter into the phone. "Do I strike you as the type to keep a diary either? Whoever put us here might've planted it, or maybe our alternate selves are different in key ways. Regardless, I found one and you should check to see if you have one too."

"Right." Dean paused. "So what happened with Balthazar?"

There was a moment of silence. "Nothing," Cas said, in that particular tone that Dean had come to realize meant that Cas was lying to him. "When I left this morning he may have mentioned that I was to stay away from 'that faggot,' but I had no idea what he was talking about." His tone grew bolder. "Either way, a threat would not convince me to stay away from the only

friend I have.”

Dean flushed. “Yeah, uh, thanks. Three chick-flick moments in one day. I think I’m about tapped out, man. Besides, Mom just told me I have Internet access on my computer, so I’m gonna go see what I can find.”

“I’ll try to come over tomorrow afternoon,” Castiel promised. “Balthazar’s schedule shows him working later into the evening, so I should be free.”

Dean grinned. “Sure thing, man. See you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” And as usual, Cas hung up without saying goodbye. It was something Dean had come to expect of him.

Still, it was kind of nice. Dean and Castiel had been friends for so long in battlefield conditions that attempting a friendship in something regarding normalcy was new and interesting.



From context clues and various shit Sam had said, Dean was able to gather that both Mary and John had taken the first day of school off of work in case they

needed to be there for Dean. Part of him was touched, and part of him annoyed.

Still, he was startled to stumble downstairs after slapping his alarm off at 5 a.m. to find John awake and at the kitchen table. He shifted uncomfortably as his father stared him down.

“Up early,” John commented.

“Yeah,” Dean replied, running his fingers through the hair at the back of his neck. “Thought I'd get a workout in.”

John raised an eyebrow. “Since when do you work out?”

“Since the looming threat of being gay-bashed presented itself,” Dean shot back. He was irritated that he'd been busted: apparently, wanting to be able to defend himself was some sort of crime now. Working out was something he and real-Sam did when they weren't on a case and he'd been doing it for *years*, but apparently other-him was a lazyass.

John blinked a few times. “Alright,” he said. “Do you know —”

“Yeah, I got this,” Dean said, cutting him off. It was rude, but for fuck's sake, his dad — the other Dad, the one who'd sold his soul to save Dean's life and who'd lived a half-life since Mary died — had been drilling good

old USMC calisthenics into both his boys' head since they were old enough to walk.

“Okay,” John said, clearly taken aback. “Be careful, it's still dark outside.”

“Right,” Dean replied.

The rigorous workout and mile run woke him up, but it left him sore in places he'd never been sore in before. Other Dean was *totally* a lazyass.

He then enjoyed a long, hot shower before dressing for the day and heading downstairs to wolf down some breakfast. When he was finished and had rinsed off his breakfast dishes John passed him a set of keys.

“Honda's ready,” he said. “I filled her tank up last night.”

Hell yeah. It was a shitty Honda, but hey: *wheels of his own*. Dean grinned. “Thanks, Dad,” he said, really meaning it.

John didn't exactly smile back, but the corners of his lips curved up slightly and Dean was going to take it for what it was.

“I'm going in late to work today,” Mary said, as the boys were getting ready to leave. “I have a court hearing in the afternoon and then I'm dealing with some stuff from the case last night, so I won't be home to make dinner.”

“Alright,” Dean said. It wasn't like he couldn't feed

Sammy, he'd done it loads of time in the past. Hell, if ways to vary ramen noodles and mac and cheese were a legitimate cuisine, he'd be a world-renowned chef.

She smiled at him. "There's a casserole in the fridge. Put it in at 350 degrees at four thirty and it'll be done by the time your dad gets home from work."

Dean blinked. "Okay."

Her smile grew wider. "And there's a cherry pie."

"You," he pronounced, "are the most awesome mother in the history of motherhood. There will be poems written about your greatness."

She laughed. "Get out of here, you two."

"Suck up," Sam said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "Bye Mom, Dad."



The Honda was a *bitch* to drive.

For one, it was a manual transmission. Dean knew perfectly well how to drive a stick shift, but he was used to the smooth glide of the Impala – an automatic.

For another, it was a four-banger and he was used to the power of eight cylinders. And it was considerably smaller than the Impala, as well: he loved his car, but it

was a fuckin' *boat*.

“Out of practice,” Sam commented as they pulled into the school parking lot.

“Shut up,” Dean snarled. He put the gearshift up into first and turned the key, pulling the handbrake up. “Just, shut up.”

Sam smirked at him and slid out of the passenger seat. Dean remained in the car for several minutes, gearing himself up.

Finally, he snagged his backpack. He sifted through it, gathering the things he'd need for his first four classes, and leaving the rest of his stuff – minus the books on the supernatural and angelology – in the trunk of the Accord.

That, he remembered, had been one really *awesome* aspect of having a car: no longer having to use a locker. Hell, tonight, when no one was looking, he could sneak the rest of the hunting books into the trunk and bam, mobile research library.

Finally, he set his shoulders and headed inside, on the lookout for Castiel. He spotted him within seconds, staring at a locker with a perplexed look on his face.

“Cas?” Dean asked, coming to stand beside the angel.

“I don't understand what I'm supposed to do with

this,” Castiel said, gesturing at the locker. “It was on my schedule. Is it a clue?”

Dean snorted. “No, man, it's your locker. You store your books and shit in there when you don't need them.”

Cas blinked at him.

“Right,” Dean said. “Come on, then.”

He led Cas back outside to his car and helped him sort through his stuff.

“You can just keep your shit in the trunk of my car if you want,” he offered. “I can make you a key.”

“Winchester's making his boyfriend a copy of his car keys!” a voice said off to their right. “It's twu wuv!”

Dean shot a dirty look over at the group shouting at them. He'd half-expected to spot Beefaroni and his crew jeering, but it was instead what looked like a group of burnouts. He felt an unexpected surge of fury in his gut.

“*Ugh*. I might like dick, you assholes, but at least I'm not gonna end up working at Dairy Queen to support my babymama. Get a fuckin' life.”

There was dead silence for about ten seconds before one of the taller ones in the group started laughing. “Oh man, Justin, you're *totally* gonna work at Dairy Queen.”

“Shut up!” said Justin, scowling over his shoulder.

“C'mon, man, the stupid might be contagious,” Dean

said, jerking his thumb at the group and nodding over at Cas.

“Stupidity is no more contagious than sexual orientation, Dean,” Cas said, deadly serious.

“Man, whose side are you *on*?” Dean demanded as they began heading back indoors.

Calculus was boring as shit, and Cas kept shifting around awkwardly throughout it, looking distinctly uncomfortable. He kept moving his shoulders like he was trying to resettlement his shirt, or maybe –

“Dude,” Dean hissed. “What's up? You got your wings back or something?”

“No,” Castiel said, shortly. “It's not important.”

Dean frowned at him but let his mind be drawn back toward his Calculus lesson.

They had ten minutes in between Calc and the period where the two of them were split – auto shop for him, Latin for Cas – and he used a few minutes of it to drag Castiel into the bathroom which was, thankfully, empty.

“Spill,” Dean said.

Cas tilted his head at him in a manner that Dean totally did *not* compare to a puppy. “I don't understand,” he said. “I'm not a liquid. I can't *spill*.”

“Cas,” Dean said. “What's up with your shoulders?”

Castiel went still and quiet. “Nothing,” he said.

“Bullshit,” Dean said. He leaned closer, disregarding the fact that if someone walked in right now it would *absolutely* look like they were about to make out. “*Tell Me.*”

Cas sighed and turned his back on Dean. For a brief second Dean was outraged and had tensed, fully prepared to punch the other teen, but then Cas shifted and pulled his shirt up.

His back was littered with black circles.

Dean peered closer.

No – red circles, ringed in black. *Cigarette burns.*

They were all over the place – all up and down his spine, across his shoulder blades, even eating into the more tender flesh near his hips and sides. There had to be at least fifty of them, possibly more, and while it was obvious Castiel had attempted to clean them off, several were *oozing* something Dean didn't want to think about.

His face went blank when Cas let his shirt drop and turned back toward him. The angel regarded him.

“Dean –” he began.

“Did Balthazar do that?” Dean asked. His tone was even and inflectionless.

Cas nodded. “Punishment for disregarding his instructions yesterday morning,” he said. His eyes

crossed slightly. "It took four cigarettes and two hours. According to the journal I found it's not the usual mode of punishment, but it was..." he let out a bitter laugh. "Well, it certainly left its mark."

Dean clenched his jaw together painfully before grabbing Cas's sleeve. "Come on," he said, his voice rough.

They headed toward the exit of the school. On the way there, Dean caught sight of Sam and gestured him over.

"I'm going home," he told his brother. "I can come back and get you, but I'm going home and Cas is coming with me."

"Dean," Sam said, his eyes widening. "Mom's at home, so I dunno what you're planning –"

"Get your mind out of the gutter," Dean snapped. "I'm not worried about it. Just – go to class. I'll be back to get you after school."

Sam studied Dean's face for several seconds before relaxing. "It's alright, Dean. If you're leaving it's probably important. I can take the bus."

"Fine," Dean said, grabbing Cas again and dragging him out into the parking lot.

They settled into the car and Dean slid the key into the ignition, ignoring Castiel's protests.

“There's no point to this,” Cas said. “It's probably less than I deserve in the grand scheme of things, anyway.”

“*Dammit*, Cas!” Dean exclaimed. He slammed his hands into the steering wheel, which shut Cas up. “No one deserves shit like that, okay? *No one*.” He sighed, running his hand over his face. “Stop it with the *woe-is-me* shit, okay? You did your time. You were in Purgatory for over a *year*, running for your *life*, and you took Sam's crazy into yourself and went fuckin' *catatonic*. And besides –“ and here, Dean's voice cracked a little, fucking *puberty*, there's no way that was him getting emotional, no way at all, “Before all of that, you helped where it counted. You were the only full-time angel who told Heaven to fuck off and helped us stop the damn *Apocalypse*. Everything you did after that was to stop *another* one. You don't need to be punished anymore, alright? Just stop it.”

Castiel stared at him for several seconds, his mouth agape. In any other situation it would be hilarious. As it stood now, it was just sort of sad.

“Alright, knock it off with the creepy staring,” Dean said, his voice gruff. “Enough people here already think we're an item.”

Cas swung his head to look out the windshield, his

jaw snapping shut with a click. Dean started the car and, jerkily, began driving for his house.

Halfway there, Cas spoke again.

"I still don't understand why we left. There's nothing that can be done."

"That's *complete* bullshit, Cas," Dean said. Cas side-eyed him heavily and Dean sighed. "Look, there are *entire government divisions* dedicated to stopping shit like this, okay? Just...trust me. Whatever's going on in this fucked-up alternate reality? *Not okay.*"

Cas sighed and looked back out his window. "I always trust you, Dean," he murmured, and damn if that didn't make Dean wince. Yeah, Cas always trusted him. Always, without fail, and look at what it got him: kicked out of Heaven, engaged in a civil war where he had to murder his own family, infested with Leviathan, crazier than a bag of cats, and locked away in Purgatory. Not to mention getting stuck playing the role of an abused 17-year-old.

Yeah, maybe Cas would be better off if he trusted Dean less often, but Dean wasn't going to dissuade him right now.

After several more minutes of tense silence, Dean pulled the car jerkily into the driveway. The Impala was gone and only Mary's truck remained, so at least there

was plenty of space for him to fuck up in.

“C'mon, Cas,” Dean said, opening his door and nodding toward the house. Cas followed suit with a heavy sigh.

Dean slammed the door behind them loudly. “Mom,” he called out.

Mary walked in from the library, eyes narrowed. “Dean,” she said, crossing her arms. “It's ten in the morning. What are you doing home? Did something happen?”

Dean turned to Cas and frowned. “Yeah, Mom, something happened,” he said. Cas shifted uncomfortably, twitching his shoulders to settle his shirt. “C'mon, Cas, show her.”

Cas sighed again. “Dean, I really don't think —”

“Cas,” Dean interrupted. “*Show her.*”

Cas frowned and turned away from Mary, exposing his back as he pulled the shirt up over his shoulders entirely.

Dean closed his eyes for a moment before turning back to his mother, who looked *horrified*. Her hands had fallen to her sides and her jaw had dropped. She took in a shaky breath before she spoke again.

“So this happened last night, after we dropped you off?”

“Yes,” Castiel said. From where he was standing Dean could tell his eyes had dropped to the floor and he looked damn-near *ashamed* of himself. Like being in pain was a weakness and not the human condition, like he should have been able to bear up better under pressure instead of owning the fact that he didn't deserve this.

Dean didn't know whether he wanted to scream at Cas or hug him. The caretaker in him wanted to take him upstairs and coddle him, like he had to Sammy every time he caught a cold; the asshole big brother in him wanted to yell at Cas to get angry, to scream for justice in a world where it was so rarely achieved.

He didn't know what to do.

“Right,” Mary said. She looked damn close to tears. “I'm just – I'll just go call Josh and have him send someone out to take a report. I can't – I can't do it myself. Conflict of interest.”

Cas looked at Dean, questioning. Dean just shrugged and turned toward his mother.

“Do you need to take pictures or something? Cuz I wanna clean those up. They're a mess.”

Mary took in another shaky breath. “Yeah, let me get a few pictures just in case,” she said, gesturing them both into the study. There, she made a phone call to her

supervisor and then dug around in the desk until she came up with a battered-looking Minolta.

“Still have a few pictures left,” Mary muttered under her breath. She exhaled. “Alright, Cas, face the front, please.”

She got pictures of Castiel's front, sides and back, where Dean could see faded bruises in the better lighting. He wanted to stab something, and he clenched his fists at his sides for lack of anything constructive to do.

By the time she'd finished, her boss and a police officer had arrived, so Dean had to wait several more minutes while they took even more photos of the damage with the official work camera. Finally, Dean was allowed to take John's first aid kit down from the garage and clean Castiel's back off with a sterile saline solution, dabbing each individual wound with Solarcaine before topping it off with Neosporin. During this, Castiel was giving the police officer a statement and by the time Dean was finished, the doctor on-call had stopped by and Castiel was telling the officer that no, this wasn't the first time this sort of thing had happened. Dean was pretty sure that he'd drawn on the material from the diary he'd found to say that, but still, Dean clenched his fist in anger. He would not cry, he would not punch

things, he would act like the adult that he actually was for once. For fuck's sake.

The doctor was this guy named Steve, and he looked over Dean's shoulder to take in the damage before letting out a whistle. "Damn, but your kid's got a gentle hand there, Mary. Good job, Dean-o," he said, clapping a hand to Dean's shoulder. "Did you numb it?"

"I used Solarcaine," Dean said. He was still trying to unclench his fingers, the nails of which had started to bite into his palm. "We didn't have anything else and it works on sunburns, so..."

"Should be fine," Steve said, smiling. He held out a camera similar to Mary's. "I know you got some already Josh, Mary, but I'll get some after shots just to cover our asses."

Mary, who was deep in conversation with Josh, glanced up at Steve. "Sure," she said, distracted.

Several hours later the DCF people had all left and Castiel was sitting on the couch next to Dean, eating the pizza that Mary had given him. Steve had bandaged the whole thing up and Cas was now wearing one of Dean's larger sleep shirts, which hung loosely on his shoulders.

"That was possibly the most humiliating experience in my life," Castiel commented around a mouthful of cheese, mushrooms, and olives. "And I was once taken

to task for watching a couple fornicate in a church.”

Dean snorted. “Are you shitting me?”

“No,” Cas said, shaking his head. “I didn't know what was going on and it intrigued me.”

Dean sighed then. “I know it was embarrassing but it had to be done.”

Cas hunched in on himself slightly, and Dean sighed again. Cas was Fucked Up, with a capital F and a capital U, and Dean was pretty sure that he'd managed to talk himself around to totally deserving whatever fake-Balthazar dished out. Hell, if Heaven's punishments in the past were anything to go by, Cas probably thought he'd gotten off *light*.

They sat in silence for a while, eating their pizza, until Mary came out of the study, looking disheveled. Her eyes were red and puffy; she'd been crying, Dean knew, and he understood where she was coming from. This Mary Winchester had spent the majority of her adult life trying to save children, and a kid she'd come to consider a third son was being abused right under her nose.

Yeah, Dean knew how that sort of thing felt. Wanting to save people and *failing*.

“Cas,” she said, and Castiel turned toward her.

“We're gonna go over to your place and get your things,

alright?”

Cas hunched in on himself again. “Okay,” he said, and he actually sounded terrified. Which Dean could sympathize with, actually, because Cas had been through Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory (not to mention Earth) but this was something he couldn't understand. The complicated intricacies of a human childhood were something he'd never had to even *think* about; from what he'd told Dean, he'd sprung to life fully-formed and with all of the knowledge of God's creation. This was way, way out of his sphere of experience.

To be fair, he'd been thrown right out of that sphere the moment he met Dean, but he was billions of years old and he'd only known Dean for a few years of it. Dean could forgive him the confusion and terror.

Suddenly the scope of Castiel's age hit Dean: he'd been alive for *billions of years*. Yeah, Dean had known that, academically, but he was confronting it head-on. Castiel had been alive for longer than Dean could even comprehend, and he'd only known Dean for the tiniest, *tiniest* fraction of his long life.

And he'd rebelled against all of Heaven on Dean's say-so. He'd chosen Dean Winchester over all of his brothers and sisters, over the great heavenly plan, over God, over *everything*. He'd chosen to follow a man

whose life was the merest *blip* in the grand scheme of things.

It was a little overwhelming to contemplate. There was no way he deserved that kind of devotion.

“Let's get going, then,” Mary was saying. Dean shook his head slightly to clear it and focused on the conversation. “You said Balthazar won't be home until seven, right? I expect the police will probably head him off, but just in case, let's go now, while no one's home. You'll need everything.”

Cas nodded and Dean hated how tiny he looked.



The ride to Castiel's place was silent and tense. When they pulled up in front of the apartment, Dean leaned over to his mom and muttered, “I'll help him, you keep an eye out. Just in case,” and Mary nodded. Dean suspected she was going to use the time to have another good cry.

He couldn't blame her.

There wasn't a single piece of luggage, not even a damn duffel bag or an old backpack, in the entire apartment – which, by the way, was *falling the fuck*

apart. The kitchen tap was literally held together with duct tape and the sounds the fridge were making were fucking alarming as all hell. Dean stood in the living room looking around in awe at the destruction.

“Wow, this is a real shithole,” Dean commented. Cas sniffed disdainfully, and the two of them continued looking for bags, boxes, *anything*.

Finally Dean found a stash of used Piggly Wiggly bags and snagged them. “Lead the way, Columbo,” Dean said, gesturing to Cas.

Cas sighed, once again *not getting that reference, tired of your shit Dean*, and began walking down the hallway to his bedroom.

It was at odds with the rest of the apartment, neat and compartmentalized. There were no posters adorning the walls, nothing to make the room personal. “Geez,” Dean said, whistling under his breath. “Other you sure is a neat-freak.”

Castiel frowned at him. “There's nothing wrong with preferring a neat setting,” he said. Dean snorted.

“Okay, maybe it's not just other you. C'mon, let's get this shit loaded.” He grabbed a Piggly Wiggly bag, opened the top drawer of Castiel's dresser, and began shoving socks and underwear into the bag.

Cas sighed and followed suit, emptying his tiny

closet accordingly. After that they moved on to books – good *God*, so many books – and the occasional nicknack. All told, the entirety of Castiel's possessions took up merely twelve Piggly Wiggly bags and the rest of his backpack.

Dean sniffed. “Do we even *have* Piggly Wiggly in Kansas? I don't think we do. Where did these bags come from, Cas?”

Castiel shrugged. Then he hunched in on himself further, which was unnerving. Dean leaned back on the bed he was sitting on, and watched his friend.

“Dean,” Cas said. He paused and then continued. “I am not used to being human, to having a home. People need shelter, food, water. What am I going to do about those things? Where am I going to live?” God, he sounded *terrified*, and Dean's heart broke a little bit.

It broke even more when he realized what was likely in stock for Cas. He knew what the system did for situations like these: Cas was only three months away from the age of majority, so they'd stick him in a group home and kick him to the curb as soon as he had his birthday. Fuck, on *Christmas*. And he could go anywhere in the damn state of Kansas. There was a good chance that Dean wouldn't see him again, and he was the only friend he freaking had in this place.

He closed his eyes. Damn, but he'd fucked everything up. *Again*.

"I don't know," Dean said, opening his eyes to regard Cas. "But it's gotta be better than this."

With that, Dean stood and began gathering bags, looping them by the handles up his arms. He managed three on each arm before it started to hurt, which worked because Cas could do the same once he'd slung his backpack over his shoulders. They headed outside, loading them up into Mary's truck bed.

Apparently Dean hadn't eased Castiel's mind *at all*, because he repeated his question on the drive back to casa del Winchester.

"Where am I to go?" he asked. Mary turned to regard him, and did so for so long that Dean had to call out a warning and she swerved, swearing as she pulled the truck over to the side of the road. Cas was sitting smushed in between Dean and Mary, which Dean had thought might make him feel a little more secure. Apparently, he was wrong.

"Cas," she said, smiling at him. She shook her head, sadness tinging the movement. "I've been calling you mine for over ten years now. Do you think I'd just let you get lost in the system? You'll be staying with us. I filed the injunction with Josh while you were interviewing

with the police officer, and he's getting it approved on an emergency basis with a judge right now.”

Dean stared at Mary in astonishment. Castiel blinked several times, face tilted toward the floorboards; Dean worried he might *actually* cry.

“Thank you,” Cas said, instead, and he sounded so pathetically grateful that Dean wanted to grab his face and kiss the –

He reared back, head hitting the window. Where the hell had *that* come from?



The Winchester house didn't have a guest bedroom, so while Dean shifted things around in his dresser and closet to make room for Castiel's stuff, Mary dug out an old camp cot that was buried in John's military junk in the garage.

“It's not that comfortable, but it'll have to do until I can get an actual bed,” Mary said, by way of apology. “There's a padded bedroll you can lay on top of it to make it more comfortable, if you want, or you can sleep on the couch.”

“Hey, we could get a bunk bed,” Dean said,

enthusiastically. He'd secretly always wanted one growing up, just so he could call top bunk and piss Sammy off.

Mary eyed him in amusement. "We'll see, Dean. You're pretty tall for a twin bed these days."

He smiled back at her, his trademarked shit-eating grin that got waitresses and bartenders across the 48 continental states to melt for him, and she rolled her eyes.

"Don't even *try* that one on me, mister. Now," and she glanced down at her watch. "I got Janice to cover for me for that hearing today, but I'd better go in to work. I have an absolutely *ridiculous* amount of paperwork to sort through." She glanced outside. "Sammy should be home any minute. I trust you can explain things to him?" She eyed Dean expectantly.

He nodded.

Mary turned back toward Cas and, before he could even think to register a protest, folded him up in her arms. Gently, so as not to screw with his now-healing back, but it was a pretty amazing hug despite that. It spoke of how horrified Mary was that this was happening right under her nose, to *him*, and of how much she cared about his well-being despite that.

"Right," she said, straightening out her clothes once

she'd let Castiel go. "I'll be back around eight. Don't forget about the casserole, Dean. There should be plenty for Cas, too."

Dean nodded again, and she left the room. Several minutes later, Dean heard the sounds of her slamming the door behind her and starting up her truck.

Castiel turned toward Dean. "Your mother would have had a truly beautiful soul, Dean," he said. His tone was mournful, and Dean remembered that, yeah, none of this was *actually* real. Mary Winchester had died when Dean wasn't even five, and he'd never get to know her.

But he didn't think anyone would blame him for trying to get to know *this* version of her. It took a tough woman to work with abused kids, and he respected the hell out of her for it. And she honestly seemed to love her children – even the adopted son she'd never given birth to – with all of her heart.

"She would have," Dean acknowledged. Then the two of them continued unpacking Castiel's things until Dean caught sight of Sam trudging up the front walk, fifteen minutes later.



Later that night, Dean was reading one of the angel books he'd liberated the night before, out of boredom and for general entertainment, and Castiel was shuffling around the room, poking at things and searching for the elusive diary he was certain Other Dean had kept.

"I'm telling you, man, I'm not the scrapbooking type, in *any* reality," Dean said, idly flipping through the book. He leaned back in his desk chair.

Castiel glared at him and lifted the mattress of Dean's bed. He snorted, turning as he held up the two magazines he'd found – *Playgirl* and *Hustler*, dated sometime in 1994. Dean grinned.

"C'mon, Cas," he said. "This is *me* we're talking about. Of course I had a porn stash. I'm a *teenager*."

Cas rolled his eyes and returned to his search.

A few minutes later Dean began to chuckle. "Hey, Cas, I didn't know you were an archangel."

Castiel turned to regard Dean with a raised eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

Dean pointed at his book. "Castiel, an archangel, angel of Thursday – seriously? Angel of *Thursday*? What a lame-ass gig, man – angel of solitude and tears, eternal watchman of the cosmos. Controller of the moon, angel of temperance. Dude, they should have

seen you after you drank that liquor store. Temperance my ass.”

Cas came to stand next to him and read his entry in the Dictionary of Angels. He snorted. “That's a mistranslation. Humanity often misunderstands 'seraph' to mean strictly archangel, which is about as accurate as describing humans as apes. Humanity and apes belong to the same genetic order, but are not by any stretch of the imagination the same creature.” He rolled his eyes. “What's wrong with Thursday?”

“Holy shit, are you *actually* the angel of Thursday?”

Castiel's eyes narrowed.

“Oh my God, you *are*,” Dean crowed.

“Thursday is a good day,” Castiel said, turning his back to Dean and continuing his search. “You might remember that you were retrieved from Hell on a Thursday.”

“Whatever,” Dean said, waving his hand. “I wasn't born on a Thursday, so clearly it's not the most awesome day in the week.”

Castiel smiled serenely. “You were born very nearly on a Thursday, and in fact it was Thursday already at the Greenwich Line, so technically – yes, you were born on a Thursday,” he said. He paused and then added, “And you were conceived on a Thursday.”

Dean made a face. “Things I didn't wanna know about my parents, Cas. That's one of 'em.”

Castiel shrugged. “Think what you like. Thursdays have always played a big role in your life, Dean. Your mother died in between the late hours of Wednesday and the early morning of Thursday in 1983. Your brother was born on a Tuesday, but you didn't meet him until the following Thursday. He left for college on a Thursday, and you left to collect him from it on a Thursday. You were slated to go to hell on a Thursday, I might add, but you waited to make your deal longer than Heaven anticipated. You met both Lisa Braeden and Cassie Robinson on Thursdays. And, as I said before, you were resurrected by me on a Thursday. Thursdays are important.”

Dean stared at him. Castiel turned and stared back.

“How – no, you know, I don't even wanna know,” Dean said. “That's just fucking creepy.”

“It's always Thursdays,” Castiel said, smirking. He held up a thick notebook, which he'd retrieved from the space between the wall and Dean's bed. “I may have found it.”

“*Gimme*,” Dean said, lunging for it. “I think I have the right to read this before you get your grubby hands on it.”

Castiel looked hurt. "I'm not going to read it, Dean. If it's anything like the one I found for myself, it's likely highly personal."

"For someone that's *not you*, Cas," Dean said, patiently. Cas shook his head.

"I will not read yours, but you are not to read mine either," he said. There was a hint of warning in his voice, a hint of the power that something was holding at bay, and Dean leaned back.

"Fine, I won't read your diary, jeez."

He flipped the notebook open to a random page and found an almost blow-by-blow description of the encounter that had led to him outing himself the year previous. He blinked. "Well, that wasn't what I was expecting," he said. He squinted down at the paper.

"Damn, I have horrible handwriting."

"I suggest you start at the beginning," Castiel said, with good humor. "It's getting late, I think we should go to bed."

At the suggestion of sleep, Dean felt a yawn coming on, so he nodded in agreement. "Sure thing, Cas. Are you sure you don't want the bed? Your back is all fucked up, you can have it if you want."

Cas shook his head. "No, thank you. The cot will suffice."

Dean shrugged. “Whatever, man. Offer stands. If it gets too uncomfortable just wake me up and I'll switch with you.”

He grabbed his nightclothes from his dresser, now considerably fuller than it had been the morning before, and headed to the bathroom. “Get changed, I'll be back in a sec.”

When he returned Cas had put his sleep pants on, but was struggling into the ratty T-shirt he'd chosen to sleep in. It was his size, which was to say, pretty small and not nearly loose enough for someone with shoulder injuries to shrug into.

“Hold up, Cas,” Dean said, holding his hand out in a “stop” gesture. “You can use one of mine, that's too small.” He dug around until he retrieved a faded, stretched Pink Floyd shirt and tossed it at the angel. It went on much more smoothly, and Dean carefully didn't pay attention to the fact that he was actually *disappointed* that Cas was covered up now.

“Night,” he said, instead, flicking the light off. They navigated to their respective sleeping places in the dark.

As Dean was sliding toward sleep, he heard Cas say, “Good night, Dean,” into the darkness.



At five a.m. his alarm went off, and Dean slapped it off without a second thought, sitting up and stretching lightly.

There was a grumbling noise from across the room, where Cas had been sleeping. The other teen sat up, bleary-eyed, hair mussed. He looked grumpy – or rather, grumpier than usual.

“Dean,” Castiel said, his voice deep with sleep. “It is an hour before we need to be awake. Why are we awake.”

Dean was rapidly finding the fact that Castiel wasn't a morning person hilarious. He snorted.

“Don't be a pussy,” he said, standing up and beginning to stretch himself out. He wasn't by nature a morning person either, but a lifetime of having to get up and moving quickly (not to mention having a military father) had led him to be moderately functional prior to 7 a.m.

“I'm going back to sleep,” Cas informed him. Dean shrugged.

“That's fine. I'm just gonna go work out, I'll see you in an hour,” he said. Castiel regarded him for several seconds.

“Work out?”

“Yeah, you know,” Dean said, making a gesture that didn't really enhance the sentence. “Work out. *Exercise.*”

Cas regarded him some more before nodding slowly. He clearly didn't understand and Dean broke out of his stretching routine and crossed his arms.

“Get in shape, you know, tone the body? Other me is lazy as *fuck*. I could get jumped any time and I'd be lousy in a fight,” Dean continued. He then continued stretching, ignoring the defensive tone in his voice.

“I see,” Castiel said. “You want to build muscle and increase your agility in case another student attacks you.”

“Exactly,” Dean said, making a gun out of his left hand and pretending to shoot it at Cas. He winked and bent over, touching his toes to work the sleep out of his limbs. Cas nodded and stood up.

“I suppose I should, as well,” he said, sounding cranky but mimicking Dean's movements. “What is the point of this?”

“Stretching out,” Dean said, looking back at him from between his legs. Cas looked even more hilarious upside-down. “Warming the tendons up so they don't snap or tear while you're exercising.”

Dean carefully led Cas in a series of stretches; five minutes later they'd warmed up and changed into exercise clothes. Buried at the back of what used to be Dean's sock drawer they found a pair of gym shorts that had clearly belonged to Castiel several years back, because they still had the name "Castiel Novak," scrawled on the tag.

"Huh," Dean said, eying the name.

Cas nodded. "I'm leaning more toward this being a pocket dimension of some sort, an artificial creation based on reality. There are a few different beings who could possibly pull it off, but I fail to understand why they would give me my vessel's surname."

Dean shrugged. "Beats me. If they had any brains they'd have given you the last name Winchester. You're basically family anyway."

Castiel flushed at that, which brought a happy feeling to Dean's stomach. "I have no surname, Dean," the angel said, slowly. Like Dean didn't understand that angels only got the one name.

"Yeah, but next time you need one you can use ours," Dean said, ruffling his hair as they headed down the stairs. "Since you're one of us now. Hell, you've even got the whole 'self-loathing and sacrifice' routine down pat. Sam'd be ready to welcome you to the family

any time.”

His jaw snapped shut at that, but luckily Castiel didn't get what “welcoming someone to the family,” meant.

“That is very generous of you,” Castiel said, solemn, “But Winchesters have a habit of dying before their time. I think I'd prefer to remain nameless.”

As they walked into the living room, Dean slowly turned to regard his friend. Cas had a small smile quirking his lips. “Did you just make a joke?”

Castiel's smile grew and Dean reached out to punch his arm. “Asshole,” he said, heading into the kitchen.

John was sitting at the table; he'd put out two mugs of coffee for the boys, which Castiel grabbed at with such alacrity that Dean laughed outright.

“You joining Dean for his workout this morning, Cas?” John asked. He hadn't reacted the night previous, when he came home to find that he suddenly had another teenaged son, so Dean assumed that Mary had called him and hashed out the details already.

Cas nodded.

“Well, be careful, son. When you're not used to it, PT's hell on the body.”

“PT?”

“Physical training,” Dean said, rolling his eyes. “It's a

military thing.”

“I see.” Cas clearly *didn’t*, but Dean assumed that, being friends with *him*, Castiel was used to being vaguely bewildered pretty much all of the time.

They finished their coffee quickly – Castiel thanked John several times – and Dean dragged his friend out to the backyard. It needed to be mowed pretty bad, and Dean made a mental note to do so after school.

He led Cas in a brisk twenty-minute calisthenics workout, which the angel did without complaint, and then an equally brisk 15-minute run.

“Normally I’d run for longer,” Dean panted out, as they walked back up to the house. “But we both gotta shower now. I can rush-job it, but we’ll have to hurry through our warm-up process tomorrow.”

“You do this *every day*?” Cas gasped. Dean nodded.

“It don’t work unless you do it regularly,” he said.

“How... *unfortunate*,” Castiel managed. “If we ever get out of here, I will never again take the state of my vessel for granted.”

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s the spirit, Cas.”

Dean called first dibs on the shower, taking care of business quickly before making way for Cas, who he

instructed to be fast as well. Cas, never one to ignore an order, managed a five-minute shower, and the two of them made it downstairs right around the normal time for breakfast.

“Cas,” Mary said, reaching over Castiel’s stack of pancakes to touch his hand. He looked up at her, eyes wide, mouth full of pancake. Carefully, he chewed and swallowed.

“Yes?”

“They arrested Balthazar last night,” she said. Cas blinked and nodded slowly, so she continued. “I also got your temporary guardianship order.” She looked toward Dean. “I’ll follow you guys to school to get everything sorted before I head into work.”

“Right,” Dean said. “So no off-roading. Got it.”

She snorted and slapped at his upper arm. Dean grinned back at her, mouth still full of pancake.

Cas was eying him and smiling, like he didn’t quite understand the joke but thought the good humor around the table was worthwhile, so somehow, Dean felt better for it.

Part Two



It only took a week for word to get out around school that Castiel Novak was now living with the Winchesters. Unfortunately, that meant that it only took a week for the teasing to ramp up to truly epic proportions.

The burnouts had mostly decided that they liked Dean's smartassery, which is the only reason it stayed a secret for so long. Dean parked near them every morning, so it was with a slightly-stoned shield that Dean, Cas, and Sam exited the Honda every morning. Eventually, though, one of Beefaroni's football player pals happened to be scoring weed off of one of them right when Dean pulled up, and that was all she wrote.

It started with verbal taunts about how Dean now had a live-in boyfriend; Sam wasn't immune from this taunting, either, because implications that Dean was

screwing his little brother flew like bras at a strip club. It escalated slowly until the end of October, when things became scarily physical.

Dean and Cas had been working out in the mornings for two solid months (even on weekends) at this point. Dean had also begun instructing Castiel in the fine art of the fistfight, using the hand-to-hand combat training his father had put him and Sam to nearly every morning of their adolescence. Cas, being a warrior of God and all, was pretty good at close-quarters combat, and they shared a handful of wins apiece whenever they sparred.

John had taken an interest in the sessions, joining them for their run most mornings and pointing out flaws in stance and openings in their guard. Normally Dean would grate at this kind of over-supervision, but John seemed determined to shore up their weak spots, and Dean was grateful for the meaning behind the effort. Even Sam looked in occasionally, although he never bothered with exercise. Hell, he didn't *need* it; Sam was in great shape for a 14-year-old.

It was a Thursday. As Castiel had pointed out before, it was always *Thursdays*.

Halloween had never been Dean's favorite day; there was always some fucked-up shit going on that he

and Sam had to take care of, usually fucking *witches* because that's just how Winchester luck fell, and because it was Halloween he always had to be on the lookout for other people's kids. For once, though, he felt like he could sit back and relax, and he planned to do exactly that.

Dean, Cas and Sam had all considered costumes, and Sammy eventually decided to go as some comic book character or other. He'd grown two solid inches in the last few months and Dean knew from experience that he wouldn't freaking *stop* anytime soon, so he could probably have gone as Miss Universe and not been bothered by the other students.

Castiel seemed disinclined to participate in the holiday festivities, and Dean felt pretty much the same. So it was in normal jeans and T-shirts that they went to school that day.

Sam wished them a happy Halloween and departed for his own group of friends. Dean shot the shit with the burnouts for a few minutes, Castiel awkwardly close at hand, before the two of them headed inside.

"What are you supposed to be, *faggot*?" Beefaroni (dressed as a vampire – so original. Although Dean supposed that since *Twilight* had yet to be written, he had *that* much to be thankful for) taunted, as Dean and

Cas walked into their Calculus class.

Dean grabbed Cas' hand and held it up to his chest, pouting theatrically. "Gay married," he said. Next to him, Cas huffed amusement and tugged his hand back.

Calculus was, as usual, boring – once Castiel had broken down the advanced math, Dean had yet to be intellectually stimulated by *any* of his classes (except maybe History; he didn't like to talk about it). It was kind of a letdown, to be honest; he remembered that when he was actively learning things in school, he'd at least not been *bored*.

"I forgot my Latin book in your car," Cas said, as they exited the room after the bell.

Dean nodded. "I gotta take a leak, so I'll meet you for physics, third period?"

Cas nodded and reached into his pocket for his copy of Dean's car key. It was one part horrifying and one part comforting that Cas had become so used to certain human actions.

Dean went into the bathroom and did his business. Everything seemed normal until he washed his hands and left; he walked into the hallway to find that a steady stream of students (in costume and out) was pouring out the front doors. This was *highly* unusual because there was only five minutes to get to class; by now, most

kids were heading to their lockers.

They were all heading to the *parking lot*. Dean's heart sank and he bolted out the doors with the rest of them.

He reached his car to find a loose circle of football players surrounding Cas, whose nose looked to be broken. He was listing to the left and there was a pool of blood spreading from some sort of wound on his ribcage. His shirt was torn and his knuckles, bloody. He had a black eye, too, but that was really the *least* of their worries. Dean felt a brief moment of pride: Cas was pretty fucked up, but the football players around him looked worse for wear too, and he was clearly holding the whole group off. He was on his feet, staggering, fists out and a wary eye on his enemies.

"Hey *faggot*, you gonna get your boyfriend to back you up now?" Beefaroni jeered. Something glinted in his hand and Dean froze.

It was a knife, blood dripping from its tip.

That fucker had *stabbed* Cas.

Dean saw red. Without thinking, he threw himself into the fray, letting his backpack fall from his shoulder and to the ground with a muffled *thump*. He spotted the burnouts to his left and called out, "Call the fuckin' *cops*, man!" at the top of his lungs before jabbing at Beefaroni

with a closed fist – faking him out.

The football player reared back as Dean placed himself firmly in between him and Cas. Just as quickly, Beefaroni lunged at Dean with the knife, and Dean ducked, driving his left elbow up into the taller boy's wrist to knock the knife away from him. Quickly twisting, he grabbed that same wrist with his right hand, pinching the nerve there and forcing Beefaroni to drop the knife outright. He kicked it toward Cas and called back, "Don't touch it!"

"*Dean,*" Cas replied, pained. Dean heard the sound of his friend slumping over to his knees behind him, and Dean curled his left fist upward along his hand, exposing the butt of his palm, which he used to strike upward at the football player's nose. He heard a snapping noise and the other boy cried out in pain, both hands going up to grasp at his now-bloody, broken nose.

"Anyone else wanna fuck with me?" Dean snarled. He turned to regard the other football players; a tall blond one darted out, swinging clumsily, and Dean neatly tripped him, sending him face-planting into the ground. Blood splattered against the pavement, and Dean found himself hoping vindictively that the kid's nose had gone so far up into his skull that he'd be brain-

dead for the rest of his life.

While his back was turned, another one of the players grabbed him from behind, and one opposite him came forward once his arms were secured, jabbing Dean sharply in the stomach. It knocked the wind out of him; the other boy lashed out at his face next, catching Dean in the right cheek. It didn't shatter bone, but Dean had been in enough bar fights in his life to know that this was gonna fuckin' *hurt* in a few minutes.

Dean was about to heave his lower body up in a display of acrobatics he was pretty sure he couldn't *actually* pull off when out of nowhere, two other people launched themselves into the fight – one he recognized as Justin, the pothead; the second was none other than his brother.

"Sam, be *careful!*" he called out, moving his head at the last moment so that the fist currently aimed at him missed and plowed into the face of the football player holding him. Dumbass had pinned his arms but didn't think to secure his neck.

Quicker than Dean could react he was released, and he stumbled forward, going to Justin's aid quickly. He prevented an attack from behind before helping Sam deal with the one who had been punching him while he was held down. The three of them circled Castiel

protectively – Castiel, who was on the ground moaning and possibly *bleeding out*.

“Did anyone call the police?” Dean gasped out.

“Yeah, Billy called on his car phone,” Justin said, panting. Another person joined the fray, a lithe-looking Mexican girl who *clearly* knew what the fuck she was doing: she high-kicked the football player who was heading for them and took up a space in their circle.

“I have no idea who you are,” Dean said. “But – *thanks.*”

She grinned at him, fiercely. “I got two moms, man.” She ducked one of the football players – Sam was shouting, outraged, “YOU CAN’T HIT GIRLS YOU ASSHOLE!” – and flung him toward Dean, who let loose with a roundhouse kick that impressed even himself. There was the sound of police sirens from the other end of the parking lot; students scattered.

“He’s not even *gay*, you fucksticks!” Dean yelled at their retreating backs. Ignoring the carnage, he turned and crouched down next to Castiel, checking to see that he was still breathing.

Thank *Christ*, he was.

“Cas,” he said, shaking his shoulder. “Cas!”

“Dean,” Cas murmured back. “This is extremely painful. Don’t shake me.”

“Oh thank *fuck*, you’re conscious,” Dean said. He slumped down and pulled up Castiel’s shirt. The wound was red, a gouge across the left ribcage that looked scary and gaping to his only-half-trained eyes. He looked at it, a worried expression plastered over his face.

“It’s very hard to breathe,” Cas said, casually. Like he’d comment on the weather.

“Shit,” Dean said, ripping the shirt entirely. He could see it now – blood bubbling up every time Cas exhaled. “Shit shit *shit*, Sammy, is there an ambulance?”

“I think so,” Sam said, from above him. He was standing, jumping and waving. “Why?”

“His lung’s punctured,” Dean said, covering the wound up with a wad of torn shirt to staunch the bleeding as much as he could. “I think it’s collapsed. Shit shit shit *shit!*”

“There’s an ambulance,” the Mexican girl said. “And some cops.”

Dean looked up at Justin. “Get outta here, dude. You don’t need to get caught up in this. And – *thanks*, man.”

Justin nodded, a grateful look on his face as he bolted off the school property.

Dean pressed harder, ignoring Castiel’s breathless

cries, and for the first time in a long time, he prayed.

To his surprise, the Mexican girl kneeled next to him and began praying audibly. She stopped halfway through and looked at him. "I dunno if it helps," she said, doubtful. "But if there's a God, maybe he'll save him."

Dean nodded. "Yeah," he said, voice cracking halfway through the word. Or maybe whoever had created this alternate universe would save him. Either way, *something* needed to happen.

"Move over, son, move over!" said an authoritative voice.

Dean gestured to his hand. "His lung's punctured," he said, helplessly. The paramedic squatted next to him, taking the girl's place and moving his hand over Dean's.

"I got him now, son," he said, voice kind. "You let us do our jobs and he'll be fine."

Dean moved out of the way, standing next to the girl and Sam in a daze as the EMTs worked on Cas.

The next twenty minutes or so were a blur; police officers were taking reports from the few students they could round up, handcuffing the football players who weren't so grievously injured that they needed to be hospitalized (Dean noted with a thread of angry satisfaction that even though Beefaroni had an obviously broken nose, he was in handcuffs at the side

of a cop car). It was all flashes of awareness interspersed with his own steady voice, recounting the events as they unfolded. Like his words were grounding him, keeping him tied to some form of reality.

The girl was standing next to him, angrily reacting to something the police officer had said to her. “Listen here, asshole, write it down. *Victoria Mendoza*. That’s me. Recognize the last name? My mom is *Esmeralda Mendoza*. That’s right! So you *have* heard of her! The lawyer for the ACLU in Kansas! Yeah, that’s right, you just *try* to let that asshole go. He fucking *stabbed* Castiel, I fucking *saw* it. Don’t you fucking walk away, asshole!”

Sam stared at her, his gaze admiring. Dean snorted.

“Not the time to pick up chicks, Sammy,” he said, his voice hoarse as he watched the EMTs load Cas into the ambulance.

“I’m not gonna,” Sam said, his eyes still pinned on Victoria. “She’s something else, though.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. His mind was elsewhere.

Victoria turned toward him. “I called my mom. She’ll be here any minute and make sure none of *them* fucks this shit up.” This was said with a jerk of her thumb over her shoulder.

Do not cry, Dean told himself, firmly. “Thanks,” he

said, and if his voice shook, Victoria was nice enough not to mention it.

The ambulance took off; no one asked if anyone was going to ride with him. Dean *wanted* to ride with him. God, what if Cas *died*?

He'd been through this before, though – Cas had died five times on him and come back each time. He'd come back this time. Right? After all, Cas was an honorary Winchester. Death didn't stick to the Winchesters.

But *fuck*, it never got easier.

He took a shaky breath and sat on the hood of the Honda. At his feet he could see Castiel's Latin book sitting half-under the car, his backpack a few feet away. Both were splattered in his blood. There was a commotion about twenty feet away from him; he didn't care. *Fuck this*.

Dean leaned his head forward into his hands, hiding his tears from the people milling about.

Several minutes later a gentle hand came to rest on his shoulder. Dean looked up and spotted a woman he knew, *instinctively*, was Victoria's mother. She had kind brown eyes, wide cheekbones and a narrow, pointed chin, but mostly she just looked *angry*.

"Dean, right?" she asked, her words a low murmur

in counterpoint to the noise around them. Dean nodded. "I don't know if anyone's thought to tell you, but they're pretty sure your friend's gonna make it. They're taking him to Lawrence Memorial for emergency surgery."

Dean nodded again, before he blurted out, his voice broken, "He's not even *gay*."

Esmeralda nodded, sadly. "It's unfortunate," she said, "But most of the time when things like this happen, they *aren't* gay."

That didn't make it better.

"Victoria says he lives with you?" she asked. Dean nodded, wiping his nose on the back of his hand in a last desperate grasp for some sort of dignity.

"My mom works for DCF," he said. His voice sounded more steady now, more sure of itself. "She's his guardian until he turns 18 in December."

Reciting facts grounded him slightly, made him feel better. He let out a shaky breath. "I should call her," he said.

"I took care of it," Sam said, from next to him. "She's on her way to the hospital now. She said we should meet her there, if the police are done with us."

Esmeralda's expression hardened. "They *better* be done with you," she said. She turned to Victoria, who nodded.

“Yeah, Mom. They’re doing the crime scene walkabout now; you’ll wanna watch.”

Esmeralda looked torn. “Do you need a ride to the hospital?” she asked.

Dean shook his head. He took a steadying breath and patted the car underneath his ass. “I got a ride,” he said, letting out a strangled-sounding laugh. He stood, stooping to grab Castiel’s Latin book and both of their backpacks.

“You okay to drive, man?” Victoria asked. Dean nodded.

“Yeah. I’ll – I’ll feel better after a drive,” he said, his voice stronger. He turned to her. “Thanks. Again.”

She shook her head. “Don’t thank me for not being an asshole, dude.”

Dean let out a huff of dry laughter. He looked at Sam, who nodded. “Right. I guess we’ll head out now,” he said. He threw his and Castiel’s things into his back seat; a few seconds later Sam added his to the pile, and then they climbed into the front.

“Take care of yourself, Winchester,” Victoria said, leaning over to talk to him through his car window. She tapped on the roof and straightened, backing up from the car. “Be careful.”

He nodded. “You too,” he said, his eyes landing on

the football players who were being attended to by the remaining EMTs. She nodded understanding and went to stand with her mother.

Dean peeled out of the parking lot. His last coherent thought before he pulled in front of the medical center thirty minutes later was, *Damn, I hate hospitals.*



Lawrence Memorial was a big, modern-looking facility. This should have made Dean feel better, but at this point only good news about Castiel's miraculous recovery could do the trick.

He found a parking space with relative ease and sat in the driver's seat of the Honda for several minutes, staring at the building in dread. Finally Sam interrupted his musing, tapping his arm with the back of his hand.

"Hey," he said. "We should go in and see what's up."

Numbly, Dean nodded. He let out a slow exhale through his nose before releasing his seat belt and opening the car door.

Mary was waiting for them outside of the emergency room. She was smoking a cigarette. Dean and Sam both gaped at her.

“They brought him in about five minutes ago,” she said. She took a drag on the cigarette, her hands shaking. “They’re pretty sure he’ll be okay. You were right, Dean, it’s a punctured lung.”

Dean chose to ignore the cigarette, for now. He stared at her, pleading for more information, and she turned to Sam.

“Hey, why don’t you go see if they’ve put him into surgery yet?” she asked him. Sam, oblivious as ever, nodded and walked into the ER.

Mary threw the half-smoked cigarette out onto the sidewalk and crushed it under her heeled foot. “I hate this,” she said, angry and despairing. “You know, people who commit hate crimes against gays and lesbians almost *always* walk. If they even do get put into the system, it’s a slap on the wrist. This is just... this is wrong. *These* are the monsters, not...” and she trailed off. Dean knew where she’d been going with that, and he agreed with her wholeheartedly, so he nodded.

“He’s not even *gay*,” Dean said, frowning. The two of them leaned against the wall to the ER, Mary hunched over crossed arms, Dean letting his head fall back to rest against the brick. “Like, they beat him up for being gay and *he’s not even gay*. It’s so fucked up. He got stabbed for being my *friend*.”

Mary eyed Dean skeptically. “Not gay, huh?”

Dean flushed. “I don’t think he’s... well, really *anything*. I don’t think that kinda thing interests him, you know?”

“Uh huh,” Mary said. Her tone was disbelieving. “Dean, honey, has Cas ever said anything –”

Dean shook his head. “Not really something we worry about, Mom,” he said. Cuz seriously, if his angel ever came out to him he’d probably check himself straight into a psychiatric ward.

“It’s just –” And Mary broke off, looking at him strangely. Her face gentled. “The two of you have been really close for your entire life, honey. I don’t know if Castiel is gay, but he loves you anyway.”

Dean snorted. “Mom, we’re not *like* that.” Despite the voice chiming at the back of his head, the one that was helpfully pointing out all of the times he’d imagined Cas while jerking off (both here and in the real world, and wasn’t *that* just a bite in the ass), and how often he’d sometimes just zone out staring at his friend’s face, Dean was certain of this. Castiel was his friend, maybe even his *best* friend – you don’t get rescued from Hell by someone and not like them even just a little – but they weren’t... that.

Whatever *that* was.

Mary smiled, a bit sadly. "Sure, honey," she said, patting him on the head. "I'll stop saying the two of you are in love with each other when you *stop being in love with each other.*"

"Mom!" Dean exclaimed, jerking upright and away from her hand. "What is it you think we *do* every night? Cuz I swear, we just go to bed."

Mary laughed, doubling over, the lines of worry washing away from her face in the process. "*Dean,*" she said, in between gasps. "Sometimes I worry that you think that sex and love are the exact same thing."

"I *know* they're not," Dean replied, indignant. After all, he'd made an entire life based around pursuing one and avoiding the other.

The two of them quieted down and stood there, leaning against the brick and watching traffic pass by. After several minutes of relative silence Mary sighed.

"It just... it pisses me off," she said, shaking her head. "I don't think Cas is ever going to get justice for this, and he's going to have to go back to school and be surrounded by the people that nearly killed him. That's not.. it's not *right.*"

"No, it's not," Dean said, sighing. "But you know, sometimes things just don't work out like they're supposed to."

She grinned at him and ruffled his hair. “When did you get so smart?”

Dean snorted. “Smart’s not the word I’d use, Mom.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Anyway,” Dean continued, smirking. “One of the girls who helped us out during the fight called her mom.” His smile grew wider. “Esmeralda Mendoza, some big-time lawyer for the ACLU. She was *fuming* mad.”

Mary’s return smile was a little bit vindictive, but Dean approved nonetheless.

“The ACLU, huh?”

Dean nodded.

They were interrupted by the sound of feet slapping on pavement, and as one they turned. John was running up, out of breath (Dean would have to try to convince him to actually work out with them more often, because this was ridiculous).

“Is Cas okay?” he asked, coming to a stop in front of them. He looked at Dean and Mary, begging for answers with his eyes, and Dean decided in that moment that he was going to forgive John Winchester for everything he’d ever held against him. Because this incarnation of John, this man who could have been his father? He *cared*. He *cared* about his son’s best friend, he *cared* about the third kid he never had, and he was

worried.

Dean gulped as Mary answered her husband's question, and the trio went to go wait inside. Mary's unfinished cigarette lay forgotten on the pavement, still smoking.



Dean *really* fucking hated hospitals.

They were the *worst*. Half the time, the people were all convinced they were dying, and Dean hated knowing that there were Reapers lurking around the corners, *waiting*.

Whatever general-use antiseptic they used at hospitals always smelled the same, pungent and stinging, and it always made Dean nauseated. There was also an underlying musty smell, unique to every hospital he'd ever been to. He didn't know what caused it but it was nasty as *fuck*.

Still... Castiel was here, and so this was where he needed to be.

They'd been waiting for several hours in the waiting room (Dean and Sam had gone through every magazine and even gotten started on *Highlights* by the

time someone had come to get them. Dean could say with complete assurance that he still hated that Gallant fucker, brown-nosing prick that he was) before they got news that Cas was being moved, post-surgery, into the Intensive Care Unit. They'd used some sort of adhesive to glue his lung closed, so it wasn't collapsed anymore, but the doctor said he'd be on a ventilator for several days as his body learned how to breathe again.

Nothing could prepare him for walking into the room and seeing his best friend surrounded by tubes and breathing machines. He looked pretty good, actually; pale, but Cas was *always* pale. It just felt *wrong*, watching an Angel of the Lord struggle to inhale.

Generally people on ventilators, the nurse had explained, were completely sedated, but they had Cas on mild sedation for a few hours because he seemed to be pretty good at letting the machine breathe for him. Dean neglected to tell anyone that this was because Cas had only needed to breathe for the last few months of his existence; hell, the ventilator was probably *closer* to normal for him.

He stood in the doorway, taking in the scene. Sam was standing to Castiel's right, silently observing the way the IV dripped into its tubing from above. Mary and John were standing to Cas' left, talking quietly to him.

Cas himself was *really* out of it, eyes half-lidded and nodding every few words like he understood what was going on, which Dean severely doubted.

He'd give anything for Castiel to be back to his old self and not having to deal with this stupid, petty human *bullshit*. He'd give anything to not be *here*, because back there, back in the normal world, people were getting with the program and his sexuality wasn't that big a deal unless they went to the deep south. He'd give anything for Cas to have never met him, because then he'd be alive and content in Heaven rather than going through an existential free will crisis. Even if it meant he'd never got to meet him.

And *God*, that hurt. The idea of having never met Cas. Castiel could be a dick sometimes, and hell, he'd tried to *become God*. He'd made a deal with a demon and broken the wall in Sam's head. But meeting Cas had changed Dean's life, for the *better*, and he was his best friend. His *only* friend, if he was honest with himself.

It was there, standing in that doorway, watching the scene unfold in front of him, that it hit Dean like a ton of bricks: Mary had been right.

Dean was in love with Castiel.

Shit.



Over the last two months or so, Dean and Cas had developed a routine. It was never more apparent than when Cas wasn't there to share it with him.

The Winchesters got home around nine, and Dean went to bed shortly after. He tossed and turned for two hours before he realized that Cas not being in the room with him was rendering him completely unable to sleep. Sighing, he sat up and flicked on his bedside lamp.

Dean opened his nightstand drawer to seek out a book or *something*, grabbing the first thing that came to hand. It happened to be his journal, the one he'd never quite got around to reading. Shrugging, he settled down to read on his bed, laying on his stomach and propping his chest up on his pillows.

He started, as Cas had suggested months ago, at the beginning.

The journal was a big five-subject wire-bound one, the type you keep all of your notes for classes in. He'd apparently ripped out all of the dividers at one point, rendering it one gigantic notebook. It was mostly-full, so he figured he had a lot of reading ahead of him.

It started when he'd been fourteen. Castiel's double and he had decided to keep journals together, and *that* was just about the gayest thing he could imagine (although he guessed it explained why his Cas had been so insistent that he *had* to have a journal). At first, the entries were boring as shit, and often included little notes from the other Cas. From what he could tell, they'd swapped them regularly for the first few months of keeping them. It was kind of cute in a really homosexual BFF's sort of way, but mostly it just creeped Dean the fuck out. He had been one *girly* 14-year-old in this universe.

In his real life he'd been hunting with his dad by the time he was 14. It bothered him that any incarnation of him would keep a journal and trade it off with his best friend to leave notes for each other. *Ugh*.

After a few months this practice tapered off, thank *fuck*. The entries became more personal, less daily overview and more inner feelings shit. Still sort of girly, but Dean figured that if he'd been able to keep a diary growing up, maybe he'd have turned out less fucked up. If anything, getting some of that shit down on paper might have helped him dwell on it less. Ugh, now he was starting to sound like Sammy with his psychobabble. *Moving on*.

After Dean got through the entry about his fifteenth birthday party, the entries started to become more sexual in nature, and old-him was questioning everything about himself. Sounded about right; fifteen was when he'd started to notice other dudes in the locker rooms. The *am-I-gay?* crisis actually followed a pretty similar path, lots of questioning and panic and jerking off and confusion. The fact that he'd still found women pretty damn hot too was something that confused this more sheltered Dean than it had actually confused him in real life; by the time *he'd* got to this part of puberty Dean had already met several gay couples in his line of work and had dated a bisexual girl.

The year between fifteen and sixteen took him two hours to plow through; there was a whole lot of confusion and pondering his future and slowly, mentions of Castiel became more and more prominent. Dean could tell *exactly* when other-him had developed a crush on his best friend, even if the teenager hadn't been able to see for himself until several months later.

The moment his doppelganger had realized what had happened had come, appropriately, on his sixteenth birthday. There had been a small birthday party and Castiel had stayed over. Halfway through the night Cas had needed to change shirts because he'd spilled soda

on himself, and seeing his friend half-naked had made him realize how far gone he was.

Dean snorted. It was like something out of a cliché'd rom-com, but he could see it. He'd seen Jimmy's body naked before (*covered in bees*, yes, but still hot as fuck), and the guy had won the damn genetic lottery with his build, just this side of slim with nicely broad shoulders and well-defined pecs. Cas had scored a sexy vessel, no lie, and the fact that he was *exactly* Dean's type as far as dudes went? Wasn't lost on him in the slightest.

His other self had despaired over the next few months about his feelings for his friend before finally coming out as bisexual to Castiel, privately. Cas had accepted it with his usual, "Why does that even *matter*?" attitude, but hadn't indicated that he was interested in any way (the description of his coming out to Sam a few days later went the same way, which surprised Dean exactly not at all). Finally, a few months later, Dean'd given up on his friend and, despite harboring a torch the size of Texas for him, had struck up a relationship with the illustrious Cody. The teen had quickly become infatuated with his new flame, although Castiel still remained a large part of his life.

He read about this body's gay cherry-popping, the

futures his other self had planned out to include both Cody and Castiel, the colleges he wanted to apply to (which, *Jesus wept*, was something he was going to have to actually take into account soon if he was going to be stuck here any longer), what cities he was considering living in. That Dean could not envision a life without Castiel in it was patently obvious: a fight with the other boy had never once been mentioned before in all of the journal so far, but in April the two had argued furiously about the future. Dean was set on somewhere in California or Washington, where Cas (who had wanted to get a degree in library science, haha, *hilarious*) was dead-set on Texas A&M and then living somewhere warm, likely in the south. Castiel had stormed out and Sam had taunted Dean about bickering with Cas like an old married couple (so Sammy, all over).

Dean had wanted somewhere liberal, somewhere he could live with Cody and his best friend/asexual love of his life and not get second glances. Castiel wanted a good school and a warm climate, politics be damned. Their make-up the next day had been sort of sadly hilarious; Castiel hadn't even considered the fact that his bisexual best friend might not be welcome in God Country. The resultant apology had lasted several hours

while the two boys hashed out their shit and came to the conclusion that they absolutely couldn't go somewhere without the other. Dean wouldn't be surprised if there had been a pinkie promise involved; *goddamn*, other-him was a fucking pansy.

Still, the news that Cas would be coming along to *any* future hadn't sat well with Cody, and Dean and he had fought. Dean frowned: clearly, his ex-boyfriend had been an insecure *asshole*. Either way, they argued on and off for a month before making up and getting back together rather spectacularly: in the locker room at the high school, where they were almost immediately caught out.

There was almost graphic detail in this entry, and it bothered Dean on a level he couldn't quite describe. It was worse than reading the Supernatural novels, so he skipped it entirely, flipping to the descriptions of his and Cody's breakup and subsequent enforced separation from each other, how Balthazar was keeping Castiel from visiting during the summer, and how senior year was going to suck ass.

The entry from the night before Dean had taken over was short, sweet, and to the point.

Saw Cas today. First time in like three months. Fucking Balthazar. Hung out downtown, got burgers. I

think I'm in love with him.

Shit.

Heh. Dean could absolutely relate.

He sighed, shoving the journal back into his nightstand's drawer. It was five in the morning (he knew this because he had to shut off his alarm; going out to exercise without Castiel seemed *wrong*, somehow) and he didn't know that he could sleep. But Dean was an expert at fake it 'til you make it, so he lay in bed, eyes closed and body lax, and eventually his breath evened out as he slipped into a deep sleep.



Sam and Dean skipped school that day, with their parents' permission, and they spent the morning in the ICU, staring at Castiel as he slept in his bed. At lunch both their parents joined them and Cas woke up briefly. He was still *really* out of it, and around the breathing tube managed to start nattering on about bees. It worried Dean but honestly, it was better than dead silence and a glassy stare.

He was going to *kill* Beefaroni. God, he should have tried harder to remember the dick's name, because that

ridiculous nickname didn't do justice to the monster he was. He was going to pull his intestines out of his *asshole*.

They left Cas when he fell back to sleep. His parents hadn't taken the day off work, both being the type to drown their sorrows in productivity. Dean could relate. Usually in a situation like this Dean would clean his guns or wash Baby, but instead he changed the oil in the Honda and gave it a thorough tune-up. For a while Sam sat on a lawn chair next to him, making idle chat, but eventually he drifted inside to watch TV.

Dean had just shut the hood on the Honda when someone called out his name. He turned to find Victoria Mendoza staring back at him.

"Oh, hey," he said, waving at her. "What are you doing here?"

"Mom got your address from the school," she said. Dean stared at her until she continued, because this in no way explained *why*, and was in fact more of a *how*. "She said she was going to represent Castiel if a case against the school district comes up, but really we wanted to know how you guys are doing."

Dean shrugged as he gestured for her to follow him inside. "Alright, I guess. I mean, Cas is gonna make it so that's good news, but he's pretty fucked up, so..."

Victoria let out a humorless laugh. "Yeah, I guess I can understand that." She held out a stack of worksheets. "I got all of your homework today, for you, Castiel, and Sam."

Dean nodded thanks as he opened the door and stepped inside. "Set it on the coffee table," he said, gesturing. He held up his grease-covered hands in explanation, wiggling his fingers. Victoria nodded acknowledgment.

Sam noticed them and his face blushed bright red. "Victoria!" he said, straightening from his usual TV-viewing slouch.

Victoria laughed. "Man, only my *mom* calls me Victoria. Y'all can call me Vicky. *Damn*, you white boys and your proper names."

Dean snorted and headed into the kitchen to wash his hands, listening as Sam asked *Vicky* why she was there. The two of them settled into a conversation while Dean thoroughly cleaned his skin and under his nails, and he gleaned from this conversation that Vicky was a sophomore, her other mom's name was Carla, Carla was a tattoo artist, and that Vicky herself wanted to be a teacher when she grew up, probably science.

"What I wanna know," Dean said, re-entering the living room several minutes later and handing a can of

Coke to Vicky, absently. “Is how the hell you learned to *fight* like that.”

Vicky grinned as she accepted the Coke. Dean handed a second one to Sam: it was ingrained in his nature to take care of Sam, alternate universe or not, and part of that included letting him be social and normal when other people were around. That this version of Sam was social and normal already meant absolutely nothing.

“Carla does MMA,” she said, opening the Coke and setting it on a coaster on the table. “And before that she did karate and tae kwon do. She’s been teaching me for almost ten years; I can handle myself in a fight.”

“Wow,” Sam said, his eyes wide. He stared at her, impressed. Dean snorted and opened his own Coke as he sat down on the chair opposite the couch his own personal lovebirds had claimed. Sam was a goner; he probably had a shot, though. Vicky was eying him like she might *actually* eat him if given half a chance, and Dean could think about his brother’s aesthetics on a non-sexual level well enough to know that at this phase in his development, he was actually swinging toward good-looking.

Dean pulled his and Castiel’s stack of homework to himself, flipping through it. It didn’t look too hard, except

for Castiel's Latin, and he was pretty sure he could plow through his in about an hour. He grabbed his Coke and stood.

"I'm gonna get this shit done with," he said, nodding down at it. He headed toward the stairs, calling, "Thanks," out over his shoulder and leaving Sam to his fate.

He hoped Vicky understood the double thanks she was getting, because actually explaining it would veer way too close to chick-flick territory for his comfort.



Sam went back to school on Monday; Dean did *not*. He wasn't scared, but Mary was, and Dean waited until Sam came home Monday afternoon with the news that the school was buzzing about the fight, but not angry at Dean for it. After this revelation, Dean was allowed to go back himself.

Dean thought his mother might have a point – over half of the varsity football team was currently under arrest or hospitalized, which sort of screwed their chances at winning any games for the rest of the year. It would be natural for the student body to point fingers at

him and Castiel, but public opinion seemed to be that if nine football players could get their asses kicked by two faggots, they deserved what they got.

It was lonely without Cas, although the burnouts were pretty fuckin' awesome and had sort of adopted him as their big gay mascot (although, *really*, at some point Dean was gonna have to explain the difference between gay and bi). Sam and Vicky joined him and the stoners at lunchtimes, so at least he had a pretty decent-sized crowd of people on-hand at all times. Still, he missed Cas terribly and made sure to go visit him after school every day. Sam always came with, which meant that he and Cas couldn't talk about their personal research, but it was good to see him recovering.

On Thursday, a week after Cas had been stabbed, the doctors announced that they thought Cas might be released that weekend. It was, they said, *far* sooner than they'd usually allow someone with a nicked lung to be released, but Castiel showed every sign of healing rapidly. Dean figured it was probably some remnant of his angelic grace, and he was just glad that he hadn't healed at a *superhuman* rate.

"That's *great*," John said. Mary hadn't been able to get a lot of time off of work this week, although she made sure to come by every day and visit Cas for at

least a few minutes, so John had been the one who made sure to sign where an adult needed to sign. Seeing as he was co-owner of the business he worked at, he pretty much set his own hours, and it made more sense for him to step up. Still, Dean was almost *pathetically* grateful for the show of solidarity. “What can we expect at home?”

The doctor – who absolutely was *not* gorgeous and thus kick-starting Dean’s Dr. Sexy fantasies all over again, no sirree – started rambling on about how the stab wound had just missed the heart so they didn’t have to worry about any cardiovascular issues, but they needed to be on the lookout for acute respiratory distress syndrome and *blah blah blah*. Dean excused himself to go talk to his friend.

As he walked into Castiel’s room (he’d been moved over to the normal hospital on Tuesday and out of the ICU, so he was sharing with someone), he noticed that the perpetually-present roommate was gone and that there was no one else in the room. It was the first time he’d been alone with Cas since before the fight, and since he’d realized he was in love with him.

For several seconds it felt awkward, but Dean shook it off. This was Cas. Nothing would come of it anyway, and there was no reason to wreck a great

friendship over this shit. Dean didn't need Cas to love him back, he just needed him to be *alive*.

"So, the doctor says you might get to come home this weekend," Dean said, moving to sit in the chair at Cas' bedside.

"Good," Cas said. He looked disgruntled. "This hospital is tedious at best. I'd much rather be at home. I can't even get the homework you brought me done; nurses are always interrupting me and calling me names that don't belong to me."

Dean blinked. "*What?*"

Castiel scowled; as if on cue, a nurse walked in. She had curly bleach-blonde hair and was curvaceous in all the right ways. If it were his old life Dean may have tried to tap that; as it stood now, he knew he didn't have a chance in hell. He looked like he was *maybe* 15.

"Well, cutie, the doctor thinks you might be able to go home this weekend!" she said, smiling as she inspected Castiel's chart. She checked his IV line, took his blood pressure, and checked his temperature, all the while attempting to make small talk. This failed miserably; Castiel simply stared back at her like she was a moderately-interesting specimen slide under a microscope. *Complete* with barely-restrained disgust. This flustered the nurse, and eventually she shut up and

did her job before leaving.

Dean laughed. “Is that what you meant, Cas? Cutie, sweetie, honey? Oh god, please tell me one of them called you *sugar*.”

Cas glared at him. “It’s demeaning and insulting.”

“It’s *Kansas*,” Dean said. “Although to be fair, I think *this* nurse was probably flirting with you.”

Castiel’s frown deepened. “I have no interest in her. And as far as she knows, I’m not even *legal*.”

Dean chuckled and patted Castiel’s hand. “I know, man, but you gotta give her some slack. You’re hot stuff, like *just outta the oven* hot, and she’s probably a newly-divorced thirtysomething. She just wanted the ego boost.”

Cas was silent for several seconds while he parsed Dean’s meaning. “Why would she derive self-worth because of *my* physical attractiveness? That doesn’t make *sense*, Dean.”

“Well, we’re not all celestial wavelengths of intent who judge a person based on how sexy their *soul* is, Cas,” Dean said, smirking. “Most of us like to think we’re pretty sometimes, and when another pretty person says you’re pretty it makes *you* feel pretty. Well, for girls anyway. Boys like to be hot, or I guess handsome.” Dean wrinkled his nose – he’d been called *pretty* too

many times for his comfort.

“But your physical appearance has no bearing on –”

“*Christ*, Cas,” Dean said, rolling his eyes and leaning back in his seat. He brought his hands up to rub at his forehead in exasperation. “Look, you really should know this by now considering how long you’ve known *me*, but sometimes the package is pretty damn important to us mortals, alright? It’s some sort of, I dunno, evolutionary response. ‘When seeking a mate, *homo sapiens* looks for the most attractive of the flock.’” This last Dean intoned gravely and with a terrible French accent that went right over Castiel’s head.

Cas stared at him like he was insane and Dean rolled his eyes. “Look, dude, you’re going to have to deal with this for however long we’re here, and whenever we get back to the real world, because Jimmy? He was *hot*. Which means by default people are going to think *you’re* hot. Just learn to be nice to people who flirt with you. It’ll make them feel better, anyway, and you’re a fucking angel so you should *like* brightening someone’s day.”

Cas looked disgruntled at that. “I’m an Angel of the Lord, not a self-help book.”

Dean’s jaw dropped for a second before snapping shut, and then he was *howling* with laughter.

“Goddamn, Cas,” Dean said, reaching out and slapping the bed. He chuckled some more before settling back into his chair. “I *knew* that when you grew a sense of humor it’d be a killer one.”

Castiel managed to convey both utter contempt and intense amusement at the same time, which set Dean off again, so when John and Castiel’s doctor walked in several minutes later they found a fuming Cas and a hysterical Dean.



Cas came home Saturday afternoon and flopped down on his camp cot with so much force that for a brief moment Dean suspected he was being hyperbolic (score one for Dean: he knew what that fuckin’ word meant now). But no, this was *Cas*, and Cas only ever did exactly what he meant to do, which meant he was just *that* tired.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want the bed?” Dean asked, for about the billionth time. He really thought Cas would feel better on the bed – it was *huge*, for one, and two it was just about the squishiest thing he’d ever lain down on. It was almost too much, but after a lifetime of beds

with suspicious stains and springs poking him in strange places, Dean welcomed it. He'd take the camp cot, though, if it'd make Cas feel even a *little* bit better.

Cas, who was laying face-down into his pillow, made a noise that Dean was pretty sure meant no.

"It's squishy," Dean offered again, helpfully.

Cas propped himself up. "Dean," he said. "I'm recovering from a stab wound and I just want to *rest*. Stop asking stupid questions."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Alright. Well, I'm gonna go help Mom with dinner. She's making that nasty stroganoff shit cuz she knows you like it."

Cas made a general noise of assent and waved him off, face already buried in his pillow again. Dean snorted and made sure to flick off the light and close the door behind him.

Not even twenty minutes later the angel made his unsteady way back downstairs, clutching his unfinished homework in his hands. He set himself up at the table, occasionally eying Dean and Mary as they shuffled around in the kitchen but for the most part keeping to task. By the time the dinner was ready, Cas had finished his homework for the entire week and a half he'd been out of school, which Dean thought was pretty damn impressive considering he'd suffered through most of

that same homework throughout the week on his own.

Calculus was hard without Cas to help ease him into it, but not impossible; what he'd had problems with was history, which had *always* been difficult. Castiel generally had an interesting perspective on the various events they were expected to learn about, considering he was *there* for like, half of them (or at least observing).

Cas was quiet for most of dinner, speaking when spoken to but otherwise silent. Sam more than made up for it talking to Vicky, who'd been hanging out with Sam and was thus invited for the spectacle herself. The two of them were rambunctious and *obviously* into each other, which seemed to amuse the two adults (and Dean) enough that they tolerated the noise. Castiel picked up on it about halfway through the meal and from then on looked perpetually dismayed. Dean nudged him lightly in the arm with his elbow, and his friend turned toward him, questions written on his face. Dean nodded at Sam and Vicky, and rolled his eyes. Cas snorted and rolled his back.

Yeah, things were back to normal. As much as they ever got here, anyway.



That night, Dean and Castiel went to bed pretty early, both exhausted. Dean claimed it was from having to haul Castiel's heavy ass around the house; Castiel claimed it was from being "overstimulated by Victoria's presence." Either way, they were tired and by the time ten p.m. rolled around, both were laying in their respective beds, dead to the world.

Dean was surprised to be shaken roughly awake at some ungodly dark hour of the night. A half-asleep glance at his alarm clock told him it was 2 a.m., and he wanted to punch something until he caught the look on Castiel's face.

Cas looked *wrecked*. Dean had never seen that look on his face; the closest reference he had was the look the angel had worn when Dean insisted on keeping nearby in Purgatory (and in retrospect, his insistence on keeping Cas around, where he could see him and maybe save him? Made sense. Clearly Dean was very good at deluding himself).

"Cas? What's up?" he asked, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes.

"Dean," Cas whispered. He reached out and then stopped, pulling his hand back. "There was – I had a dream."

Dean regarded him for several seconds, rapidly

assessing the situation. “Nightmare?” he asked. Cas nodded, his uncertainty and terror evident in every motion he made.

“It was the fight at the school, only it differed greatly from what really happened,” Cas said. He hunched in on himself. “You didn’t succeed in your attempt to protect me.”

Ah. Dean had died, then, and Cas’d woken him up to prove he was alive. That made sense, and Dean couldn’t honestly begrudge him it. Cas stared back at him, uncertain, and finally Dean scooted over toward the wall, patting the bed.

“Come on, then,” he said, tired. “If I die again I’ll be right here and you can prove I’m alive by checking that I’m breathing, instead of waking my ass up.”

Cas hesitated for a brief second before clambering into the queen-sized bed with Dean. As the two of them settled for the night, Dean realized the enormity of what had just happened, and what anyone looking in might think about it. Still, Cas was his best friend, practically his *brother*, and if laying next to him would help him sleep better, Dean was all for it.

He lay on his back for several minutes, staring at the ceiling and then forcing his eyes closed and trying to go back to sleep. He couldn’t, because he just *knew*

Cas was staring at him.

He sighed, opened his eyes, and rolled over onto his side, facing Cas. Sure enough, Castiel's eyes were gleaming and the angel was facing him. Which made the position they were in that much more gay, but hey, he'd gotten busted fucking another dude seven months ago. Can't get much gayer than that.

Dean sighed again. "Cas, man, there's *no way* I'm gonna be able to sleep if you keep staring at me like that."

Castiel obediently closed his eyes. He was still wide awake, though, and Dean knew it and it was *freaking him out*.

"Can't you at least *try* to go back to sleep?" Dean asked. Cas opened his eyes and shook his head.

"If I go back to sleep," Cas said, voice hitching suspiciously, "I'll see it again."

He was afraid to go to sleep because he didn't want to have another bad dream. It was so heartbreakingly *human* that Dean felt himself hurting deep down in his gut. He sighed, which was fast becoming a common theme for this conversation.

"Alright," he said, steeling himself. He knew that what he was about to do was half for Castiel's comfort, and half for his own, but he'd never tell a soul. "Close

your eyes, and never, *ever* mention this to anyone.”

Cas closed his eyes again; Dean reached over and pulled the other teen toward him, close and tight in a hug. They were outright *cuddling*. Dean’s chin was resting on Castiel’s forehead, which kind of tickled because the ass needed a haircut, but whatever. Dean closed his eyes.

“Dean,” Cas said. He sounded confused. “What are you *doing*?”

“When people are scared,” Dean began, “they want comfort, right? ‘s what I used to do for Sammy when he had a nightmare. Just go to sleep, Cas. I’ll be here in the morning.”

Cas lay there for several seconds, contemplating, before he seemed to accept Dean’s words. After several minutes of allowing himself to relax, Cas reached over and clung back to Dean, almost desperately. Yeah, they were *cuddling*, this was a thing that was happening.

Dean resisted the urge to sigh, instead snuggling closer to Castiel. The angel was already asleep, snoring lightly, and Dean smiled against his forehead.

It should have been more disturbing to him how comfortable this was, how much he’d like to be able to do this forever, but he was too tired to deal with psychological bullshit. It could wait until morning.

He closed his eyes and drifted off peacefully.



Sunday night, Cas hovered near Dean's bed, and Dean obediently scooted over, which made this less a one-time incident and more a *tradition*. Castiel wouldn't understand the difference, he thought, but there wasn't really anything wrong with cuddling as long as you didn't fuckin' *talk* about it the next day.

Both of them slept better for it. Dean could tell that Cas looked well-rested during the days, and lord knows *he* did. He even managed to get through school pretty happily, despite the fact that Cas wasn't there. The difference a bedmate that you gave a shit about could make was pronounced. He'd experienced this to some extent with Lisa, but this level of comfort and trust had never been present between him and his ex-girlfriend. To be fair, he'd been fresh from watching his brother plummet into Hell; he hadn't much trusted *anyone* at the time.

He wondered if he'd have slept better had he been sleeping next to Cas instead of Lisa after all of that. And then promptly pushed the thought from his mind.

Castiel healed at an exceptional – although once again, not superhuman – rate, and got his clearance to go back to school on Wednesday, very nearly two weeks after he'd been stabbed. Wednesday morning was hectic; Dean had got back into his morning workout routine the week prior, but staunchly refused to allow Cas to join him until he got a doctor's note. Half of his workout time was spent shouting at Castiel, which annoyed John and woke both Mary and Sam up. Finally Dean stormed out of the house and went for a run without any warm-up or workout, just trying to burn off some of his fury at how little Cas cared to take care of himself.

It had snowed a few nights before, and the sidewalks were still pretty slick. Dean should have paid closer attention but the argument with Cas distracted him; he tripped, flailed, and slid a solid twelve feet on his ass before coming to a stop in someone's driveway. The wind had been knocked out of him, and he spent several seconds there with his mouth open, gasping for air that wouldn't come.

Finally, he pulled himself up and groaned. His knee wasn't sprained, just bruised, but it hurt like a *bitch* and he was going to have to walk home on it. He resented the fuck out of the fact that cell phones weren't

commonplace items yet: he couldn't even call for a ride and he was at *least* a half a mile from home.

Limping, he started back toward the Winchester household. He'd probably make everyone late for school, which was *bullshit*. Really, Dean was old enough to get over himself and stop letting Castiel's crap get to him like this. Yeah, the fucked up teen hormones were making him quicker to anger than usual (and in retrospect, Cas probably got pissed off easier than usual too, and for the *same reason*), but he had the advantage of experience here. He *knew* better. Cas didn't: he'd never had a childhood, didn't know what puberty put someone through.

Heh. He was willing to bet that this was eye-opening and confusing as *fuck* for the angel.

He'd made it halfway home when the Impala pulled up next to him. His dad was sitting in the driver's seat (Sam was in the back; they'd clearly both been on the lookout for Dean), and he gestured his eldest son toward the passenger side. Dean climbed in gratefully.

"Thanks," he said, wincing as he buckled his seat belt. "Tripped and bruised my knee."

John smirked. "I figured that was a possibility. I don't think I've ever seen you and Cas fight like that."

"Like an old married couple," Sam piped up from

behind them. Dean glared at him over his shoulder and flipped him the bird, which John scolded him for.

Dean must have looked more disheveled than he thought, because when he walked through the door, Castiel – freshly showered and ready for school – actually looked alarmed. “What happened?”

Dean shrugged and limped over to the couch, sitting himself down gingerly. He pulled up the hem of his track pants, up to over his knee. It was rapidly swelling and oozing blood from a myriad of tiny cuts, and he sighed.

“Twisted my knee up a little, that’s all,” he said. A glance at the clock told him that he’d *really* screwed up his time. “I’m gonna be late, I can’t go in looking like this. I need a shower.” Cas came to kneel next to him, fussing with the wound and trying to clean the scrapes off with a piece of tissue, which made Dean flush. Sam shot him a knowing look from behind John, mouthing, “*Old. Married. Couple,*” at him. Dean glared in his general direction before his attention was dragged back toward Castiel; he hissed in pain as Cas knocked a tender spot.

“I can take Cas and Sam in the truck on my way to work,” Mary said, coming up to the edge of the couch and crossing her arms. “That way you’ll be the only tardy one.”

“I’m not going without Dean,” Cas said, waving away her concern. He continued trying to clean up Dean’s wounds, his attention having switched focus toward the scrapes across both of Dean’s palms. Dean only just barely caught the look John shot Mary, but he couldn’t tell what they were trying to communicate to each other. Dean looked down at Cas, helplessly.

“Dude, you shouldn’t be late because of me,” Dean said. “It’s your first day back.”

“Which means that if we’re late no one will think to comment on it,” Cas replied, looking up into Dean’s eyes. Out of long habit, Dean held the angel’s gaze before realizing what this probably looked like to everyone else in the room. He shook his head, looking at Mary in mute appeal.

She shrugged. “If Castiel wants to wait for you, Dean, I’m not gonna stop him. He’s almost an adult.”

“*Traitor*,” he said, automatically. She grinned at him and turned to Sam.

“In the truck in five,” she told him. She turned back toward Cas briefly. “Help him get cleaned up, alright? I don’t want to hear that you two stretched your tardiness out any longer than it needed to be.”

Cas nodded, his face solemn and his eyes wide. Like this was some sort of sacred duty that he’d been

assigned. Then again, Cas always had the annoying habit of assuming that any assignment he was given was of grave importance.

Mary shot John another indecipherable look before leaving the room to get the last of her things.

“You’ll be alright?” John commented. Dean looked at him and nodded.

“Nothing broken,” he said, shifting his leg to test this theory. “Just bruised and banged up, is all.”

“Alright, well, I’ll see you boys after school,” John said. He was still giving them an odd look, but the question that Dean was almost certain was going to come – the question about whether they were having sex or not, or maybe if they were seeing each other – stayed in John’s head rather than falling out of his mouth.

John left for work. A few minutes later Mary and Sam were heading for the door when Mary stopped and turned to regard them; Castiel had managed to pull himself away from Dean long enough to procure a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a wad of gauze, and some waterproof bandages. He’d settled down to torturing Dean through antiseptic stings by now and it took Mary several seconds to get his concentration turned toward her. If the expression on his face was anything to go by,

he didn't think much of the distraction.

"Yes?" he asked, voice terse.

"I just wanted to remind you that Balthazar's trial is tomorrow," Mary said. Castiel's eyes widened and he nodded slowly. "You're expected to testify, but if you're not feeling up to it I can ask for an extension, after everything that happened..."

Cas gave the question no small amount of consideration before nodding. "I should be fine," he said. He turned back toward Dean's injuries, placing a bandage over the largest cut with something bordering on reverence. Mary shot a look, fond and affectionate, toward the pair of them as she left with Sam in tow.

As he exited the house, Sam made a gagging gesture at Dean and then smirked. Dean glared back at him but couldn't think of anything to say in rebuttal. His little brother was right: Castiel was acting like an overprotective boyfriend. Dean supposed it was the angel's way of making up for his lack of healing abilities, but it wasn't like he could *tell* anyone that.

Dean sighed as Cas finished cleaning his injuries. Standing and trying not to wobble too hard, he headed for the stairs and the bathroom so he could shower. Putting weight on his injured knee hurt like a bitch, and he couldn't bring himself to protest too hard when Cas

slid under his arm and helped support him up the stairs.

He drew the line at letting the other teen undress him, however, and physically pushed Castiel out of the bathroom when Cas looked to be considering that option. “No, absolutely not, *no way*,” he said, closing the door behind Cas firmly. “If you wanna help me, grab the clothes I picked out last night and bring them in when I get in the shower,” he called through the wood.

There was a moment of silence, and then Castiel replied, “Okay,” and Dean could hear him stumping off toward their room. Dean sighed in relief, peeling himself out of his filthy workout clothes and setting the shower to something warm and soothing.

He had to sit on the floor of the shower because his knee wouldn’t hold him up. This meant he’d have a good chance to jerk off once Cas came and went with his clothes (he got pretty weak at the knees when he came, so shower-time was normally *strictly* that). He ran suds through his hair with his fingers, happily thinking about his future masturbatory adventures as he waited for Cas to come and go.

He heard the bathroom door open and close and some quiet, shuffling noises that he assumed were Cas setting his clothes down on the counter. He waited for several seconds, but the door didn’t open again. He

narrowed his eyes and peeked around the curtain.

Sure as shit, there was Cas, sitting on the closed toilet lid and regarding Dean with some trepidation.

“Get. *Out*,” Dean ordered.

Cas looked taken aback. “I’ve seen you naked before, Dean,” he tried to explain, sitting stiffly upright. “It’s not some sort of secret.”

“*When* – no, nevermind, *don’t* want to know. The point is, shower time is *alone-time*. You gotta go, man.”

Cas took several seconds to realize that *alone-time* meant *no-Castiel-time* and he frowned. Several more seconds passed before understanding bloomed across his face.

“You’re going to masturbate,” he said.

Dean blushed bright red. “GET OUT!” he shouted, grabbing the bar of soap and launching it at Cas.

Cas flushed as he ducked the soap, but he seemed to understand that Dean *meant* it when he said to leave, because he did so. Dean glared at the door for several seconds before turning to face the taps and crossing his arms. Water fell on him from above, getting in his eyes. At this point he was so annoyed and embarrassed with Cas that jerking off would only result in him angrily yanking at his dick for several minutes before giving it up as a lost cause.

He closed his eyes, letting out a long breath, before opening them again and carefully finishing up his washing. By the time he was clean, he had calmed down considerably, enough to start considering fantasy-versions of the scene that had just taken place.

What if he *hadn't* kicked Cas out? If he'd just gone to town, *knowing* that only the thin vinyl shower curtain separated him from the angel's view? What would Cas have done if he heard the noises Dean was making?

Well, likely he'd have just sat there, staring at the shower curtain like some sort of creepy gargoyle statue, but Dean preferred to imagine a scenario where Castiel took interest in the proceedings.

In his mind, Cas was curious and stood from the toilet, slowly inching toward the shower, where Dean would have been tugging at his own cock and letting out gasping, quiet noises.

As he thought about it, his dick began to swell between his legs, and he grabbed it firmly. He started to stroke, pushing any feelings of guilt to the back of his mind, to be dealt with later.

He let his fingers pull, a little rougher toward the head like he liked it, while he snaked his other hand down to tickle at his balls with his fingertips. He imagined Cas peeking in through the gap between

curtain and wall, curious blue eyes taking in the view. Dean wasn't blind, he *knew* he was good looking, and he imagined Cas licking his lips at the sight of Dean spread out, slick and wet as he touched himself.

Fantasy-Dean leaned his head back and caught sight of Cas watching him. If this happened in real life, it was a fifty-fifty shot: Dean would either get furiously angry and throw something at Cas (as evidenced before) or he would stop what he was doing and demand that Cas leave. Angrily, of course, because you don't interrupt a man's alone-time like that.

In his fantasy, however, he simply continued looking back at Castiel as his strokes firmed up, became more confident. The idea of Castiel watching him was a *massive* turn-on, it seemed, because his strokes in real life began to stutter and he slid headfirst into an orgasm that left him gasping for breath.

"Damn," he said, shaking his head. Apparently he had a thing for voyeurism, or rather, for one *specific* person looking at him.

God, he was so *screwed*.



As it turned out, they were only halfway through Calculus when the two of them got to school, and Mary had called ahead to let the administration know the two of them would be late.

Excused tardies. *Sweet.*

The majority of the school day passed pretty quickly; before Dean really considered it, lunch had arrived and Dean was steering Cas toward the table he'd been sitting at all week. Castiel looked surprised and a little bit unnerved, but Sam and Vicky greeted him instantly and the rest of the stoners took his reappearance in stride, so the other teen relaxed pretty early on.

Seventh period was the last class of the day, and Dean always felt light-headed and tired by then. It was coming up on 2:30 p.m., when they'd get out of school, and he was *really* ready for the day to be over. History just wasn't his subject.

Cas was by all accounts reading his textbook with some amount of scrutiny, and after several minutes of this Dean poked him.

"C'mon man, there's nothing in there you don't already know," he whispered. They had a table to themselves, which was kind of nice for private conversations, but kind of annoying because they

tended to get singled out for questions.

“I’m not reading my history text,” Cas said. He sounded absent-minded, like answering Dean’s questions wasn’t very high on his priority list. “I’m rereading my journal.”

Dean stared at him like he’d lost his damn mind. “*Why?*” he hissed. “If someone catches you with that –”

“No one will catch me,” Cas said, confidently. “I need to refresh my memory for the trial tomorrow.”

At that Dean clammed up. There was no doubt in his mind that Castiel only being able to remember the one incident would let Balthazar walk. So there was a point.

But on the other hand –

“Cas, teenagers are *assholes*,” he argued under his breath. The history teacher got up from his desk. Dean had been steadfast in ignoring his lecture up until now, but he quickly refocused his attention. *Ah*, he was just changing the transparency on the projector. He leaned back toward Cas. “If one of them catches you reading your fucking *diary*, you’re boned.”

“It’s not a diary,” Cas said. “It’s a journal.”

“*Same fucking thing*,” Dean replied.

“No, it’s *not*,” Cas said. “Diaries have locks.”

Dean blinked. He opened his mouth, and then

closed it again. Really, he couldn't find a good argument against that.

"Still, you said it had private shit in it," Dean finally continued. He felt this was a reasonable point to raise. "If someone catches you with it, they'll *take* it. And they'll *read* it. And if it has anything in it like *mine* did, you do *not* want that shit becoming public knowledge."

Cas turned toward Dean, the full impact of his gaze slamming into him. Dean blinked. Cas cocked his head at him and for the billionth time Dean was reminded of a confused cocker spaniel.

"You read your journal?" Cas asked.

Dean turned back toward the teacher, flushing. "It got boring while you were in the hospital," he said, fingers automatically reaching out to toy with the edge of his paper. He could *feel* Castiel smirking next to him, but when he finally glanced back at the other teen, his face was buried in his textbook.

Dean sighed. He had it *bad*.



The car was a bit more full than it usually was on the ride home – Dean and Cas sat up front, and Sam in

the back, but Vicky had joined them for a study-date with Sam. Apparently they had Spanish together, and Sam was miserable at it.

This was clearly just an excuse (Dean knew for a fact that Sam took to foreign languages like a duck to water), but Castiel didn't pick up on that and Dean let it slide because he was feeling generous. He hadn't forgot Sam mocking him that morning, oh no – he was just saving his ire for something worthy of retribution.

Sam would learn his lesson in due time. Until then, best to lure him in with a false sense of security.

Dean and Cas quickly got their homework done with; Cas wanted to continue rereading his journal, and Dean just couldn't stand being in the same room with Vicky and Sam. It was sickeningly cute, and Dean just didn't *do* cute.

After about an hour of dealing with shameless flirting between the two of them – and in broken textbook Spanish, even – Dean and Cas were able to escape up to their bedroom, where a surprise lay for them.

John had apparently taken some time off work that morning, because while Dean's queen-sized bed was still where it had been that morning, rigged above it on a sturdy-looking wooden frame was a twin bed.

“We have bunk beds,” Dean said, staring at it in awe. Then he frowned. “Why would Dad bother to build this *now*? You’ve been on the cot for months.”

Cas considered the frame with some trepidation before his face colored. Dean realized where his thought process was going and flushed as well.

“Aw, *hell*,” he said. “He must have seen us sleeping.”

It put him in a shitty mood for the rest of the evening. He could take people thinking something might be going on between them because of their actions while awake, but people knowing about the cuddling was *drawing the damn line*. He slammed things, he grunted out one-word answers, and was just generally a dick.

Finally, Mary pulled him into the kitchen, ostensibly to help with the dishes. Dean muttered under his breath as he helped his mother rinse assorted detritus off of plates, but he kept it at that level: Mary Winchester wasn’t a woman to be fucked with in *any* reality, and he still remembered her kicking his ass back in the seventies.

“Dean, you’re being an asshole,” she said, finally. She sounded frustrated and almost instantly Dean felt bad. “Is this about the bed?”

Dean flushed. “Look, it’s not –”

Mary held up a hand. “I have no idea what’s going on between you two, and to be honest I don’t *want* to know. It makes your dad feel better about the situation, so I let him do it, okay?”

“It’s not *like* that,” Dean insisted. There was dead silence for several seconds before he blurted out, “Cas has nightmares.”

Mary regarded him seriously and he found himself continuing. “He freaks out, you know, because he sees me get stabbed instead of him, or maybe with him I dunno, and if he wakes up and I’m there it’s okay, you know? But if I’m not he has to walk over and wake me up. Just, you know, to reassure himself.”

“Every night?” she replied, her voice quiet. Dean nodded, miserably.

Mary sighed. “Just – I let your dad build the frame because he found you guys a few nights ago.” She grinned at him. “I’m not going to say it wasn’t *completely* adorable –”

“*Mom!*” Dean protested.

“– But he’s still...still getting used to this. His first instinct was to make Cas sleep in Sam’s room.”

“No,” Dean said, his spine straightening. Not only would Cas be freaked out if he couldn’t check on Dean

in the middle of the night, but Dean liked having the angel close too. Not that he'd ever admit it, but sometimes he woke up in the morning and just looked at Cas, marveled at the fact that he wasn't in Purgatory, that he was *here*. Most of the time it was the best part of his day, and he wasn't willing to give that up.

"That's what I said," Mary said, grinning wryly. "The bunk bed was a compromise, but I won't force you to use it."

"Just —" Dean started. He paused, considered, and then continued. "Just tell him. Tell him about the nightmares. It's not like that with Cas, he's my *friend*."

"Dean," Mary said, frowning. "You don't curl up around someone like that if they're just your friend."

Dean laughed weakly, his eyes darting away from hers. "Well, you know Cas. He's always had personal space issues."

Mary regarded him for several more seconds before she sighed and nodded. "I'll talk to him. You go apologize to your brother and Cas, because you've been a piece of work all damn night." She made a shooing motion with her hands, and Dean grinned: he was officially excused from finishing the dishes. *Sweet*.

Dean did apologize to Sam, later that evening and just before he and Cas went upstairs to bed. He didn't

tell his brother why he'd been in such a shitty mood, didn't even bother explaining, just apologized. Sam took it with fairly good grace for a 14-year-old, too.

"Eh, it's alright, Dean," Sam said. He was in his bedroom, throwing darts at a dartboard. It was something Dean had never seen Sam do in *any* life, and it occurred to him that despite raising Sammy, he didn't actually know a whole lot about what he liked to do for fun.

Sam took sight, aimed, and launched the dart. It landed with a *thunk* right near the center. Dean was impressed.

"I mean it," Dean insisted, stubborn in his apologies as everything else. "I shouldn't be so shitty to you just because I'm having an off day or whatever."

"It's not like I'm not used to it," Sam said, shrugging, as he walked to the dartboard and retrieved his darts. He gave his older brother the stink-eye. "*You* probably haven't noticed, but *we* all know you're kind of a bitch."

Dean stared at him like he was insane. Sam started to laugh.

"Don't give me that look, Dean, you practically go through PMS at the end of every month. We all brace for it, even Cas."

"I hate you *so fucking much*," Dean swore.

“It’s alright, Dean, *really*,” Sam assured him. He looked so earnest that for a brief second Dean almost believed him, but then his younger brother smirked and added, “Your *husband* got stabbed, you’re allowed to be a little cranky.”

Dean didn’t give it a second thought, just reached out for Sam, intending to give him the noogie to end all noogies, but Sam was quick, jumping quickly to the side and darting between Dean and the door. Dean hollered after him unintelligibly, giving chase. Part of him was irritated at the comment – husband, *seriously?* – but mostly he was enjoying horsing around with his little brother. He’d almost never had the opportunity to do this when they were in school, because he was busy playing parent rather than brother.

Sam was undeniably quick, but Dean was faster, and he finally caught up to him and gave him the promised noogie of doom in the living room. Castiel, Mary, and John watched on in general bemusement.

“Alright, that’s enough,” John said, after a few minutes of Sam calling for their help. “Let your brother go, Dean.”

“He’s being a dick,” Dean said.

“Language,” Mary said, reprovably. Dean sighed and let Sam go. Sam stuck his tongue out at Dean,

grinned innocently at his parents and Cas, and dashed back up the stairs.

“He’s going to be a horse,” Dean commented, stretching out gingerly on the carpet as he caught his breath.

“Probably,” Mary said. “My dad’s over six feet tall, and Sam takes after his namesake.”

John grunted at that; Dean remembered that Samuel Campbell and John Winchester had never quite gotten along.

“Speaking of my father,” Mary said, turning toward John. She looked him in the eye with a stern look on her face. “My parents will be coming over for Thanksgiving. *You’re* going to behave.”

“I’ll behave if *he* does,” John said, mutinously. He sounded like he was about ten years old, and Dean considered pointing this out, but the amusement factor wasn’t worth it.

Mary rolled her eyes. “You two are adults. You’ll *both* behave or I swear to *God*, my mother and I will stake the both of you out on the front lawn.”

John sighed the sigh of the long-suffering, and Dean smirked at them from his spot on the floor. Then he flung himself up. It was getting late, and Cas had a court hearing to go to tomorrow.

Castiel obediently stood and followed him toward his bedroom. Nothing had been said publicly about the bunk bed, and Dean wasn't about to start now, but he glanced back at his parents to say goodnight and Mary nodded at him and jerked her head toward her husband.

Cas wished his foster-parents a good evening as well, and the two of them walked in tandem up the stairs. Once their bedroom door was closed behind them Dean turned to Cas.

"You don't have to sleep on the top bunk if you don't want to," he said, voice quiet. "I talked to my mom and she's alright with it. If you know, you need it."

Cas regarded Dean for several seconds before nodding. "Thank you," he said. "I would like to use your computer before sleeping anyway, if that's alright?"

Dean grinned. "Sure. It's ancient, though, about as close to Sam's laptop as a mouse wheel is to the Impala."

Cas didn't appear to understand what Dean was getting at, but Dean brushed past him anyway, showing Cas how to flick the power on and what the start bar was and how to sign on to AOL and use their shitty browser.

Dean flopped over on his bed as Cas hesitantly began typing out queries. "Picking up the research

again?” This had been a favorite pastime of theirs over the last two months, except that they’d managed to plow their way through every book on the supernatural in the Winchester library (and the public one) without a single hint toward how the two of them had been misplaced.

Cas nodded solemnly. “I’ve been remiss in my search. It’s too easy to get sucked into a human life like this.”

“It is,” Dean agreed, laying back on his bed and putting his hands behind his head. “Everything seems a lot more pleasant when you don’t have to worry about the supernatural jumping out and ganking you. Normal’s nice, normal’s *easy*.”

“Easy for you, perhaps,” Cas said, snorting. “I’m an angel, Dean. None of this is *normal*, and I shouldn’t *want* this.”

Dean raised an eyebrow at him, tilting his head in a way that he had *absolutely not* picked up from Castiel.

“What, you *want* to be a teenager?”

Cas shook his head. “Not a teenager, no. My brief brush with mortality before Lucifer was not nearly this overwhelming; I expect the emotional overload and hormones do odd things to teenagers.”

“Cas, you have no idea,” Dean said. He paused, and then continued: “Emotional overload? Dude, you’re

like a blank slate.”

Cas blinked and then chuckled. “Dean, I am what I am. My natural reticence doesn’t mean I don’t get overwhelmed, it just means I don’t *show* it.”

“Must be nice,” Dean muttered. He stood up again and grabbed his nightclothes from the top of his dresser. “Be right back,” he said. Cas stood up as well, reaching for his own sleepwear; Dean knew he’d take the opportunity of Dean being gone to change himself.

Ten minutes later, the lights were off and Dean was snuggled up in his bed. Cas was sifting through his internet search results, the glow of the computer monitor throwing his shadow into sharp relief on the wall opposite. It was comforting, almost, to hear Cas tapping away slowly at the keyboard as Dean drifted off to sleep.

After a while Castiel turned the computer off – Dean had showed him how – and just before he fell asleep, he could feel Cas snuggling in next to him in bed.



There was no repeat of the Dean-Cas exercise fight the next morning, which was all for the better as Mary

was running around like an idiot the entire time Dean was preparing for his workout, and *well* after he got back.

The Winchester matriarch was well-versed in child abuse hearings, but never had she been there to watch someone she considered her own *son* testify, and she was nerve-wracked, coaching Castiel the entire morning in between making breakfast for everyone. Cas, still in the process of waking up, was nodding absently to her comments, occasionally repeating back something she said, until he finally stared at Dean in mute appeal for a rescue.

“Dunno what to tell you, man,” Dean said, walking in from his workout to snag another cup of coffee before he jumped into the shower. “I’m gonna take a shower, it’s not like you can come with.”

The look Cas shot him made it clear that the other teen considered that a perfectly valid option considering the circumstances, and Dean laughed outright at his friend’s confusion and misery.

Dean showered in record time, clomping down the stairs about ten minutes later in a pair of black slacks and a gray button-down shirt open at the collar. He’d be joining Cas in court for moral support, midway through the day, and he didn’t want to make Mary look bad in

front of her coworkers.

The rest of the family had already sat down to breakfast. Cas glanced at Dean as he walked into the kitchen and started filling his plate; to Dean's surprise, the angel did a classic double-take, taking in Dean's change in outfit with wide eyes. It sent a shiver down Dean's spine: he was pretty sure that Cas had just never seen him in office casual before, but on anyone else it would be a pretty blatant check-out. He shook his head and continued getting himself breakfast, trying to ignore the tingling feeling at the back of his neck.

Dean had pointedly not taken in Castiel's clothes, which Mary had purchased the night before at Wal-Mart, because Cas always managed to make every item of clothing look uncomfortable, ever. He was surprised to find that the tan slacks and blue button-down looked *great* on the angel, and found himself swallowing hard as he rose to put his dishes into the sink.

Mary chattered the entire way through breakfast, still coaching Cas on what to expect, and kept reminding them that they had to leave after lunch and that she'd already organized it all with the school administration so she wouldn't have to be there to check them out. Finally Dean sighed.

"Mom. We *got* it," he said. Sam and Castiel had

both started edging toward the stairs so they could brush their teeth, and Dean wanted to do the same. Which was impossible if his mother didn't shut the hell up.

She bit her lip and started worrying at it with her teeth, which made Dean's expression soften slightly. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright," he said. "Everything'll be *fine*."

Mary nodded, and Dean excused himself to brush his teeth.

The ride to school was somber, even Sam (who *wouldn't* be attending the hearing) electing to remain quiet. Castiel spent the majority of the morning ignoring his lessons and rereading the selections of his journal he'd found that referred to the abuse: he didn't seem nervous in the slightest, but then again that was pure Cas. The angel only ever got nervous if Dean's life was in danger or there were sexually aggressive women in his near vicinity.

The two of them bolted down their lunches so they could leave school early, Sam and Vicky both wishing them good luck as they dashed out of the cafeteria. Some of the football players who were back side-eyed the *fuck* out of them, but luckily they seemed pretty impotent without Beefaroni there to rile them up.

Dean received an allowance of \$20 every week (so did Sam, and Mary and John had included Castiel in the tradition once he'd moved in. Cas had no idea what to do with the money so he simply shoved it in Dean's desk drawer every Friday), and as he had no social life to speak of (and his parents gave him an additional \$10 for gas, and good *Christ* gas was only like a buck a gallon, he'd *kill* for these prices back in 2013), the cash just tended to rack up. Dean used the extra time to spend some of his cash on chocolate milkshakes for the both of them, something that Castiel had discovered he was fond of. The delighted look on the other teen's face made the detour well worth it, and Dean tried to ignore the bright, fuzzy feeling it lit in his chest.

It was, by his calculations, two weeks exactly since he'd realized how hard he'd fallen for the angel, and he was honestly surprised at how easily he seemed to just incorporate the knowledge into his life. It just *was*, like his love for his brother and the fact that he knew about twenty different ways to inconvenience demons. He wondered if it was because that was just the way love worked, or if it was because he'd actually been in love with Cas for way longer than he wanted to think about.

Once again, *not thinking about it*.

Dean had actually had to look in the phone book to

find the court address, because there was no such thing as Google in 1996, let alone Google Maps, and then he'd found a battered Lawrence road map shoved into the glove compartment of his Honda. From comments Mary had made, Dean had clearly been there in the past, which in *his* life wasn't actually true: he avoided Lawrence, Kansas assiduously throughout his teen years and adult life. Still, asking her how to get there would have garnered him a strange look at best, outright concern at worst.

He pulled into the parking lot and spotted a very nervous-looking Mary Winchester standing near the doors. She had another cigarette in her mouth, which Dean was fast learning only happened when she was almost sick with nerves.

"Is your mother smoking?" Cas asked, eyes wide as he reached down blindly to unclip his seat belt.

"Yeah, apparently she's a nervous smoker," Dean said, frowning. "Heh, you should have seen her outside the emergency room when you got shanked. I didn't know her long enough to find out, before."

Castiel accepted this information with a nod of his head, and the two of them stepped out of the Honda, locking the doors out of now-established habit as they exited.

Mary crushed the cigarette out as they approached her, looking guilty as she did so. Neither of them mentioned it.

“Okay, so it’s Judge Richardson,” she said, as she ushered the two teens into the building. “He’s pretty sympathetic toward abused teens, Cas, but there’s likely to be lots of questions about why you never told me, knowing I work for the division, so –”

Cas negated that with a shake of his head. “I will be fine,” he assured her. His lips quirked up at the corner on one side, softening the severe expression he wore almost perpetually. “Calm down.”

Mary stopped and let out a sigh, forcing her muscles to relax as her two sons – one by blood and the other by choice – came up alongside her. The door to the courtroom was to their left, and Dean eyed it with some amount of trepidation.

Cas turned 18, officially, in just over a month, so even if Balthazar got off Dean was pretty sure they could convince the judge to let him stay with the Winchester household. The problem was that if Balthazar got off, well, the other man knew where they all lived. He’d been in jail for several weeks before making bail, had lost his job, had lost all of his possessions when he’d been evicted, and now had a

felony arrest on his record even if it didn't turn out to be a conviction. Last Dean checked he was crashing on some chick's sofa.

So yeah, Balthazar needed to go away.

He looked at Cas. Cas nodded back, solemnly. Dean was very suddenly struck by the fact that they might never get out of here: they might be stuck in this reality together for the rest of their lives.

Somehow, it didn't seem like that bad an option. So long as he had Cas with him, Dean could deal.

Inhaling, he opened the door to the courtroom and propped it open, gesturing for his other family members to precede him.

This was it.



Dean had forgotten what it was like to be in a courtroom, watching trials and hearings. It'd been so long since he'd made it to that part: usually he'd disappeared off into the night shortly after being arrested. It was a talent that had annoyed the everliving shit out of Victor Henrickson when he'd been alive.

Thinking of the FBI agent *hurt*, so Dean turned his

focus back to the hearing. He'd never been to a jury trial before; all of his previous hearings had been for misdemeanors, minor traffic offenses and the like, but Balthazar was up for two counts of felony abuse of a minor and two counts of child endangerment, so he was before a jury. It was strange, seeing all of those anonymous-looking faces staring back at them.

Cas was in the stand, staring at the defense attorney like he'd grown a second head. But then again, Cas stared at pretty much everyone like that, all the time. Like he didn't understand humans, *period*, which annoyed Dean because he'd put a lot of time and effort into normalizing his angel.

There it was again. *His* angel. Dean needed to stop thinking of him like that. First because here, Cas wasn't *actually* an angel. Or maybe he was just a powered-down angel. Either way, not applicable.

Secondly because he wasn't *his*.

Dean had spent the majority of his life truly believing that he was stupid. Slowly but surely he was realizing that no, he *wasn't* stupid, he just had a younger brother who was bordering on genius. That said, he'd taken a good chunk of time the last few weeks to really puzzle over his feelings for Castiel and wonder why the lack of reciprocation didn't hurt. If this had been Lisa or Cassie,

he knew that the likely rejection would sting like a bitch; somehow this *didn't*. Which didn't make sense, and Dean was strongly considering checking out some psychology books on the subject because he was just *waiting* for the other shoe to drop.

Because Dean *knew* he was fucked up. He might be developing a sense of self-worth, but Dean Winchester had been (literally) through Hell and back. And then for shits and giggles, Heaven and back. And then, even more ludicrously, Purgatory and back. This on *top* of watching his brother die (three times), a mountain of daddy issues he didn't *ever* want to think about, the real-life coping skills of a three-year-old, an unhealthy attachment to booze and sex, and a codependency for his brother that was so strong people thought they were fucking each other. So in Dean's experience, he was likely in denial or pushing something back, and it was going to hit him and he was going to have a nervous goddamn breakdown at a critical point.

Yeah, it might not be in the middle of ganking a bunch of vampires this time around, but the SATs were coming up (*Jesus Christ* that was something he never thought he'd think, even to himself) and it would be just his luck that the freakout would happen right in the

middle of it.

He tried to focus on what Cas was saying. The angel spoke softly, enumerating different things, and every now and then he glanced at Dean, who smiled sort of absently every time. Cas didn't smile back – smiling wasn't really his thing – but it seemed to be encouraging him, so Dean at least tried not to zone out *too* terribly.

Court was boring, though, and pretty soon he found himself contemplating this whole Dean-loves-Castiel thing again. Before he knew it, Cas was dismissed from the stand and came to sit in between Dean and Mary.

“Good job,” Mary said, briefly touching Castiel's forearm to emphasize what she was saying. Cas nodded at her and turned his gaze toward Dean, as he always did after Dean had required him to do something. It was like the angel was asking for a critique of his acting skills, which, well, he sort of was. Dean smiled and nodded his assurance before turning back to the proceedings.

The doctor – Steve, Dean remembered, was up next, and after him the police officer who'd been called to the house. Mary's boss and Mary were both called up as well, and finally Balthazar himself. The pictures of Castiel's back were shown to the judge and jury, and

Dean was *really* grateful he didn't have to see them. Once was enough.

Eventually things wound down. Dean almost wished he'd brought a book of some sort, he was getting so bored. Hell, even Cas looked bored, and Cas was never bored. Cas was continually fascinated with all things human.

It was damn close to 4:30 – which is when the courthouse started winding down for the day, according to Mary – when the jury filed back in and gave their verdict: guilty on all counts.

Mary let out a soft sigh of relief and slumped over in the pewlike courthouse seating, her muscles relaxing automatically with the release of stress. Cas also let out a little puff of air that Dean was pretty sure was supposed to be a sigh as well. Dean just smiled.

The judge declared Cas a ward of the state until his 18th birthday. At this Dean leaned forward, anxious, because he very suddenly realized that the courts had the right to take Cas away from them. That worry was dashed when the judge clarified with Mary that she was willing to take Cas on for the remainder of the school year.

Mary looked almost offended that he'd even bothered asking when she said yes. The only thing that

made Dean happier than how awesome his mom was, was seeing Balthazar escorted out of the room in handcuffs.



Some paperwork had to be attended to with both Castiel and Mary present, and Dean wasn't leaving Cas, so by the time the three of them exited the courthouse – just after 5 p.m., the guards locking the doors behind them – it was halfway to full darkness.

Mary looked around and then smiled. “What do you say, guys? Should we tell John and Sammy to meet us somewhere to celebrate?”

Dean stared at her. In the two and a half months he and Cas had been stuck in this weird alternate reality, the Winchester household had never once gone out to eat. Occasionally, Mary or John would pick up takeout on the way home, and once Mary had ordered pizza in, but Dean had quickly learned that Mary thought eating out was a waste of money (and that his parents were both generally too tired after work to bother with going somewhere).

Before Dean could formulate an answer, Cas piped

up from beside him.

“I would like a burger,” he said, voice as serious as ever. Dean snorted and tried to stifle his laughter; Cas threw him a dirty look. Dean knew they both were remembering Famine. Cas hadn’t been able to look at a burger without looking a little green around the gills for *months* afterward, but once he’d got over the aversion he’d enjoyed them again. *Very* occasionally.

Mary laughed as well. “You and burgers, Cas. Fine, how about Dempsey’s over on Vermont? We haven’t been there in at *least* two years.”

Dean had no clue, but the idea of a real burger made his mouth water just a little bit. He nodded enthusiastically, and Cas followed suit.

Mary headed for the pay phone on the corner, calling out for the two of them to meet everyone there.

Cas turned toward Dean, smiling slightly. “That’s one problem out of the way,” he said, his voice easy in a way that it hadn’t been in several days.

Dean nodded. “Now if only we could find out how the fuck to get home,” he said, sighing and reaching into his pants pocket for his keys. The two of them started to walk toward the Honda.

“An answer will present itself eventually,” Castiel said. “I’ll keep looking online. Does Lawrence have a

secondary library branch?”

Dean shrugged, unlocking his car door and then quickly sliding in to unlock Castiel's side. “I dunno, maybe? I'd barely learned to read when the house burned down; libraries were a bit beyond me, to be honest.”

Cas sighed. “While I don't mind the rest, I'm anxious to get back home. The remaining Leviathan could be doing any number of terrible things.”

Dean shrugged again. “I dunno, man, without Dick they seemed to be sort of dying out. We were in the middle of this thing, chasing Kevin Tran around because he found a Word of God that talked about closing the gates of Hell forever; the Leviathan weren't really at the top of our priority list.”

Cas blinked and turned his entire body to look at Dean. “Close the gates of Hell?”

Dean started the car and nodded. “Yeah. Kevin told us about it. Kind of a big deal, huh?”

Cas turned back toward the front, pulling absently at his lower lip with his right thumb and forefinger. His brow furrowed in concentration.

“Closing the gates of Hell may lead to the closure of the gates of Heaven,” he said, slowly.

“What?” Dean was glad he'd come to a full stop in

front of a red light, because he was pretty sure he'd have swerved right into oncoming rush-hour traffic had Cas said that while the car was in motion. "Are you *shitting* me?"

Cas shook his head. "The gates of Hell were created after those of Heaven, of course, but they were made in the same way. They're linked."

"So we'd be dooming everyone who dies, ever, to just...I dunno, walk around as ghosts on earth?"

Castiel blinked and looked at Dean for several seconds before outright laughing; the sound sent a delighted shiver down Dean's spine.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Souls enter heaven and hell in a different manner than what you're thinking of, Dean. The gates allow things to *leave*: demons to come topside, angels and resurrected souls to return to earth."

Dean frowned. "But what'll happen to *you* if we close the gates to Heaven?"

Cas sighed. "I expect I won't be able to return to Earth ever again." Then he shuddered slightly.

"Although I suppose that's probably for the best."

"*What?*" It was ripped from Dean's throat before he had a chance to self-censor. "So, we close the gates of Heaven and you just get sucked back, no choice at all?"

Cas turned to look at Dean again, his head cocked. "I expect I'd be in Heaven already, Dean. I have a lot to answer for, and while my brief stint as God," and at this he shuddered again, "May have left Heaven's ranks depleted, there are still angels left. I'll be punished, no doubt." He frowned and pondered for several seconds before adding, "That's assuming I don't just get sent to Hell. I am, after all, a fallen angel still in possession of his grace. That's the usual spot for fallen angels to go. I think the only reason I've avoided that fate so far is that Crowley may *actually* harbor a soft spot for me out of all of the angels. Or perhaps he just didn't want me."

Dean's throat threatened to close on him, and he pulled over to the side of the road. This, *this* was the meltdown he'd been expecting, only it was so out of the blue he had almost no time to prepare for it.

After several minutes of wrestling for control of his body, pushing the panic and anger away, he spoke again.

"So what you're saying is that if we go home, if we succeed and we close the gates of Hell, we're condemning you to an eternity of being tortured?"

Cas chuckled darkly. "Dean, I'm going to be condemned to an eternity of being tortured no matter what you do."

“Yeah,” Dean argued, “except that if we don’t close the gates, I could come *get* you. Kinda hard to do if the gates are closed.”

Castiel’s face softened. “That’s an impossible task, Dean.” He swallowed, and Dean could just make out the bobbing of his Adam’s apple from the corner of his eye. “It’s very noble of you to consider it, but it’s not necessary, nor do I deserve it.”

“*Bullshit*,” Dean said, slicing through the air with his hand. He turned to Cas. “No deal, man, I’m not closing the gates of Hell if you might be stuck behind them. I already I-lost you in Purgatory, I’m not losing you to Heaven or Hell now that I got you back.” He gulped, hard, at the bewildered expression on Castiel’s face. God, the angel actually thought he *deserved* torture.

And here Dean thought he’d cornered the market on self-loathing.

“Cas,” he said, turning fully to face him. The seat belt made it difficult. “You’re *family*. Do you think I’d just let you get tortured forever? You fucked up, but *no one* deserves that, especially not you.”

“Dean, I tried to play *God*,” Cas said. His voice was rough, full of some unnamed emotion. “There’s no way to make up for that. If my Father demands it, not even *you* could stop him.”

“*Watch* me,” Dean said, belligerently. “You’re my friend, Cas. My *best* friend, probably the only real friend I ever had in my life.” Except Benny, but that wasn’t really important right now. “I never asked for anything from *anyone* for all of the shit I did, Cas. *Nothing*. I never asked for a normal life or a million dollars or a supermodel girlfriend or anything, *anything*, in exchange for all of the shit I’ve done for the world. I never asked for it, and I never *expected* it, but I’ll be *damned* if I let them take the one thing I *would* ask for away from me.” Dean shook his head, his heart pounding, and crossed his arms defensively across his chest as he turned back toward the road. The idea that they could escape here back into the real world, only for him to lose Cas...it *terrified* him.

“*Dean*,” Cas said. His voice sounded strangled; Dean thought he might actually be *crying*. He continued staring forward, refusing to confirm his theory. “If you close the gates of Hell and Heaven, you will eliminate demons and angels from the equation. No more meddling from either side. True free will. You *have* to try.”

“Not if it means losing you,” Dean insisted, stubborn to the end. “Cas, I’ve lost *everyone*. I’m not losing you too.” He turned again, and sure enough, Cas’ eyes

looked suspiciously liquid. “What if we close the gates and you’re on this side? What if you’re on Earth when we do it?”

Cas swallowed and obediently considered the question, staring forward, off into the distance. Finally he spoke.

“I’d be disconnected from the Host,” he said. “I assume it would be something like when I was cut off before, after Lucifer rose. Eventually I would be little more than human.”

Dean stared at him. “But then you would die.”

“Eventually, I’m sure,” Cas said. Swallowed again. “Yes, I’d be mortal.”

“Where – where do angels go when they die?”

Cas smiled at him. It wasn’t a very happy smile. “We aren’t human, Dean. Generally, we go to Purgatory.” He stopped and considered, his face going blank as he did so, before inhaling sharply.

“What?” Dean asked.

“I may –” He frowned again. “I don’t know if it’s possible, and it’s just a theory, but it might have –” He trailed off and thought, shaking his head. “I’d need to get out of here to confirm it anyway, but I can see it in the *mirror* –”

“Cas,” Dean said. “Dude. Complete sentences.

Finish thoughts. *Communication.*”

Cas shook his head. “It might just be an illusion of the pocket dimension, Dean, but ...I may have developed a soul.”

Dean stared at him. “An angel with a *soul*?”

Cas nodded. “I told you that I can still see souls. It was how I knew you were really here, that it wasn’t some sort of artificial construct. I’ve touched your soul before, Dean. I held it as I fought my way out of Hell. No one could ever imitate it, although they could come close if they were really powerful.”

Dean felt a small splash of pride at that.

“When I look into the mirror in the mornings, Dean, I see a soul.”

Dean blinked. “Has that ever happened before? An angel developing a soul?”

Cas shook his head. “Not without the angel ripping out their grace and Falling the way Anna did. The process gives birth to a soul, but the problem is that grace and souls don’t work well together.” A seasick expression crossed his face. “As we discovered after I opened the gate to Purgatory.”

Dean blinked. “How does that work, then?”

Cas shrugged. “An angel’s grace would generally consume the soul it’s created, as was the case with

Anna: she still retained something resembling free will and a conscience, but her soul was gone, reabsorbed into her grace. For the two to exist side-by-side should be an impossibility.”

“Huh,” Dean said. Then, tentatively: “You don’t think – God –”

Castiel’s face clouded over. “I have no reason to believe that my Father has anything to do with this.”

Dean let out a shaky breath. “Right. So, assuming you have a soul, and assuming you’re on earth when the gates close and you lose your power, what happens when you die?”

Cas shrugged again. “Depends on the soul. I’d either go to Heaven or Hell.”

“Can’t you tell?”

“I assumed it was some sort of illusion, Dean. I don’t trust my reflection when it comes to trying to sense what sort of soul I have.”

“Humor me,” Dean suggested, smiling. “Assuming the reflection is accurate, what would happen?”

Cas stared at him for several seconds before slowly admitting, “Unless I committed some sort of grievous sin or made a deal, I’d be going to Heaven.”

“Squeaky clean, huh?” Dean said, aiming for humor to restore some sort of balance to this conversation. He

was still terrified that they'd leave this place and he'd lose Cas, but the terror was slowly fading to something manageable.

Castiel didn't get the joke. "It's a bright soul," he said. "Not as bright or as clean as yours, Dean, but bright nonetheless. It's part of the reason I'm pretty sure it's an illusion."

"Okay, ignoring the creepy, *terrifyingly* girly part about me having a bright, clean soul – *What?*"

"There's no way I could have a soul that pure, Dean. I had all of the monster souls of Purgatory within me, I had the *Leviathan* within me. I unleashed them upon the earth, which likely carries a special sort of taint in it's own right, and I injured those closest to me in doing all of this." Cas looked down at his hands, tightly clasped in his lap. "If I did have a soul, it wouldn't be a bright shining thing. It would carry the mark of the damned."

Dean sighed. "All of that shit was pretty fucked up, Cas, not gonna lie, but I think intent matters. You did the wrong things for the right reasons. Shouldn't that erase at least some of that?"

Cas laughed. It was a harsh laugh, and it sent a chill down Dean's spine: it was the dead laugh of the Castiel he'd met in 2014, drugged up and sex-crazed. He didn't

like it at *all*.

“Even if intent matters as much as you hope it does, Dean, I doubt it matters nearly enough to erase that burden. No, if I have a soul, it’s tarnished.” His stomach chose that moment to rumble, and Castiel looked down at it and then promptly used it as a diversion. “We’re going to be late. You should drive.”

Dean stared at him for several seconds before he nodded, turning the car back on and flicking the blinker to indicate he was going to rejoin traffic. “Yeah,” he said.

This, he decided, wasn’t over. He would solve this. He wasn’t going to lose Cas, not now.

Not after falling in love with him.

Part Three



It became routine quickly: Every night the two of them would head upstairs for bed, and Cas would flip on the computer, sign on to AOL (which now offered unlimited access, thank *Christ*, or Cas would be running up an immense bill), and spend about an hour frustratedly searching for answers to his questions. After failing to find anything useful, he'd climb into bed with Dean. This continued even after the nightmares tapered off, and Dean carefully didn't read too much into it.

It wasn't a *bad* routine; hell, Dean was pretty happy with *any* routine at this point, because he'd spent his entire life without much of one. It was nice.

But see, there was a problem. With Cas spending the nights in his bed, and Dean rushing through showers in the morning thanks to their workout routine

(which Cas had been cleared to continue on Friday afternoon), not to *mention* that Cas rarely let Dean out of his sight since the stabbing, Dean had absolutely no private time.

Basically, by Sunday night he felt like he was going to stab someone if he didn't jerk off soon. He hadn't had the opportunity since Wednesday and even when he had his *regular* body, that wasn't fucking normal. He spent all day Sunday twitchy, feeling like his skin was crawling. It was actually kind of unnerving to understand how much he relied on regular orgasms for stress relief, but it was what it was, and honestly? Probably better than the drinking binge he'd gone on when they thought Castiel had died at that reservoir.

Still, this had to stop.

He went upstairs at 8, as was his habit, and Castiel followed him, as was *his* habit. They changed for bed, and then Cas immediately beelined for the computer. Dean groaned, slapping his face with his hand and letting it drag down the side.

Cas looked at him. "Is something wrong?"

"Cas, man, you know you're my best friend, right? But dude, sometimes you've gotta give a guy a little privacy." Cas stared at him, uncomprehending. "You know, alone time?"

Very suddenly Cas understood where Dean was going with this, and he scowled. “I *will not* curtail my research so you can masturbate. Do it in the shower like I do.”

And *whoa*, that was an image that Dean *really* didn’t need to deal with right now. As it was, he was pretty sure there was a dazed expression on his face, and he shook his head to clear it. “I don’t have *time* in the mornings, Cas.” He flushed slightly but plowed on. “It takes a while sometimes, okay? I’m just asking for like a spare thirty minutes every night, that’s all.”

Cas crossed his arms and his glare intensified. He looked downright belligerent, and *fuck*, Dean had forgot how scary Cas could be sometimes. Even if he *did* look like a scrawny teenaged twink right now.

“Dude, seriously. This is a thing that needs to happen. Cleaning the pipes is like, basic maintenance, okay?”

Cas’s arms tightened around himself. “I’m aware,” he said, his voice sounding *more* than annoyed with this human bullshit he had to endure. Which, *dammit*, now the image of Cas jerking off in the shower was back. Dean shifted, uncomfortable with the thoughts he was currently having. It was probably severe blasphemy to think dirty thoughts about an Angel of the Lord when

they were right in front of you, right? *Goddamnit, Dean, get your shit together.*

Dean's patience broke. "For *fuck's sake*, Cas!" he exclaimed. "If I go somewhere, *you follow me*. It's ridiculous and it means *I don't have any time to myself*. And I swear to *God*, I'm going to strangle someone if I don't, and soon."

Cas sniffed, disdainfully, before turning toward the computer in the chair. "You could go to the bathroom now," he said, waving his hand in a gesture that he had to have learned from Sam, because Dean *absolutely* did not flick his wrist like that.

"Cas," Dean said. "We share that bathroom with everyone. *Anyone* could come in. I'm *really* not okay with this. This is *my room*, man, just let me touch myself in peace!" His face burned bright red.

Cas turned back toward him. "This is *our* room, Dean. You're the one who agreed to share with me." He actually looked a little hurt and Dean found himself relenting, which really: not cool.

"Goddamnit, *don't* use the puppy eyes on me," he said, poking Cas on the forehead. Castiel's head cocked to the side and the whole confused cocker spaniel thing came back into play. "No, *unfair*, don't do that."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Cas said,

his face a perfect mask of innocence. Oh, Dean was *on* to that bastard. He must have been picking up more about body language than Dean thought.

“C’mon, Cas, just thirty minutes,” he whined. Cas sighed.

“Dean, if I go back downstairs for thirty minutes your entire family is going to wonder *why*. And then they’re going to figure it out. And then Sam is going to mention it explicitly in your hearing. Probably in front of people.”

Which, okay, point.

Dean twitched.

Cas sighed and gestured to the bed. “Take care of your business, Dean. I won’t interrupt you.” He turned to the computer and placed his hands on the keyboard, clearly intending to continue.

“With you in the room? C’mon, Cas, that’s not right. You’ll *hear* me.”

Cas sighed again, and it was a sigh that spoke of exactly how frustrated with Dean he was right now. To be fair, Dean couldn’t believe he was having a discussion with an Angel of the Lord about his masturbation habits, either.

Castiel opened the top drawer of Dean’s desk and dug around for several moments, finally pulling out a Walkman that Dean hadn’t even been aware that he

owned. He blew a fine layer of dust off of it, sneezing slightly, before fiddling with the controls. The face popped open and he pulled out the tape.

“*Physical Graffiti*,” he read out, musingly. He put it back in. “I like this one, it has *Kashmir* on it.”

“Okay, wait, since *when* do you know anything about Led Zeppelin?” Dean allowed himself to be sidetracked by this, because the alternative – Cas sitting there, surfing the Internet and listening to his Zeppelin tapes while he jerked off – was too horrific to contemplate.

Cas shot him an amused glance. “Dean, you’re my best friend. Knowing about Led Zeppelin is a prerequisite.” Which, okay, that was kind of flattering, and Dean tried not to blush over it, but an angel (a *literal angel*, with *actual wings*) had just said Dean was his best friend. Who *wouldn’t* be flattered?

“Yeah, but *Led Zeppelin II* is clearly the superior album,” Dean argued.

“I understand your fascination with the song *Ramble On*,” Castiel said, settling the headphones over his head. “It almost directly parallels your life. It’s no wonder you identify with it. I just prefer *Kashmir*.”

Dean stared at him some more. Castiel was arguing with him. About Led Zeppelin. He knew this was an

alternate universe, but this was getting ridiculous.

Cas fiddled with the Walkman for several more minutes before he figured out how it worked – clearly the batteries in it were still fresh – and got it to wherever he wanted it to be. He then turned toward Dean expectantly.

“I will no longer hear you,” he explained. Like Dean was a toddler who needed shit spelled out for him.

“I am not jerking off with you in the room,” Dean said on automatic. “I’m sorry, I *am not* touching myself in the presence of an Angel of the Lord.”

Cas looked on, clearly amused about something, before explaining. “It wouldn’t be the first time, Dean. I took your protection very seriously when we were working to prevent Lucifer’s escape.”

Dean’s jaw dropped. “You *watched me jerk off?*”

“I didn’t *watch* you,” Cas corrected, glaring at him. The tone of his voice clearly told Dean that implying that Cas was a pervert was *not okay*. “I was present in the room while it happened.”

“Oh my *God*, you are *such an asshole*,” Dean informed him.

Cas’ lips twitched and a full-on smile spread across his face, which, honestly? Not okay. Dean was already confused and angry all at once, adding arousal to the

mix wasn't fair.

"Dicks with wings, I believe was the term," Cas said.

"I am going to find whoever taught you your sense of humor, and I am going to *strangle* them."

"I had no idea that auto-erotic asphyxiation was your thing, Dean. I learn something new every day."

"How do you even know – *No*. No, I *do not want to know*." Dean held up a hand, visibly calming down via strict breath control. "I am not masturbating with you in the room."

"I am not leaving the room," Cas said, crossing his arms again. "In the time we've been arguing, you could've visited the bathroom, *finished*, and come back to go to sleep."

Dean glared at Cas, turned out the lights, and climbed into bed. *Very resentfully*.

He heard the sounds of Cas settling back in for his research, and after several moments he could hear the sounds of *Kashmir* filtering in from the cheap headphones that came with the Walkman.

Dean tried to fall asleep, really, he did, but the new-found knowledge that teen hormones were getting to Cas – and that he was jerking off in the shower because of it – kept sneaking back into his head. He could see it; even as a teen, Jimmy had been attractive in a pretty

sort of way, and it showed in Castiel's teenaged form. He'd seen him without his shirt on and Dean had a *very* good imagination, so imagining him naked? Not that much of a stretch.

Naked, dripping wet with shower water – maybe even with lather slipping down his neck and shoulders, he hadn't even been able to finish washing – slowly stroking those long fingers down his own cock. Maybe, since he'd apparently watched Dean do it before, he even took cues from his charge. Maybe he'd sneak his other hand around, pressing up on –

No. No, Dean was not going to think about this.

He bit his lip and tried to think unsexy thoughts. He failed miserably, his imaginary naked Cas coming back to the forefront of his mind with a *vengeance*. Cas was pale, never venturing outside without a shirt on even when it was warm enough to do so, and that ass –

No, *goddamnit*, Dean was not doing this. Not with Cas in the room. It was bad enough that he even thought about this stuff, about an angel, about his *best friend*.

He sneaked a guilty glance over at Cas, like the guy could tell what he was thinking. If he could, he showed no signs of it, and in fact gave every evidence of being engrossed in his research. Although his head nodded in

time with the music, which was sort of attractive even with his features thrown into sharp relief by the computer monitor. Actually, it was *really* attractive: his angel *liked* Zep. What more could a man want?

Dammit.

Dean turned back toward the wall, sighing in resignation as he let his hand drift into his pajama bottoms.

It didn't last long, which was good because *Kashmir* was only like eight minutes long and it was the last song on that side of the tape (Dean had listened to it enough times in the past to know). When he came, some five minutes later if the slowly fading strains of *Kashmir* were anything to go by, it was quick, hard, and to thoughts of Castiel. He shoved his hand down the side of the bed, wiping the mess off on his sheets (and making a note to wash them tomorrow) before tucking himself back in and curling in on himself.

He'd almost managed to fall asleep when Cas turned the computer off and crawled into bed with him. There was a moment of silence and then the other teen asked, sounding *highly* amused, "Feel better?"

"Asshole," Dean muttered.



Beefaroni, it transpired, had just turned eighteen the week before he decided to stab Cas, so he was going to be tried as an adult. He was charged with attempted second-degree murder (which he pled not guilty to) and denied bail the day before Thanksgiving.

The trial would hopefully take place within a few months. Esmeralda stopped by to talk to Castiel and Mary about it after the initial hearing; Cas insisted that Dean be present for the discussion, as he'd been involved in the incident as well.

Dean was pretty sure that he was also there for moral support.

"The ACLU is trying to get the trial fast-tracked," Esmeralda said, flipping through her case notes. "We're not directly involved in the case, but if he walks – and there's surveillance video of the stabbing taking place, so he *can't* deny that he did it – then we'll likely be talking a lawsuit based on Castiel's perceived sexuality. It's difficult, but it'll be a media shitstorm and the City of Lawrence has expressed a desire not to get caught in it."

"They do that," Mary said. She'd taken an immediate liking to Vicky's mother, the two of them having a similar sense of right and wrong and fair play, not to mention an intimate, *personal* knowledge of the

legal system.

“Perceived sexuality,” Cas mused, blinking. “It seems like a strange thing to attack me for, if they don’t even *know*.”

“Yeah, people are assholes like that,” Esmeralda said. Her eyes flicked toward the kitchen, where Vicky and Sam were having another study date. Vicky’s family was going out of town, up to Lincoln, for Thanksgiving, and she wouldn’t be home until Sunday night, so the two teens were spending as much time together as possible before she left. Dean was pretty sure Sam was close to closing the deal; if the kid didn’t muster up the balls to ask her out before Christmas, he’d eat the Honda.

“People don’t really think in those terms, Cas.” Mary said. “To the close-minded, you either *are* or you *aren’t*, and you just happen to fit a set of physical traits that, to them, mark you gay.”

Cas seemed to consider that before shrugging. “I fail to see how physical traits has anything to do with it. I have no specific sexual preference, and my attacker is himself homosexual.” Everyone stared at him for a second before he continued. “To be fair, it must hurt to hate yourself that much.”

“Cas, you can’t just say someone’s gay without

proof,” Dean hissed in his ear. Cas rolled his eyes but didn’t expound on his statement. Several uncomfortable moments flew by before anyone spoke.

“So, you’re not gay?” Esmeralda asked. “I only ask because that would probably sell a jury on convicting him.”

Cas seemed to consider this question seriously before answering. “I mean what I said,” he said. “I don’t have any specific preference one way or the other.”

Dean swallowed, hard.

“So you’re bisexual?”

Cas cocked his head. “I suppose that’s probably the closest term,” he said. “If one were to restrict themselves to a rigid gender binary for sexual partners.”

“Oh Jesus *Christ*,” Dean said, running his hand down his face and leaning to whisper in Cas’ ear again. “*Please* tell me you don’t jerk off thinking about celestial wavelengths of intent or something,” he said.

Castiel glared at him with every evidence of being offended. “Those are my brothers and sisters you’re talking about,” he muttered.

“Now who’s getting muddled up with the gender binary?”

“I have no idea what you two are whispering about,” Mary said, “But it’s probably not appropriate for

company, so let's get back to the conversation we were having?"

Cas sighed. "To answer your question, for the purposes of a court hearing, yes, I am bisexual." He looked really put out at having to say it, which left Dean torn between amused and horrified.

"Well, then it's *actually* a hate crime," Esmeralda said, making a note in her file. "Not that that means too terribly much, but we're pushing for hate crime legislation to apply to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community, so we could throw the term around to get a maximum sentence."

Castiel nodded his approval of the intent to legislate sexuality into hate crimes, and Dean wondered if he was going to become some sort of social activist when he grew up. *God*.

They tied up a few loose ends and Esmeralda checked on Vicky, who was flirting shamelessly with Sam. Sam himself looked flustered at the attention, which was so fucking adorable that Dean couldn't appropriately express it in words.

"It's time to go, Vicky," Esmeralda said. Vicky turned puppy eyes on her mom.

"But we're not done studying," she said. Esmeralda looked very much like she wanted to say something

about the quality of Vicky's studying, but was too amused to do so.

"I can drive her home when they're done," Dean offered.

Esmeralda made her expression into something appropriately stern, nodding thanks at Dean before saying, "No later than eight, we're leaving early tomorrow."

"Thanks, Mom!" Vicky said, smiling and bouncing spastically in her seat before turning back toward Sam. Good *God*, if someone had ever met Becky Rosen and given her a black belt and a knowledge of hate crime legislation, she'd be Victoria.

And wasn't that just a creepy thought. Dean shook it from his head as he followed his mother and Esmeralda back out into the living room, Cas at his side. The three of them wished the lawyer safe travels before Mary turned and regarded Castiel.

"So. Bisexual."

Cas blinked. "In a manner of speaking, I guess."

She eyed the two of them. "You realize that this isn't going to make John very happy."

Dean stared at her, trying to come up with some argument, before Cas beat him to the punch.

"I don't see why." Cas shrugged. "Dean and I aren't

having sex, so it's a moot point." He considered, before adding, "And if we *were*, separating us wouldn't prevent anything. Dean's *very* stubborn."

Mary snorted as Dean spluttered his embarrassment. "Well. For the moment, let's keep this between us while I try to sort of ease him into it, okay?"

Cas shrugged acceptance of that, and Dean nodded. His face was still burning, and as Mary left the room he turned to regard his friend.

"You *cannot* talk about hypothetical Dean and Cas hooking up in front of my mother. Uncool, man."

"She brought it up, not me," Cas pointed out. He was completely unconcerned.

"Dude!" Dean exclaimed. "You don't just bring up sex with someone's son in casual conversation!"

"*Hypothetical* sex," Cas said. He walked back to the couch and sat down, picking up the book he'd been reading when Esmeralda and Vicky had shown up.

"Hypothetical or not, you don't bring that shit up."

Cas rolled his eyes and sighed. "Fine. In the future I will *never* talk about you and sex in the same sentence, despite the fact that the amount you've indulged in during your life is, frankly, rather astonishing."

Dean gaped at him. "Did you just *slut-shame* me?"

Cas eyed him levelly. "I just commented on the

strength of your libido. My father must have put a *lot* of effort into it.”

Dean started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Vicky asked, coming out of the kitchen with Sam in tow.

“Nothing, except that *Cas just called me a slut.*”

Sam began giggling hysterically, and shortly after Vicky joined him. Cas huffed and closed his book, slamming it down on the coffee table. He stood and began heading up the stairs, making some comment about not being able to get any real work done with all of these disturbances. Vicky excused herself to use the restroom shortly after that, leaving Dean and Sam alone in the living room.

The silence was uncomfortable, and Dean realized exactly *why* when Sam spoke up, awkward as all hell.

“So...you and Cas,” Sam began.

“Oh for *fuck’s sake*,” Dean exclaimed, turning to face his brother. “Why does everyone think I’m sleeping with Castiel?”

Sam turned beet red. “I dunno, you two are just really close. Like, closer than *ever*. Even *Dad* mentioned it, okay?”

Dean was mortified. “Look, Sammy, we *live* together now. Of course we’re gonna be close! Besides, that’s

just...Cas doesn't see me that way, alright?"

Sam stared at him, eyes wide, before he hesitantly continued. "But you do?"

Dean felt his face go blank. "That's not what I said. Don't put words in my mouth."

Sam gave him the most puppy-like pitying face in his arsenal. "Dean –" Then he glanced over Dean's shoulder and froze. Dean sighed, knowing exactly who was behind him.

Cas walked into Dean's field of vision and grabbed his book off the table, making no comment whatsoever as he did so, merely turning around and heading back up the stairs.

"Thanks a *bunch*, Sammy," Dean said, once Cas was cleared out of the room. "Now Cas is gonna think I'm in love with him. *Awesome*."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Well, he'd be right, wouldn't he?"

Dean glared at his little brother, pushing him in the shoulder. "No," he said. "Now leave me the fuck alone, I'm gonna watch TV and I don't want you smelling up the place."

Sam turned back toward the kitchen, obviously trying to muster up some dignity as he did so. He failed miserably, but it wasn't really his fault: he was fourteen.

Fourteen-year-olds don't do dignity very well.
Dean sighed and reached for the remote.



It was a little bit terrifying how easily the headphones routine had become exactly that.

Dean drove Vicky home just before 8 and then automatically headed upstairs. Cas was already perched in the computer chair, reading some website that involved what looked like Enochian. He'd been mostly ignoring Dean all afternoon, and to be honest, Dean was pretty okay with that.

He changed into his sleeping attire – Cas already had – and set the alarm for later than usual.

"I'm setting it for nine instead of five," he commented. "We can sleep in a little, it's Thanksgiving."

"Fine," Cas said. He didn't sound angry or pissy, which Dean figured he had to be thankful for. *Nobody* did pissed off like Castiel.

Dean flipped on the bedside light, turning off the overhead and reaching for a book. It wasn't like he'd hated reading before; he'd just never really had the *time* for it in between hunts. Nowadays there was plenty of

spare time to fill, and a distinct lack of interesting television, so he'd become a fairly regular patron of the Lawrence Public Library. Right now he was sinking his teeth into some really good sci-fi/fantasy blend stuff involving dragons (friendly ones, and he didn't think the chick who'd written these books would be too pleased to know anything about the real kind) and before he knew it it was 9 p.m. and Cas was reaching for the Walkman.

Yeah, this was *weird*. It had been less than two weeks, and Castiel already automatically assumed Dean was going to want to jerk off before he went to bed. And he'd be right, which was the *really* scary part.

Heh, maybe there was something in Castiel's slut-shaming after all. But hey, at least Dean was in a decent mood most of the time now, which Cas had to be thankful for, if nothing else.

Just to throw Cas off, he waited an additional ten minutes, reabsorbing himself into the fictional world before him. Finally, he flicked off the light and rolled over under the covers, facing the wall.

As usual since this whole thing had started, Dean popped off pretty quick, although he'd started keeping a small hand towel shoved in between his bed and the wall, because washing the sheets every day got real old, real fast. He sighed, tucking his pants back around

his hips and shuffling the covers around him.

He was still thinking about his suddenly decreased staying time when Cas crawled into bed with him, and he realized with sudden clarity that it was Cas. Cas was in the room with him, Cas could be *watching* him (although he was pretty positive he wasn't; he'd never checked to make sure, but Cas had said he wouldn't and Dean trusted Cas), and that was what was making him go off like a rocket every night. It was annoying, because part of the argument in the first place had been that Dean took a while to jerk off. Now, it almost felt uncomfortably like a lie, like Cas was *judging* him.

Which was dumb, because Cas couldn't *possibly* know how quick was too quick anyway. His showers in the mornings never lasted more than fifteen minutes and he was always squeaky clean, so *he* obviously got the job done fast himself.

Dean lay there, awake for entirely too long after Cas had fallen asleep next to him, staring at the underside of the as-of-yet unused mattress above them. Really, this shouldn't bother him this much: so *what* if he was turned on by Cas? He'd *always* been turned on by Cas, his vessel was hot. This was not news.

Of course, he'd never realized he was in love with the damn angel while he jerked off to images of him in

the showers of various motel rooms, but that wasn't really the point.

This was stupid. He was here in the dark, in an alternate universe where he and his BFF the Angel of the Lord were teenagers, contemplating the significance of masturbatory staying time. He had better shit to think about.

Like the fact that Samuel and Deanna Campbell would be in the house tomorrow.

Dean shivered under the covers; the chill didn't go away when Castiel cuddled up next to him in his sleep.



Cas seemed content to ignore what bits of his and Sam's conversation he'd overheard the day before. At least, he didn't allude to it in the slightest as he and Dean went through their morning exercise routine. They went for a leisurely long jog afterward, circling the entire neighborhood and keeping pace with each other, and by the time the two of them got back at around 10:30 a.m. Mary had long since put the turkey in the oven. She harangued the two boys until they obediently marched upstairs to shower and change into something

appropriate for helping out in the kitchen.

Castiel was absolutely balls at cooking, but he *could* wield a knife pretty well. Dean figured this was because of his millions of years of wielding a *sword*, and if the angel was a little too forceful when he chopped carrots and sweet potatoes, Mary didn't say anything. Dean was put to use preparing rolls and fresh green beans; Sam helped his mother make gravy and extra stuffing. After everything was ready, Mary snagged Dean and the two of them crafted both a cherry pie and a pumpkin pie. Dean looked at the pastries wistfully, but they wouldn't even go into the oven until half past three, when the turkey came out. His resultant sigh carried a hint of regret, which Cas seemed to find amusing as *fuck*, because the other teen actually snorted.

"Dean and pies," he said, dodging Dean's half-hearted attempt to swat at him. "Everyone thinks the two of us are a couple, but they're wrong: *that's* the love story of the ages."

Mary laughed outright, shooing the two of them out of the kitchen with her hands as she began to clean up. Dean pouted.

"I fail to see what's so wrong with enjoying a good dessert," Dean said, striving for dignity. The two of them joined John in the living room, sitting on the couch and

carefully keeping out of the line of sight between John's recliner and the television. The football game was on and John was *very* intent on it.

"There's *nothing* wrong with enjoying a good dessert," Cas said, picking up a magazine and flipping idly through it. Dean despaired of the fact that football didn't interest Castiel in the slightest, but eventually figured that it was probably for the better: Just his luck, they'd choose opposing teams to support, and when Castiel decided to support something he got scary-obsessed.

"So why the snide comment?" Dean asked, leaning back next to his friend and taking in the action on the TV.

"You do not merely *enjoy* pie." Castiel's eyes were glittering with amusement. "Watch yourself in the mirror while you eat a piece some time."

"He's right," Sam said, from the floor near John's recliner. Dean jumped slightly; he hadn't realized his brother was even in the room. "You go all weird when you eat pie. Like, eyes rolling up into your head, moaning, the whole works."

Dean stared at his brother. "I do *not*."

"Yes, you do," John said. "Now all of you, *shut up*."

Dean and Cas shot each other a look and rose from

the couch as one. This would be a good time to head upstairs and try to get some research done, seeing as the entire family was occupied. Especially if John's chosen team – the Kansas City Chiefs this game, although the whole family was supporting the Cowboys next game, because *fuck* the Redskins – wasn't doing well.

Cas pointedly did not head for the computer, instead propping himself up against the head of the bed and picking up a book. It was, weirdly enough, the angelology book that Dean had been reading several months prior. Cas had been strangely fascinated with it the last few days.

Picking up the hunting book about minor gods and deities, Dean crawled next to him in the bed and picked up from where he'd left off. "Why are you so interested in that thing, anyway? It's a bunch of new-age mumbo jumbo."

"It's always interesting to read what notions the human race has about us," Cas said. He flipped a page. "What you got right and wrong. So far it's about half and half. For instance, this author is convinced there are seven archangels, when in actuality there were four, including Lucifer."

"Huh," Dean said, eyes flicking over the page he

was on. Then he froze. And swore, loudly.

“What?” Cas said. He glanced over toward the page Dean was on. “Did you find something?”

Dean pointed to the book, hovering over the entry on Loki, the Norse trickster. “Yeah, this guy. When all of those pagan gods had us at the Elysian Motel, they all thought Gabriel was Loki.”

Castiel blinked. “And?”

“*And,*” Dean said. “You said you were trying to open the portal from Purgatory again, to send Jimmy home. *Purgatory, Cas.*”

Castiel seemed to come to the same conclusion he had, and swore as well.

“Gabriel,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“Gabriel,” Dean agreed. “You said angels go to Purgatory when they die? That means he *had* to be there.”

“If anything is strong enough to force its way through the portal without being human, it’s Gabriel,” Cas said. “And he’s fully capable of creating a pocket dimension, not to mention all of the false souls he’d have to create for people to be interacting with us.”

Dean whistled. “That’s a lot of juice,” he said. Cas nodded.

“The Antichrist – Jesse – the archangels, and the

Christ Child are probably the only creatures that could harness the power to do this on their own. Jesse doesn't have the life experience necessary to create such a realistic environment, and Jesus Christ has been in heaven for over two thousand years with little to no inclination to return to Earth."

"So if it's just one being, it's definitely an archangel," Dean said.

Cas nodded, his face pensive. "If Michael or Lucifer had escaped the cage in Hell, we'd be dead, and if it were Raphael he'd have likely captured the both of us to torture us. This seems like Gabriel's *modus operandi*. Not to mention that it would take something as powerful as an archangel to block the powers of a seraph, even one as fallen as me." He looked almost ill. "I should have thought of this before."

Dean rubbed his hands down his face, suddenly exhausted. "So your big brother's back in town, and he's decided to stick us in high school – *why?*"

"You said that in your earlier encounters with Gabriel he was playing the part of a Trickster," Cas offered. "Which generally attempt to exact some form of just desserts vengeance on those who have wronged others, or in yours and Sam's case, teach a much-needed lesson."

“I think that if we were getting our just desserts, we’d be in a completely different scenario,” Dean said, drily. He snorted. “I still remember the herpes commercial he stuck Sam in.”

“I still remember the game show,” Castiel said, his voice equally wry.

“So Gabriel is out and he thinks we need to learn a lesson,” Dean said. “But what lesson? That’s *really* vague. Even in TV Land we had more to go on.”

Cas looked nervous; Dean hadn’t seen that expression on the angel’s face since he’d been introduced to Charity, the hooker. “I haven’t got any ideas, Dean. This is completely out of my sphere of expertise.”

“Heh. You and me both,” Dean replied. He slumped over. “Well, mystery solved, but just because we found X doesn’t mean we’ve balanced the equation.”

Cas sighed. “Unfortunately, you’re right. We might be stuck here for a long time.”

“Just great,” Dean muttered. “Which means now I’ve *actually* gotta worry about the SATs and college applications.”

Castiel’s expression crossed over into amused territory. It was a good look on him. Dean decided he liked it.

“Dean, you’ve very literally faced down the hordes of Hell and the forces of Heaven combined. College applications should be no worry at all.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Dean said, raising his hand and waving him off. “I’m officially fucking tired of this bullshit. I’m taking a nap.” And with that, he tossed the book on the nightstand, flopped over to his side of the bed fully-clothed, and closed his eyes.

Cas snickered next to him, but he did wish Dean a good night, and he stayed close. Which was good, because at this point Dean wasn’t entirely certain he could sleep without his comforting presence against his side.



Samuel and Deanna were nearly an hour late for dinner, which made Mary absolutely *livid*. She ushered both of her parents into the office almost immediately after they arrived. Under pretense of going upstairs to wash up, Dean and Castiel huddled near the doorway, out of sight but still able to hear the conversation.

“This isn’t okay,” Mary was hissing. “You’ve missed every major holiday with us for the last six years. My

children barely know who their grandparents are, and you *live in town*.”

“Calm down, Mary,” Samuel said. “There was a nest of ghouls up in Topeka and it took longer than we thought it would to clear it up. And I know how much you hate the idea of the *family business* intruding.” He sounded *resentful as fuck*, and Dean bristled in his mother’s defense.

“*Oh my God*,” Mary said. “You couldn’t *not* hunt on Thanksgiving? One day a year?”

Dean looked at Castiel, whose eyes were wide. They both listened closely.

“Mary,” Deanna said. “You know the one won’t wait for the other. Ghouls are bad business, you can’t just let them fester. They’ll reproduce and multiply faster than you can keep track if left to their own devices.”

Mary sighed loudly. “I know, Mom.” There was a pause. “I suppose I should thank you for showering before showing up.”

There was a snort and footsteps toward the door. Dean and Castiel scrambled for the stairs quickly, falling over each other in their haste to not get caught eavesdropping. They made it up to their room quietly and then Dean turned toward Cas, eyes wide.

“My family is still hunting,” Dean said. “There are

still supernatural creatures here. What the *hell* is Gabe playing at?"

Cas shook his head. "I don't know, Dean, but it means we need to tread carefully. I haven't sensed any demons or otherworldly creatures so far, but that doesn't mean much."

Dean swore. "I don't even have a damn arsenal here, man. Ruby's knife is still back home."

Castiel nodded. "I know a shorter exorcism that I can teach you, however, and both of us are still equipped to create holy water the traditional way. We can also create anti-possession charms." He pondered for several moments before plodding over to Dean's desk and rifling around in it for way longer than Dean thought necessary, considering how neat the other boy tended to keep it.

Finally Cas stood upright, holding two necklaces. They were plain charms, strung on boring cording, but they were *iron*.

"You're a genius," Dean declared, snatching one of them up. He examined it closely. "What is this, anyway?"

Cas shrugged. "They're both Chinese characters. The one you picked stands for forgiveness." This seemed to amuse the angel.

Dean snorted and pulled the cord around his neck, letting the charm settle underneath his shirt. “What’s yours mean?”

Castiel grew solemn as he pulled the necklace on over his head, shoving it under his shirt as well. “Faith,” he said, turning his back on Dean and heading toward the door. “Tomorrow we can figure something out about everything else. I suspect we should be fine if something attacks while your grandparents are here.”

“Probably,” Dean agreed.



There was some explaining to be done when Dean and Cas got back downstairs, namely because Mary hadn’t thought to inform her parents that they’d adopted another teenager.

“Seriously?” Dean asked, as that “discussion” between the two patriarchs slowly raised the volume level well past the noise of the pregame show on TV. “Cas has been living with us for like three damn months and you never *once* thought to bring it up with your parents?”

“I don’t talk to them very often,” Mary said, voice tight with stress. Samuel and John were still arguing, and it had started to get really disgusting. Dean was never more happy to know that Samuel was dead – twice over – in his universe, because the shit the other man was verbally vomiting was making him feel physically ill.

Finally, John reached his limit when Samuel said, “Nice to see that it’s socially acceptable now to order a live-in boyfriend for your faggot of a son.”

Dean felt his face go blank.

John grabbed Samuel by the neck, and Dean knew Samuel was a pretty fabulous hunter, but John had been a *Marine*. He pinned the older man to the wall, glaring at him.

“I can sit here and listen to you talk shit about me all damn day, Samuel,” John said, his voice deadly quiet. “But the moment you start talking shit about any of my sons – remember, there’s *three* of them now – is the moment you are no longer welcome in my house.”

Dean stared at John, eyes wide.

Samuel did the same.

There was a beat of silence before John spoke again, his voice thick with tension and anger. “Now, are you going to apologize to Dean and Castiel, or am I

going to have to kick you out?”

He loosened his hold on Samuel, who cleared his throat and shook his shoulders out for a second before turning to where Dean and Castiel stood, across the room, staring at the drama unfolding before them.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “That – I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Damn right you shouldn’t have,” Deanna said, glaring at her husband. She shot an apologetic look at Dean and Cas before turning back to her husband.

“Come on, it’s Thanksgiving, you guys. Not a bar brawl.”

There was a long uncomfortable stretch of silence before Dean spoke.

“Uh, just for the record,” he said. “Because *seriously*, everyone seems to think this – Cas and I aren’t seeing each other.”

Cas turned to Dean and cocked his head. “Are you suggesting we’re blind?”

Mary snorted and then began outright laughing. The tension in the room dissolved almost immediately.

The adults headed into the kitchen, leaving their teenaged charges behind them. Dean was pretty sure they were going to have a serious discussion of some sort, but he honestly didn’t care.

His dad stood up for him when it counted. And

really, it wasn't *actually* his dad, but it was the man he could have been. He felt warm, happy, content, and extremely overwhelmed.

Sam shuffled over toward the two of them. "That was kind of scary," he said.

"No shit," Dean said. He clapped his hand to Castiel's shoulder and snorted. "That was a good one, Cas."

Cas had a bemused smile on his face. "I don't know what I did, but – thanks?"

"Seriously?" Sam asked. "You've never heard the term 'seeing someone' before?"

"You've known Cas long enough to know he's really fuckin' literal," Dean said.

"Yeah, but there's like, a limit," Sam said, scrunching his face up in an expression that Dean hadn't seen in over a decade. It was *adorable*.

Cas sighed. "What did you mean, then?"

"When you're seeing someone, you're dating them," Sam piped up. "You know, like exclusively."

"Ah," Cas said, nodding. "Well, then, I'm clearly a comedian."

Dean and Sam stared at Castiel for several seconds before all three of them began snorting in suppressed laughter.

Mary called the three of them into the dining room, and very suddenly, Thanksgiving was in full swing.



Dean had known that Mary wanted a normal life, away from hunting, but he hadn't expected the fervor with which she threw herself into Christmas preparations.

1996 Black Friday sales had nothing on 2012 ones, but they were still a pretty big deal, and Mary woke the whole household early the day after Thanksgiving. The fact that she was the only one intending on Christmas shopping that early had absolutely *zero* dampening effect her enthusiasm.

Dean quickly learned that his mother loved Christmas and considered it her favorite holiday. Throughout the month of December he was subjected to garlands of some sort of freaky-ass plant strung throughout the house (he double-checked to make sure it wasn't meadowsweet; being Christmas Dinner for a couple of pagan gods *once* was enough), spontaneous renditions of annoying-ass Christmas carols, cheery Christmas ornaments, Christmas cookies, and way, way

too much Christmas shopping. Which was sort of hilarious because Dean had *no idea* what to buy anyone, despite the fact that John and Mary had given Sam, Dean and Castiel fifty dollars each for Christmas budgeting; Dean and Cas both had their combined allowance savings as well.

Dean and Castiel had to sit their SATs with “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas” stuck in their heads. They received their results a week later with “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” belting out from the stereo. Dean probably would have been happier about his results – a nice, round 1470 for Dean, and a completely unsurprising 1525 for Castiel – if he weren’t being assaulted with cheesy holiday tunes.

Apparently there was a writing portion being added next year, which Dean thanked whatever minor deities were listening that he hadn’t had to suffer through. As it was, 1470 was a great score that would get him into a lot of colleges, something that surprised the hell out of him; he wasn’t the smart one of the family, after all.

“According to this SAT website,” Castiel told him the night they received their scores, “You might consider getting your IQ tested, as these SAT scores generally correlate with low-level genius aptitude.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dean

demanded, throwing a wadded-up piece of paper at Castiel's head. It was a perfect shot, naturally. He tried to ignore the traditional Christmas carols filtering up from downstairs. "I'm the dumb Winchester, Cas."

"You're not *stupid*, Dean," Castiel said. He looked sad. "Your innate understanding of mechanics and mathematics, your practical application of strategy, and your ability to jury-rig complex equipment spur of the moment are all indicators of a genius-level intellect. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

"Yeah, yeah," Dean said, waving him off. "So says the guy that got a 1525."

Cas rolled his eyes. "I'm an *angel*. I have knowledge of all of God's creations. I probably could have got a perfect score on the damned test if I'd wanted. You can't compare my knowledge of the world to your intellect. They're two different things." Dean chose to ignore the angel, but the idea stuck with him for several weeks after.

By the time the Winterfest dance had come upon them, the Friday before Christmas break, Dean had just about had enough of Christmas. And he still hadn't completed any of his Christmas shopping.

"This is fucking stupid," Dean said, sorting through a pile of clean laundry. "Why do we have to go to this

fucking stupid ass fucking dance again? *Fuck.*”

Castiel, who was dressed in the outfit Mary had chosen for him for court, looked on, amused. “You swear a lot around this time of the year.”

“Yeah, because Christmas is fucking stupid,” Dean snarled. Finally he pulled out a dark gray button-down, only mildly wrinkled, to go with the black slacks he’d picked out. He realized halfway through dressing that not only was he in his underwear in front of Cas, but that he’d chosen (accidentally) the outfit he’d worn to court as well.

He shrugged to himself. He looked good in these clothes, and hell, he’d been jerking off in Castiel’s presence for over a month at this point. No big deal in the grand scheme of things.

“As for your question, your mom wanted us to escort Sam and Vicky to the dance,” Cas continued from behind him. Dean was pretty sure he was imagining that Castiel’s voice had gone tight. “Presumably to make sure nothing inappropriate happens.”

Dean snorted. “Inappropriate? *Sam*? Jesus, even when he’s an *adult* I gotta sweet-talk him into getting laid. As long as she’s not a demon, we’re probably safe.”

“I expect it goes both ways,” Cas said. He stood up and straightened the collar on Dean’s shirt, smoothing it out with his fingers before he stepped away, nodding acceptance of Dean’s chosen clothing. “I’m sure she wants Sam and Vicky – and likely me – to keep *you* out of trouble.”

“Me? I’m an innocent angel,” Dean said, rolling his eyes as he sat down on their bed, pulling his shoes toward him. They were uncomfortable black oxfords, but they were the only dress shoes Dean had found in his closet.

“You’ve met angels, Dean. Do we strike you as particularly innocent?”

Dean looked up into Castiel’s eyes, which were crinkled up in amusement. He considered the subject and then shrugged.

“Compared to me? Yeah, probably,” he said, winking at his friend before turning back to the task of tying his shoes.

Castiel was silent on the matter.

By the time they’d stumbled down the stairs, both looking like hell in their unironed dance-wear, Vicky’s mothers had dropped her off already. Sam had actually bought her a corsage, which was geekily adorable, and if they weren’t already going out, Dean was pretty sure

they would be by the time the night was over. If Vicky was *really* lucky Sam would muster up the balls to give her a goodnight kiss.

Dean, Sam, Vicky, and Castiel were all subjected to Mary cooing over the lot of them and forcing them to stand still for pictures. To be fair, Sam looked pretty good in his formal attire – brown slacks and a tan short-sleeved button-up – and Vicky looked drop-dead *gorgeous* in a classy red dress that fell to her knees. Compared to them, he and Cas looked like they'd crawled out of a self-service laundromat dryer in whatever had fallen on them first.

Mary made Dean and Cas stand next to each other, and Dean shot his father (standing near the entrance to the dining room) a long-suffering glance. John looked amused at his plight and offered absolutely no aid or assistance.

“Are we finished?” Cas asked, his tone plaintive, several minutes later. “We’re going to be late.”

With that, Mary ushered them out the door and Dean sighed, sagging briefly against the porch supports before straightening up and heading for the Honda.

“Have fun on your date, Dean,” John’s voice called from the door.

“I hate you all,” Dean said to the air around him. “All

of you. Just so you know.”

Sam snorted as he crawled into the back seat with Vicky.

“You have a date?” Cas asked, getting into the passenger seat.

“No, Cas, I *don’t*.” Dean slipped the key into the ignition; he’d gotten used to the Honda by now, but he still fucking *hated* it and missed the Impala with a passion. “He was teasing us. Both you and I.”

Cas was silent for several seconds. “I see,” he said, clearly not doing any such thing.

“Dad’s implying you and Dean are a couple,” Sam said from the backseat.

“Oh.” Cas frowned. “That’s happening a lot. Should I be concerned?”

Dean snorted. “Not unless you actually give a shit what everyone else thinks of us, no.”

Vicky laughed from the backseat. “Cas, the entire *school* thinks you two are seeing each other.”

“Oh Christ,” Dean said, turning down the street and heading toward the school. “Can this year get any worse?”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Cas said. He was fiddling with one of the buttons on his shirt.

“I dunno, probably all of the eye-sex you guys have

and how you're basically attached at the hip," Vicky said. She was digging around in her impossibly-tiny purse (which Dean saw absolutely *no* purpose for) and not really paying attention to the conversation.

"What."

Cas didn't even make it a question, and Dean snorted.

"The staring, man, the *staring*," he said, nudging Castiel's arm with his elbow. "You know, we've talked about it. The staring."

"Yeah, it doesn't count when you do it *back*, Dean," Sam said from the backseat, sounding entirely too pleased with himself.

Dean grunted in response as he pulled into the school parking lot. The two lovebirds got out and started heading inside. Dean stared after them.

"I *really* fucking wish I didn't have to go in there," he said. "High school dances are fucking *stupid*, no booze, no one *ever* gets laid, and it's fucking 1996 so there's not going to be *any* good music."

Castiel had no opinion on Dean's observations, apparently; instead he stared at him.

"Jesus Christ, Cas, we *just* talked about the staring thing," Dean said. Cas let his eyes drop to his hands, currently clasped in his lap.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Cas said. “I didn’t realize it was inappropriate. I’ve caused you a lot of trouble over the years.”

Dean sighed and put his hand on Castiel’s shoulder. “Hey, man, it’s alright,” he said. “Profound bond, remember?” He chuckled. “No one else gets it, but fuck ‘em. If my best friend wants to stare into my soul or something, *whatever*.”

Cas smiled, still looking at his hands. “You’ve come a very long way since I first met you, Dean.”

Dean blinked. “What?”

Cas shook his head. “Nothing, nevermind. Let’s get this over with.”

The high school auditorium was decked out with the absolutely cheesiest winter-themed decorations Dean had ever seen, complete with gigantic oversized paper snowflakes hanging from the ceiling and white glittery gauze strung along the walls. It was disgusting.

Dean groaned. “You have got to be fucking kidding me. The *Macarena*? I was so *happy* when this one went away.”

Cas was listening to the music with his head cocked, and he grimaced. “This song is terrible.”

“See?” Dean addressed the general air around him. “Badass Angel of the Lord thinks this song needs to go

away. It needs to go away.”

Cas rolled his eyes, but he looked pleased at Dean’s comment.

The music was just truly, *truly* shitty. Dean remembered how much he hated the music of 1996, he remembered it *clearly*, and this was just a painful reminder. It was all shitty electronic remixed pop music, derivative bullshit that had him restless to gank something within twenty minutes of walking into the building.

During a particularly unpleasant, slowed-down rendition of, “You’ll Always Be My Baby,” Dean caught sight of Sam and Vicky dancing, and he sighed. He’d have to forgive this song its trespasses, if it had Sammy happy.

Dean and Cas had staked out a spot out in the corner, nearish the few burnouts who had chosen to come but far enough away from the festivities that one would have to go out of their way to talk to them. This didn’t stop the few football players who were in attendance from coming over to mock them; clearly, however, they remembered the ass-kicking they had received at the hands of the Winchester family, so they kept the taunting light. It was all insinuations that they were fucking each other anyway, which at this point

Dean had heard so often that it was almost boring.

“You’d think they’d pick something else to try to insult us about,” Dean commented, about an hour and a half into this monstrosity. “Cuz, like, even if we *were* dating, how would that be a *bad* thing? ‘Oooh, you have a personal preference for hot dudes. Oh my god that’s *so terrible*.’” Dean rolled his eyes and stared at the snack table with legitimate regret. He was ninety percent sure that no one had spiked the punch, which was too bad because this shindig *really* needed some alcohol.

“I’m not sure myself,” Cas admitted. “Taunting someone for a possible relationship doesn’t make sense. Personally, I’d rather taunt someone over their choice to partake in a sport that involves regularly getting your head smashed in.”

Dean grinned at him, and Cas smiled back easily. Dean’s heart stuttered in his chest and he forced his eyes back toward the over-hormonal cluster of teenagers at the center of the dance floor.

Several minutes later a really truly horrible R&B song started up, way louder than it needed to be, and Dean had to crouch low to hear what Cas was trying to tell him. Which was, of course, exactly when a photographer for the yearbook decided to duck out and

get a picture of them. The flash blinded Dean and Castiel alike, and by the time they were able to clear their eyes the grinning girl had dashed off to catch some other couple unawares.

“Well, that was...alarming,” Castiel said, sounding alarmed. Dean snorted.

“Yeah, that was *awesome*,” he said. “Now there’s going to be a picture of us looking like we’re, I dunno, *canoodling* at a school dance in the damn yearbook. Thank Christ I don’t *actually* give a fuck if anyone thinks I’m seeing you.”

Castiel looked at him, confused. “What’s a yearbook?”

“Oh my *God*,” Dean said. “Seriously? *Ugh*. Cas, I have really got to work on getting you more human.”

An irritated pinch of the eyebrows flitted across Castiel’s forehead. “That doesn’t answer my question, Dean.”

Dean sighed. “Okay, so remember how at the beginning of the school year we all had to take those shitty school photos?”

Cas nodded, a displeased expression crossing his features. Sam, Dean, and Castiel’s school pictures had found their way onto the Winchester family refrigerator fairly early on in his stay there. This did not make the

angel happy; Dean, on the other hand, thought it was *hilarious* because Castiel had regarded the camera with the seriousness he regarded almost everything, but he had CGI lasers flitting around behind him.

“The yearbook has everyone’s in them, and lots of other stupid shit too. You get them at the end of the school year and people sign them and crap. It’s actually really lame and I never bothered buying one.” He paused for a second before continuing. “I mean, to be fair we were never really at a school long enough to be in one.”

“What’s the point of that?”

“I guess people want to remember their teenage years. Normal people, anyway. Sam and I, we didn’t really have normal lives. And you didn’t have teenage years to *begin* with, so...”

Cas frowned. “Can’t they just...*remember* them?”

Dean blinked. “Right. I forgot that you guys are basically just gigantic hard drives with wings. Uh, humans? We don’t just *remember* everything. That’s not how it works. Memories get fuzzy, and we can’t always see things clearly, so we take pictures and put them in stupid-ass yearbooks so we can flip through them at our twenty-year reunions and remember how *awesome* everything was back when we didn’t have mortgages

and shit.”

Castiel looked like he was going to ask what a mortgage was next, so Dean cut him off by looking down at his watch and commenting on how slowly the time was going. Cas launched into, no shit, a discussion about the theory of relativity and how time was actually entirely relative and his Father hadn't set it up to be anything but.

It was an honestly interesting conversation, and they were buried deep in it when the fucking photographer came back and got them again.

“What, are we supposed to be the token gay couple now?” Dean said, glaring at her.

“Yeah!” the girl said. She had strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes, and she was so enthusiastic in her response that Dean was strongly reminded of Becky Rosen. Which, *ugh*.

“We're not a couple,” Castiel informed her.

“Sure you aren't, sweetcheeks,” the girl responded. She winked at them and darted off again, and Dean rolled his eyes.

“Good luck convincing them, Cas,” he said. He shoved his hands into his pockets and glared at anyone who came near them for the rest of the dance. Castiel crossed his arms and mostly did the same.

It was a very boring two hours.

Finally, it was late enough that Dean was able to wade out onto the dance floor with Cas and drag Sam and Vicky away from the festivities. They looked put out, but really, it was nearing 11 p.m. and that was when Dean had promised Vicky home when Carla had stopped by. Carla was scary, probably a solid foot shorter than Dean and completely capable of kicking his ass. She had tattoos all up her arms and wore a tank top in the middle of December.

Yeah, Dean liked Carla. But he *really* didn't wanna piss her off.

"So, word on the dance floor is that Jennifer got a picture of you two making out for the yearbook," Sam said, gleefully, as the four of them climbed into the car.

Dean sighed. "Trust me, Sam, if Cas and I ever decide to make out we'll make sure to tell you first." Cas opened his mouth and Dean interrupted before he had a chance. "Jesus Christ, you *seriously* don't – *ugh*. Okay, remember Meg? The pizza man?"

Castiel's jaw slammed shut. Yeah, he remembered.

"Who's Meg?" Vicky and Sam asked at the same time.

"No one you need to concern yourself about," Cas said. His jaw clenched shut and he focused his eyes

ahead of him and stayed silent for the entire trip back to Vicky's house.

He was equally silent on the ride home, not even giving one-word answers or grunts, and Dean got the feeling that he'd somehow pissed Castiel off.

After they'd come home and Sam had excitedly talked to their parents about the dance and how everyone thought Dean and Cas were a fucking couple and how Vicky had agreed to go out with him (fucking *finally*), Cas and Dean were able to stumble up the stairs and into their bedroom.

"Look, man, I didn't mean to bring up Meg," Dean said, automatically going on the offensive. "It's just that I figured –"

"I know you didn't mean it maliciously," Cas said, his voice tight. "And I know you don't like her, but I'd prefer it if you wouldn't mention her. She's my friend, and I have no idea if she's even alive."

Dean stared at him for several seconds before nodding slowly. "Yeah, man, no problem." He blinked, and then hesitantly started, "Look, if she means that much to you we can try –"

Cas cut him off with his hand, stiffly, before he went to the dresser and reached for his sleep clothes.

They turned their backs to each other to change,

Dean not even bothering to go to the bathroom. They almost never fought like this, and Dean felt like the biggest asshole for even having brought up Castiel's demon girlfriend (fuck, him and Sammy had more in common than Dean thought).

It wasn't until they'd climbed into bed together and Castiel had fallen asleep next to him that Dean realized Cas hadn't bothered researching tonight. Which meant no Dean-time, but he couldn't honestly give a shit. He'd hurt his friend and it really bothered him.

Dean knew he was an asshole. It was, in fact, one of his defining traits. But he *did* try not to hurt the people he loved more than usual, and whatever this was ran *deep*.

Well, Cas had asked him not to mention it, so he wouldn't. And as much as he hated Meg, and as much as he mistrusted her, Dean loved Cas. If it meant trying to mount a rescue mission for his usually-an-enemy sometimes-a-friend demonic pal, he'd do it.



The next day Dean managed to escape the house with only Castiel in tow. It was the Saturday before

Christmas, and he knew everyone and their fucking mothers would be out Christmas shopping, but the two of them had put it off for long enough.

“I’ve never purchased a gift for someone before,” Castiel said, eyes wide. “Material possessions mean nothing among the Host.”

“Yeah, I know, Cas, but it’s expected. I’ll help,” he said, smiling over at his friend. Cas seemed to have forgiven him whatever his transgression from the night before was, but the air was still thick and awkward between the two of them.

“You can’t help me purchase your gift,” Cas said.

“You don’t have to get me anything,” Dean said, waving his hand. “Hopefully we’ll be out of here soon anyway, right? I highly doubt Gabriel’s gonna let us bring shit back with us.”

“That’s not in the spirit of the holiday,” Cas said, frowning.

“Yeah, but I’m not big on getting gifts,” Dean said, shrugging. “Not really my thing. Don’t worry about it.”

“I want to get you a gift,” Castiel insisted. “You help me with everyone else, but I will pick something out for you alone.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Fine, whatever. Jesus, where’s the nearest Wal-Mart?”

Wal-Mart was *packed*. Dean didn't even bother finding a parking spot. "I'd rather go back to Hell for another forty years than deal with that shit," he said, sneering at the line of people trudging into the store. He sped out of the parking lot and found the first strip mall he could.

It was actually kind of nice, featuring local shops of varying types. Dean and Cas pored through them, picking out gifts for individual members of their little family in relatively quick order before separating to get gifts for each other.

And there, Dean stalled.

The set of steel-tipped darts for Sam, the Royals jacket for John, and the earrings for Mary? Those had been easy.

But what the *fuck* do you get for a borderline-fallen angel?

And then Dean realized that he'd be expected to buy him *two* gifts, because it was also his alleged birthday. He swore and immediately headed for the secondhand shop, hoping for ideas.

The angel figurines made him chuckle, but he was pretty sure that Castiel wouldn't be amused at the cherubic depictions of his family. Although he did seriously ponder getting the cupid doll he spotted buried

in a pile of two-for-one stuffed animals, just because then he could prove to him that, yes, humans actually thought the damn guys were incontinent.

For a brief moment he considered a silver ring he spotted in the locked case near the register, because while they both wore iron now (and bracelets with anti-possession symbols on them, and tried to keep containers of holy water at hand at all times, and the little film containers of salt – yeah, maybe they were paranoid, but better paranoid than *dead*), neither of them had any silver on-hand to test for ‘shifters. But then he realized the significance of giving someone a ring at Christmas and decided, *hell* no.

But – there, near the counter, was a selection of angelic shit.

Seriously, it was like those cheesy mood ring displays you always see in tourist shops, except it was about angels. There were more statuettes, books about angels, and a selection of *silver necklaces*. Dean spotted Castiel’s name in Enochian before he realized what he was looking at; Cas had used it to sign that note to him all those months ago, and Dean had a pretty damn good memory.

It was attached to a little card that talked about the angel Castiel and what he supposedly was all about

(Dean found this hilarious). The necklace promised protection and some other stupid shit, but mainly it was *silver*, and that's what Dean wanted. He picked it up, examining it for several minutes before plonking it down on the counter to buy.

"You like angels?" The guy behind the register looked like he hadn't bathed in about twenty years and wore an honest-to-God *turban*. Dean wanted to chastise him for basically fitting every stereotype about people from the Middle East for a second before reigning himself in.

"I got a friend named after this one," he said, casually.

The guy snorted. "Castiel? That's a hell of a name to stick a kid with." The guy's voice was gruff and despite his BO, he kinda reminded Dean of Bobby. Not-Bobby squinted at him for several seconds before saying, "Hang on a second."

Obligingly, Dean waited around while the guy went through a door behind the counter. There were some random grunts that Dean hoped were because the guy was reaching for something, and some shifting noises that he took as confirmation of that fact.

"Here we go," the guy said, coming back around the corner clutching a leather-bound book. He set it on the

counter with a loud thump; dust rose from the covers, making Dean sneeze.

“What the hell is that?” Dean asked.

“I’ve never been able to sell it,” the guy said, shrugging. “Rumor has it it’s an honest-to-God angelic book, written in real Enochian.”

Dean straightened. “Seriously?”

The guy nodded. “Yeah, got it from a guy ‘bout six months ago. Thought some of the angel nuts would go insane for it, but ‘parently not. You got a friend named after weird-ass angels, he might be interested.”

“Uh, *yeah*,” Dean said, inspecting it. He’d been around Bobby’s collection long enough to know that this book was *old as fuck*. The leather was red and starting to rot around the edges; the binding was frayed. The pages themselves looked like they were printed on some sort of vellum or papyrus, and they were uneven along the sides where they’d been touched over the ages. The whole book looked to be around three solid inches thick and stitched together with something suspiciously golden.

Dean eyed it for several more minutes before he asked, “How much?”

The guy shrugged. “I’ll sell it to you for what I paid for it: forty bucks.”

“You seriously got this for forty bucks?”

The guy shrugged again. “Yeah, I thought it was weird too. The guy seemed pretty eager to get rid of it, though, so I dunno. Maybe it’s just too heavy for someone who travels a lot.”

Dean did a mental count of the cash he had left on himself and nodded. “Yeah, and the necklace. I’m in.”

The guy snorted and rang him up.

After all was said and done, Dean was out fifty five bucks, but Castiel had some pretty bitchin’ Christmas slash birthday gifts. The guy packaged them up in a bag you couldn’t see through (Dean explained that he was here with said angelic friend), and he went on his merry way.

Cas was waiting for him at the car with a much put-upon expression on his face. He’d clearly already put whatever he bought Dean in the trunk already, but he was *irritated as hell*.

“Jesus, Cas, what bit you?” Dean said, closing the lid of the trunk after he set his parcel in there.

Castiel glared at him, although Dean got the impression it wasn’t *Dean* he was irritated with.

“There was an incident in the bookstore,” Cas said, glowering as he climbed into the Honda. He slammed the door behind him with entirely too much force before

starting in on his seat belt. "I'm no longer allowed in there."

"What?" Dean wanted to laugh, or maybe cry because he hadn't witnessed whatever this was.

Cas crossed his arms. "A woman grabbed me in an inappropriate spot, and I reacted accordingly."

Dean stared at him for several seconds, parsing this before he tentatively put forward: "A lady grabbed your ass and you, what...*hit* her?"

"I didn't hit her," Cas said, jutting his chin out mutinously. "I shoved her away from me. She just happened to hit a display." He glowered more. "And she didn't grab my ass."

"Oh my *God*," Dean said. "Some chick seriously felt up an Angel of the Lord's junk in the middle of a Walden Books?"

"And promptly found herself surrounded by several hundred copies of Stephen King's *Desperation*," Cas said.

Dean snorted and clapped his hand on Castiel's shoulder before starting up the car. "Cas, next time I start acting overprotective of you, just remind me of this one, single moment in time."

Cas glared. "If you'd have been there I'm certain she'd have assumed we were together and ignored me."

Therefore, this is your fault.” The angel’s expression told Dean that he knew perfectly well that he was being petty and didn’t care one bit.

“Oh, no, you do *not* get to pin this shit on me,” Dean said, poking a finger at his friend. He moved that hand to the gearshift, shifting from second into third. “Did you at least find what you were looking for before you went all Shaft on her?”

“I don’t understand that reference,” Cas said. “And yes, I found something.” He looked pleased with himself.

“Good, because I am fucking *done* with shopping,” Dean said. He glanced at the clock on his dashboard. “And I’m starving. Let’s go get something to eat.”



After a stress-filled morning of shopping and more leisurely afternoon of eating burgers and walking around downtown Lawrence, Dean and Cas were more than ready to head home by the time 5 p.m. rolled around. Dean wasn’t exactly a wrapping paper *expert*, but he was alright at it since he’d had to wrap Sammy’s presents every year after that disastrous one when he

was like twelve and stole all of those gifts from some family.

Castiel, on the other hand, didn't have a *clue*. Dean had set himself up in the living room, letting Cas have the bedroom, and it was a good thing he'd kept Castiel's stuff in their bag to do last. Dean hadn't even got halfway through his first gift – John's jacket – before Castiel flew downstairs in a panic and summoned Mary to help him.

Finally, he managed to get Mary, John, and Sammy's gifts wrapped, labeled, and placed under the (real) pine tree that was currently occupying the corner of the living room. He'd just pulled the bag with Castiel's gifts close to him when Mary came back down the stairs, her hair askew.

She shook her head, bemused, but didn't go into detail. Instead she sat next to him and began to quiz him on college applications, a subject Dean ignored in favor of trying to figure out how to wrap the necklace. Maybe he should have bought some gift bags for himself.

After about ten minutes she gave up the attempt to force Dean into responsibility, sighing and changing subjects. "Did you get your gifts wrapped?" she asked.

"All but Cas' presents," Dean said. "Got him one for

his birthday and one for Christmas.”

“Good boy,” Mary said, ruffling his hair. Dean was suffused with a general sense of well-being; the house was warm and smelled like pine and cookies, he was sitting with a pretty damn good impression of his mother, Cas was out of Purgatory. Hell, if Christmas had been like this growing up (despite the shitty Christmas music), he might have grown to love it himself.

“What do you think?” Dean asked, pulling the book and necklace out of the bag and showing her.

“You got Castiel a necklace?” Mary asked, amusement coloring her voice.

“Come on, look at it,” he insisted. She read the little card that came attached to the chain and gave Dean a fond look.

“It’s great. Is this one for Christmas?”

Dean nodded and slid the book over. “This one’s for his birthday. It’s supposedly written in Enochian, the language of the angels.”

Mary flipped through the book, stiffening slightly. Dean knew that she was considering the fact that it could be a book about the supernatural, but he saw the exact moment that she threw that idea out. It probably was, but as far as Mary knew, Dean and Castiel knew absolutely nothing about Enochian.

“This looks expensive,” she commented.

“It kinda was,” he replied, scratching the back of his neck. “Worth it, though.”

Mary’s return smile was gentle. “It’s like that, huh?”

Dean flushed and looked away. Had his mother always been that perceptive? “It’s *not*,” he insisted.

“Dean, I know my rare books. This thing is probably worth at least a couple hundred, if not a couple *thousand*.”

Dean schooled his face into an innocent expression. “I only paid forty for it,” he said. He knew *exactly* how much this book was worth; if Bobby’s expression regarding the few angelic books Cas had come around with was anything, it was *priceless*.

“Then you got a hell of a deal, honey,” Mary said, smiling. She shifted slightly, looking at the necklace again. “I think I have a box for this, if you want.”

“Sure,” Dean said, shrugging. “It’ll be easier to wrap that way.”

Mary stood and tweaked his cheek as she did so, which had the effect of making Dean feel like he was twelve while simultaneously making him feel wonderful. He glared at her anyway and she laughed as she left the room to find the box.

While he waited for her, Dean wrapped up the book,

making sure to note on the label that it was a birthday present and not a Christmas present. He stuck it under the tree just in time to see Cas start heading down the stairs.

“Nope, nuh-uh, go back upstairs,” Dean ordered.

“What? Why?” Cas asked.

“I’m not done wrapping your gifts,” he said. “Go. Back. Upstairs.”

Cas blinked at him. “You bought me presents?”

Dean looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “Of course I bought you presents, you moron. It’s *Christmas*.” The stunned expression on Castiel’s face was almost too much to deal with, so Dean continued. “Why the hell did you think I sent you up to the bedroom to wrap your stuff?”

Castiel’s expression darkened. “I didn’t think about it. I don’t like wrapping presents, Dean.”

Dean laughed. “I should’ve got you a bunch of those gift bags so you didn’t have to bother.”

Cas stared at him with a plaintive look on his face. “They make *bags*?”

Dean’s laughter took on a higher pitch and he stood at the foot of the stairs gasping for breath, which is how Mary found them a moment later.

“Back upstairs, Cas, Dean isn’t done wrapping your

presents,” Mary said, smiling at him.

Cas nodded and turned himself back around. Mary looked at Dean. “What was *that* all about?”

“He didn’t know they make gift bags,” Dean explained, still giggling to himself. “He was, uh, not happy when I told him we should have just gotten some of those.”

Mary laughed outright and handed Dean the box she’d found. It was an old jewelry box that had clearly held a necklace at one point, long and flat. The outside was made of some sort of mid-range wood, and the inside was velvet-lined.

“Perfect,” Dean said, smiling his thanks. He transferred Castiel’s necklace (and *God*, yeah, that was kind of girly of him, getting Cas a necklace. But it was *silver* and it *had his name on it*. Dean was going to continue justifying the purchase to himself with those two clarifications) to the box and quickly wrapped it, marking it *Christmas* and shoving it under the tree before heading upstairs.

“Alright, done,” he announced, opening the door to their room. Cas was cleaning up the mess he’d made wrapping his gifts, which lay piled on their bed. They were all vaguely recognizable as boxes, but each was misshapen in its own special, unique way.

What caught Dean's attention, however, was the large stretch of floor in between their closet and the bed. It looked like a bomb had gone off inside of a wrapping paper factory.

"What the hell did you *do*?" Dean asked, marveling over the destruction.

"Attempted to wrap presents," Cas said, darkly. Dean laughed and bent over to help him.

By the time they'd cleaned up the scraps of paper and wadded-up scotch tape, dinner was ready, and they headed downstairs. On the way down, Dean helped Cas carry his Christmas purchases and deposit them under the tree, as well. While they were there Dean took the time to inspect all of the presents with his name on them and attempt to guess what they were.

"Isn't the point to be surprised?" Cas asked.

Dean shrugged. "Yeah, but half the fun is in the guessing. Look, Mom got you something that is –" he squeezed it. "–one hundred percent a winter jacket, or a bunch of sweaters."

Cas blinked. "I have more gifts?"

Dean gave him a weird look. "Uh, yeah? Everyone got you one. Look." Dean grabbed a present. "To Cas, from Sam. And it's your Christmas gift, because there's another one for your birthday." He held the second

package up. "I think they're both books."

Cas regarded Dean for several seconds before speaking again. His voice was rougher than usual. "Your family's generosity is, apparently, genetic."

Dean laughed, covering up his embarrassment. "Cas, this is what you *do* for people you love. Remember, you're family now. I told you that before, you know?"

Cas was cradling the package that contained the necklace Dean had bought him in his hands. "I've never received a gift before," he said. "Not a physical one, unless you consider Jimmy's loan of his body to me a gift."

Dean grinned at his friend and clapped him on the shoulder before he stood up. "First time for everything, man. C'mon, we're gonna get yelled at if we don't get in there. Mom made spaghetti."



Dean had never really had a problem with early-rising, but he'd looked forward to Christmas break as a time to sleep in. He and Cas were so used to waking up at five every morning to work out that at this point,

sleeping in until eight was a godsend.

So neither of them was prepared for Sam to knock on the door excitedly at six in the morning and barge in.

“Guys, Christmas!” he said, excitedly. Then he took in the two bleary heads poking up at him (resentfully) from under their shared blanket. “Oh. Uh. Wow.”

There was a beat of silence, during which Castiel looked at the alarm clock and then glared at Sam.

“It’s six in the morning,” he pronounced, very carefully. “I am going back to sleep.” With that, he pulled the blanket over his head, which in the process pulled it entirely off of Dean, clad in his pajama pants and T-shirt.

“Cas!” Dean yelped, tugging the blanket back to him.

“I thought you said you two aren’t together?” Sam asked, peering at them. Dean very suddenly knew exactly what it was like to be the subject of a scientific study.

“We’re not,” Cas said, his voice muffled. “Now leave. I’m tired.”

“C’mon, Cas,” Dean said, nudging him sleepily. “It’s time to open presents.”

“I don’t want to,” Cas said, head still under the blanket.

“But if you’re not together, why —”

Dean threw Sam a dirty look. "You wouldn't get it anyway," he said. Then he tugged more blanket toward him. "*C'mon*, Cas, it's cold!"

"Mom made coffee," Sam said. He was backing out of the room now, and he looked *freaked out*. "I'll, uh, just...yeah. See you downstairs."

"Awesome, Sam thinks we're dating," Dean said, throwing his head back on his pillow. He closed his eyes. When he re-opened them Cas was staring at him from beneath his one-man blanket fort. Dean forced his eyes upward, toward the top bunk bed.

"Why would he think that?" Cas asked, puzzled.

Dean sighed. "People don't generally share a bed if they're not with each other, Cas."

Cas regarded him for several minutes, apparently trying to figure something out, before he spoke. "And yet you let me sleep in your bed every night."

Dean shrugged. "There's plenty of space and we both sleep better. I think I'd probably have problems trying to get to sleep without you there, at this point." He grinned for a second before he let the smile fall. "The thing is, Cas, the reason people usually only let – uh, *lovers* – sleep with them is cuz that's when you're at your most vulnerable. You know? But you've already *seen* that, seen me *totally* vulnerable, and I know you

won't hurt me while I'm sleeping. I trust you."

"I see." Cas was quiet for a good long while, before finally saying, "It's an intimate thing, this trust, but not necessarily romantic. Which most people don't understand."

"Exactly," Dean said, snapping his fingers. He sat up, crouching low to avoid hitting the top bunk with his head, and crawled out over Cas. "C'mon, man, we should head downstairs before Mom sends *Dad* up to get us."

Cas frowned and, reluctantly, followed Dean's example.

The two of them plodded downstairs still in their sleepwear, Cas rubbing the sleep out of his eyes still, both of them hissing occasionally when their feet came into contact with cold hardwood flooring.

John hadn't woken up yet, apparently: Dean clearly recalled him making dire threats to anyone waking up prior to 7 a.m. on the one day a year he took off no matter what. What this meant is that when Dean and Cas walked into the kitchen it was to find Sam and Mary talking openly about what Sam had seen that morning.

Dean groaned. "We were both fully dressed, man. We weren't *cuddling*. It's *not like that*."

Cas rolled his eyes and beelined for the coffee

maker. He'd become a real caffeine addict since being plopped here with Dean, and Dean was pretty sure that meant he'd be bankrupting him and Sam once they got back to the real world. Because sure as shit, the angel was going to love fancy Starbucks drinks when Sam inevitably introduced him to them.

"That's enough, Sam," Mary said. "I already explained it to you, we don't need to re-hash it."

Cas sat at the table, the mug of hot coffee clenched between his hands like it was the only thing keeping him attached to the Earth. Shakily, he started sipping. Dean snorted, grabbing his own mug and sitting next to his friend. "You're gonna wind up with a hell of a coffee addiction, man," he said.

"I already have one," Cas said, blearily. "I don't care."

Dean snorted into his coffee. Mary looked at the two of them, a frown crossing her face, and Dean knew where she was going with this. He'd seen Sam give him that exact same look too many times before, on too many hunts, at too many bars. It was a considering look, the look of someone who knew that Dean was into a person.

He avoided her gaze for the rest of the morning.



his was basically the first real Christmas Dean could ever remember with his family, even if it did include Cas now.

Sure, his parents had done Christmas in the years prior to the fire, and there was that one abortive attempt at Christmas the year before he went to Hell, but the full-on, real deal Christmas shit that he always disdained? Yeah, no, Dean had never had that.

It was kind of eye-opening. He wasn't sure if other people felt this way about the holiday (he was going to guess "no,"), but to someone who had his family mostly yanked apart by violence and the supernatural over the years, Dean found himself warming up to it very quickly, horrible music be damned.

After breakfast (coffee and cinnamon rolls, once

John stumbled down the stairs), the Winchester household opened their presents. Dean sighed in relief as his gifts were well-received by his mock-family; he'd always been pretty crap at buying shit for other people to begin with, and he barely knew these incarnations of his kin.

Sam had, indeed, bought two books for Castiel, one high fantasy novel and a nonfiction book about religious themes in modern-day cinema. Castiel seemed to love both books, thanking Sam with such actual honesty that it left Dean feeling somewhat skeptical.

What Mary and John had bought Cas (which Dean had mistaken for a winter jacket) was actually a thick down comforter in blue, and Dean got a matching gray one. He hugged it gleefully: it looked warm as *shit*, and it meant that Dean wouldn't have to share his ratty blanket with Cas anymore.

John gave Dean a significant look when he opened it, and Dean swallowed hard and nodded back at him. John, apparently, knew about the continued bed-sharing.

John and Mary had also, as a birthday present, bought Castiel his graduation kit: the cap and gown, tassel, a frame for his diploma, and a yearbook. It was something that everyone had been measured for and

paid off during the two weeks that Cas was in the hospital recovering from his stab wound, and it was something *Balthazar* would have been expected to take care of, had he not been languishing in a jail cell. Cas hadn't even known about it, Mary having snuck his measurements in when she was fitting him for his court outfit, and Castiel actually looked rather touched.

By the time Cas got to Dean's gifts, Dean was actually nervous. Sam was busy examining his new darts ("Dean sprung for the weighted tungsten ones! They're so cool, Mom!"), and Mary and John were very casually talking to each other in low tones that Dean couldn't overhear, so for the most part it was just Dean and Cas.

Cas unwrapped presents like he did everything else in his life: with a purpose, step-by-step. He carefully untaped and unfolded every inch of wrapping paper instead of just tearing into it, revealing the treasure beneath. Dean got the feeling he was trying to stretch out the entire process and revel in it.

He unwrapped the necklace first. Dean stared at him while he flipped the lid open and looked at the charm.

"It's my name," Cas murmured, letting the fingers of his left hand – the hand not holding the box open – drift

over it.

“In silver,” Dean said. Cas smirked at that; Dean returned the expression.

The angel lifted the chain over his head and let the charm settle under his shirt, next to the iron pendant. Now Cas, at least, was doubly-protected, which made Dean rest a little bit easier. He was pessimistically sure that Gabriel was just fucking with them, and that somewhere in the middle of all of this so-called perfection there'd be a demon attack or a family of kitsune would move in across the street.

Cas moved on to Dean's second present and unwrapped it just as carefully. He froze once he saw the cover. A look of disturbed consternation crossed his face.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, his tone reaching up into the range of Jimmy's normal voice. He said it quietly, for Dean's ears only.

“Some dude at the mall had it. It's Enochian, right?” Dean whispered back.

Cas nodded and let his hand touch the cover, shuddering at the contact. “It was transcribed by Gabriel himself. If ever we were looking for proof that this was his doing...this is it.”

“Well, I paid for it. It's yours now,” Dean said, firmly.

Cas clutched it to his chest and nodded.

It wasn't until everyone had cleaned up the wrapping paper mess and put their gifts away that Dean realized Cas hadn't given him a gift. He'd told him not to, but the rejection stung a little bit.

He shrugged it off and helped Mary in the kitchen, where she was currently going all-out on a Christmas dinner for her family, complete with a whole ham the size of Dean's leg and three different kinds of pie.

After everyone had eaten and spent the required post-supper time together, Dean and Cas headed upstairs. Mary had allowed the two older boys one beer apiece while they watched football, which had gone kind of late despite being a repeat of the Monday night game. Cas, it turned out, was kind of a lightweight when he didn't have angelic grace bolstering his alcohol tolerance, and had actually fallen asleep on the couch.

It was just passing midnight when Dean dragged Cas, who was stumbling, up the stairs and to their room. When they entered the room, however, Cas immediately headed for the computer, seemingly no longer intoxicated.

"I'm still drunk," Cas slurred. "But that doesn't mean I can't *read*."

"Look, I get enough creepy mind-reading from you

when you're full-on angel," Dean said. "None of that shit when you're powered down."

Cas snorted at him as he turned Dean's computer on. Dean tossed Cas his night clothes and quickly changed into his own sleepwear. While he did so, Cas made a noise behind him as if he was suddenly remembering something, and when Dean turned around the angel was holding a wrapped Christmas present.

"I almost forgot," Cas said, taking pains to speak clearly. "When your mother helped me wrap this she said that it might not be appropriate to give it to you around the rest of the family." He thrust it at Dean, who eyed it with no little amount of trepidation. "I'm aware that jewelry isn't a very masculine gift, but I wanted to get you something silver."

Dean nodded and sat on his bed to open it, tearing through the wrapping paper (and tossing it into the wastebasket out of habit; he was turning into *Sam*) to find a jewelry box. He opened the lid.

And *damn*, he was glad he hadn't bought Cas that ring, because Cas had bought *him* a ring, and if the two of them walked around wearing rings together the entire *school* would be talking. Not to mention his family.

It was remarkably similar to the one he lost when Sam had first come back from the Pit, a bit more

utilitarian and streamlined but not feminine in the slightest. There were engravings around it, which Cas *had* to have done custom at the metalworking shop in that strip mall, as it was all in Enochian.

“They’re protective wards,” Cas said. He looked to be sobering up slightly, which was good. “Like the ones I put on your ribs after Lucifer rose. They’ll protect you from most demons and the lower-level angels. I didn’t have a lot of space to work with, sorry.”

Dean grinned and slipped the ring on his right ring finger. “Thanks, Cas,” he said, flexing his hand and testing the fit (which was perfect).

Cas grinned at him, which was kind of nice: Cas almost never smiled with complete abandon, his “natural reticence,” as he called it, continually waylaying the expression.

Dean flicked off the light once the computer had finished starting up, using the monitor light to navigate his way back to the bed and curl up underneath his new comforter. He could hear Cas pulling the headphones for the Walkman on; he’d switched to a Kansas tape the night before and Dean could hear the soft strains of some song or another filtering out of the tinny speakers.

Dean lay on his back, staring up at the bottom of the top bunk for several minutes before he decided that,

yeah, today had been good and deserved a celebratory wank.

Snorting to himself, he hitched his hips up slightly and pulled the elastic waistband down over his hips, letting it settle on his thighs with a soft sigh. He shot a glance over at Cas, who appeared fully engrossed in whatever he was reading on the computer screen, and then relaxed into the mattress.

It wasn't that he was particularly *loud* while he jerked off; years of living in close quarters with both his brother and his father had stifled that particular inclination years ago. It was just that, as an adult, he'd developed a habit of making these little gasps and moans and sometimes talking (quietly) to himself in the midst of his fantasy. Hearing his own voice turned him on, because it allowed him to believe, however briefly, that his imaginary partner was hearing him too.

So he got started building a fantasy up. Dean was by nature a tactile person, but he relied on visual stimulus. Luckily, he had a very vivid imagination.

He set up the scene: They'd managed to escape this place, and they were in one of the *many* motel rooms he'd seen over the years. Sam had gone...somewhere. Did it matter where? No. Just somewhere not *there*. Cas was back to full-on angel,

cleaned and scrubbed and maybe wearing a pair of jeans and one of Dean's T-shirts, because as much as Dean had got used to teenaged Castiel in his T-shirts (Cas seemed partial to the stretched-out Floyd one he'd given him the night he moved in), the idea of full-on angelic Cas in them was downright *arousing*.

Dream-Cas slammed him against the wall of the motel room, leaning in for a harsh kiss. Imagining Cas kissing him like he'd kissed Meg got the blood pumping, and Dean felt his dick respond enthusiastically to the prompt.

In this fantasy, Cas took charge. He was a badass Angel of the Lord and fully capable of annihilating Dean, which was half of the turn-on. The other half, of course, was that he was *Cas*.

Dream-Cas tore the shirt from Dean's adult body, leaning over to nip harshly at the tendons in his neck and shoulders while grabbing at the spot where Dean had once worn Castiel's mark. The angel squeezed down, hard, making Dean pant out and beg for more.

Dean could hear himself whimper at the fantasy, and he squeezed at the base of his cock with probably a little more force than necessary to keep himself from coming. Cas was likely to research for at least an hour; he had plenty of time.

Dream-Cas tweaked Dean's nipples with the hand not on his shoulder, drawing a quiet moan from him, before letting his hand trail down to unbutton Dean's jeans. Dean was pretty sure the angel had the hang of buttons by now, having had to deal with them for going on five months (plus his time as Emmanuel), and in this fantasy his fly was dealt with quickly.

Still pressing him up against the wall, Dream-Cas shoved the waist of Dean's pants down roughly before nudging Dean's head back, kissing him again as he pulled his cock out.

The angel gave him several strokes to bring him up to full hardness quickly, his lips quirking up into a smile once he'd drawn his own head back. Then Dream-Cas stepped away, quickly stripping off his clothes and letting them fall into a careless pile.

Mentally, Dean fast-forwarded the fantasy. It's not that he didn't like foreplay, but he wanted to get to the action. Prepwork done, Dean bent over the side of the bed on his knees, begging Dream-Cas to just *get on with fucking him*.

Yeah, that would do.

Dean had done this before: with consensual lovers both male and female, as well as the occasional customer. He'd always enjoyed it for what it was, but

he'd never done it with someone he trusted as much as Cas. So in his mind, Dream-Cas did everything right, took everything at exactly the pace he knew Dean needed, took over so Dean didn't have to think quite so hard about it all the time.

Dean's hand was around his dick by now, and he was thrusting up into it with something approaching abandon. His mattress didn't betray him, being a soft, squishy sort of thing. He let out another quiet moan as his fingers stroked across the underside of the head; he reached across to smear precome around with his thumb. He thrust up again, panting, gasping as his fantasy unfolded across his closed eyes.

Dream-Cas thrust into him, gently shoving his head down into the mattress with just enough force that Dean wouldn't struggle to breathe. The angel's breaths were becoming erratic, matching up with Dean's as he thrust up into his hand.

"Cas," Dean moaned under his breath. "Uh, Cas," and he thrust up again.

Dean forced his eyes open, blinking; sparks were beginning to flutter around the edges of his vision from holding them closed so tight. He didn't want to come *quite* so quickly so he let the fantasy dissolve for a few seconds, slowing his breath and loosening the hold on

his dick, maintaining his erection with light, gentle, teasing glides up the shaft with his fingertips.

He chanced a glance over at Castiel, hoping to get some inspiration from the real deal, and he froze.

Cas was watching him, jaw agape. There was no sound coming from the headphones: either the batteries had run out or the tape had ended. What mattered was this: Castiel had heard Dean moaning his name while he jerked off and it had caught his attention.

Shit.

Dean went into panic-mode; his heart had been pounding *before*, but now it began to beat quickly and erratically. A rushing sound filled his ears and his breath froze in his throat.

Then he noticed something. Something huge, something *important*: Cas was watching Dean jerk off, and he was *aroused*.

The front of Castiel's pajama pants was impressively tented considering Cas was sitting in a chair, the computer monitor's light casting shadows along his hips and the edge of what looked to be a relatively substantial cock. Dean swallowed, hard, and then made up his mind.

Castiel wanted a show? *Fine*. Castiel would get a show.

Dean bit his lip and shoved the comforter down, letting the cooler air of the room and the light of the computer monitor touch his cock. He shivered, fisting himself slowly. The metal of the ring Cas had given him had heated up by this point, but it was an unfamiliar and exciting texture, tracing a line up and down his cock as he pulled at himself, thrusting his hips up and letting loose with a full-body shiver. He gulped air into his lungs, chest heaving, and clutched at the fitted sheet beneath him with his left hand.

Almost of its own accord, his right hand pulled downward, aiming his dick toward his feet and giving Cas an excellent view of the party. He could hear Castiel's breath speeding up; wondered if the angel was even aware that it was happening; felt a tingle creeping up his spine.

He chanced another glance over at Cas. In the half-shadow of the room he could see that Castiel's eyes were pinned to him, glittering in the darkness, his mouth still hanging slightly open. Absently, the angel licked his lips and that sold the deal.

Cas wanted him.

In one smooth movement, Dean lifted his legs from the bed, letting his underwear and pajama pants stay entangled in the covers, and strode toward Cas.

Castiel leaned back in his chair, almost like he was afraid Dean was going to hit him. Dean closed his eyes and let his breath slow down before he crouched down to Castiel's level. He brought their faces close together, looked Cas in the eyes.

"Tell me this is alright," he said.

"Dean," Cas said. Gasp, really.

"*Tell* me," Dean insisted.

"Yes," Cas said. "Yes, Dean, I —"

Dean cut him off with his lips.

He hadn't intended it to go beyond passionately chaste, but almost immediately Cas parted his lips, making way for Dean's tongue, which he used to toy with Castiel's lower lip first before sliding it in to play with the tip of the other teen's tongue.

Cas let out something that was close to a whimper and brought his hands up to the sides of Dean's face, cupping his head gently but pressing them closer together almost insistently. Like he needed this more than air.

Dean obliged, letting Cas snake his tongue into his mouth and *plunder* it. It wasn't like Cas had kissed Meg, not at all: that had been domination and fury and fierceness and the wrath of fucking *God*. Cas kissed Dean like he was precious, like he was everything, like

he wanted to crawl into the other teen through his mouth and inhabit him like he'd inhabited Jimmy. It was passionate, desperate, and curiously enough, careful. As if Castiel was certain he'd break Dean if he tried too hard.

Gasping for air, Dean pulled away, nipping at Cas' lips before opening his eyes. Cas was several seconds behind, his lashes fluttering several times before he managed to get them parted.

Dean and Castiel had made a game of staring at each other for so long, and this was no different, and yet it totally *was*, it was *completely* different. This was less a "Dean and Cas" thing and more a "Dean-n-Cas" thing, this was *them*.

After a moment, Dean reached down toward Castiel's waistband. "Tell me this is okay, too," he said, quietly.

Cas nodded, almost too eager, and Dean chuckled under his breath as he pulled at the elastic. Cas obligingly lifted his hips and Dean slipped the sleep pants off him, letting them pool around his ankles.

He looked up at Cas, letting the Dean Winchester patented shit-eating grin play across his lips before leaning over and swallowing Cas down.

Cas clamped his hands down on the armrests of the

chair, a muffled groan rattling out of his throat. Dean smiled, letting the angel take in the sight of his lips stretched out around his cock. It was apparently too much for Cas, whose hips stuttered in the chair, thrusting up into Dean's mouth.

Dean took it like a pro, following the movement and then some, almost pulling off entirely before laving the underside of the head with the tip of his tongue. Cas made another whimpering noise, and Dean chanced a glance up. Castiel's eyes were wide, his mouth was still parted, and Dean imagined he could feel the other teen's pulse via his cock.

Dean pulled off entirely, sneaking up and kissing Cas again. He was having a hard time believing this was real, this wasn't another fantasy, but Cas had his hands all over him, shoving fingertips under his shirt (oh God, Dean still had his shirt on, how fucking ridiculous was that?) and pushing up impatiently with it, so *desperate* in how much he wanted Dean unclothed.

Dean levered himself up off the angel, tugging his own shirt off and then doing the same with Cas', before taking Castiel's hand and pulling him upright, standing, into a full, hungry kiss. Cas gasped at the sudden contact between their two cocks, blowing hot air into Dean's half-open mouth, and Dean huffed laughter back

into Castiel's.

He tugged the angel – *his* angel, now, there was no way it was going to be anything else – toward the bed. Cas looked briefly confused when Dean sat down, but comprehension lit his features when he realized that this put Dean directly at dick-level. Dean smiled again and opened his mouth.

Dean had never had much of a gag reflex to begin with, and when he'd begun his on-again, off-again relationship with hooking he'd purposely suppressed it, brushing farther back with his toothbrush every morning when he brushed his teeth until he could very literally shove the whole thing down his throat. It was a routine he'd begun out of habit when he'd woken up in Lawrence four months ago, and he quickly proved it to Cas.

Dean gave Castiel's cock the attention it deserved for several minutes, bobbing his head in a rhythm and tightening his throat muscles around the head, before he finally reached out and put his hands on Cas' ass, shoving the angel's hips forward a few times to give him a hint.

Cas *got* it, apparently, because after that he started fucking Dean's face with *intent*, moaning softly as Dean let his tongue brush along the shaft as it left and entered

his throat over and over again; Cas was grabbing at Dean's hair, curling his fingers in it, pulling at it. The tugs sent shocks of mixed pain-pleasure down Dean's spine, and he groaned in response.

Dean reached down, now that Cas was doing the work, and wrapped his hand around his own cock. It was glorious, his hand knowing instinctively how to best please him, running on autopilot, and Castiel's dick thrusting in and out of his mouth. He tightened his lips around it, adding the small amount of suction he was able to in this position, and Cas let out a small whine.

He stroked in time with Castiel's thrusts, moaning around the other teen's cock, and looked up to catch Cas' eyes. The angel was looking intently at Dean's hands, and Dean obligingly spread his legs wider so that Cas could have a better view. The fact that Dean was getting off on this, on Cas fucking his way down his throat, was turning the angel on even more, and his thrusts started to become erratic.

"Dean," Cas hissed, probably in warning. Dean murmured nonsense syllables at the back of his throat, encouraging the other teen, and then Cas was coming, warm and bitter at the back of Dean's mouth. He swallowed reflexively, listening to the quiet gasps Cas was making above him, watching the dazed expression

on his face, and then Dean was *there*, Dean was coming all over the floor in between them, mouth still full of Castiel's spent cock and spunk.

Dean pulled back, letting Castiel slip out of his mouth as he took a breath, slowly, shaking, hoping beyond hope that Cas understood what this meant.

Cas was leaning against the top bunk, the palms of his hands resting against the wood grain. His eyes were closed and he was shaking like his knees were about to buckle.

"Hey, hey," Dean said, reaching out for his friend and pulling him to sit down on the bed before he collapsed. While Cas recovered, Dean reached for his hand towel and wiped up the mess he'd made on the floor as best as he could, shoving the cloth under the bed when he was done.

He turned back toward Cas, who was staring at him with a blissed-out expression on his face. They were both still naked, although amusingly enough Cas had his socks on. He quirked a smile at Cas; Cas blinked a few times at him.

Dean sat back next to him, trying to come up with words. He failed miserably; he'd always been more of a do-er than a talk-er. Instead, he leaned toward Cas and let his lips touch the angel's, gentle, letting Cas take the

lead if he wanted.

It wasn't the open-mouthed making out from earlier, but Cas still kissed him back, letting his hand lift to Dean's cheek, his thumb stroking along the ridge of Dean's cheekbone. When they finally parted, Dean let out a shaky breath.

"Guess everyone else was in on it before we were," he said. Cas snorted, which was probably the most undignified thing Dean had ever seen him do, and stared into Dean's eyes for several seconds before speaking, the first time he'd actually spoken real sentences since before this whole thing started.

"Are you sure you want this, Dean?" The question was asked quietly, and Dean was almost absolutely a hundred percent positive that if he said no, Cas would back off and never bring it up again.

"Cas, there's not a whole lot I'm sure of, *ever*," Dean said. He closed his eyes and opened them again, looking him right in the eyes. "But I'm pretty damn sure of this. I've wanted...something. I don't *know*, I can't even fucking explain it."

"It might just be the teen hormones," Cas said, sardonically. Dean shook his head.

"No," he said, negating the argument with a small gesture of his hand. "No, I've – no, this has been on my

mind for a while.”

Cas stared at him in awe, leaning forward to rest his forehead against Dean's. The angel closed his eyes, breathing hard, and for a brief second Dean thought he'd managed to send him into a panic attack.

“I don't understand what I did to earn your regard, Dean, romantically or otherwise, but I'm grateful.”

“Hey, now,” Dean objected, pulling away. Cas opened his eyes and looked at him, and for a second Dean could tell he was wondering if he'd misinterpreted the situation. “I'm just this guy, there's nothing special about me. You're a freaking *angel*. Are *you* sure you want this? Whatever *this* is? Because, man, if anyone hasn't earned this, it's *me*, not you.” At the back of his head, he could remember every wrong thing he'd ever done in his life, from running out on Lisa and Ben to selling his soul for Sammy; he'd never done anything that warranted getting an angel in return.

“I'm not much of an angel,” Cas muttered, eyes darting away. “Trapped here with almost no power, and even out there I'm fallen. I'm *sullied*, Dean, don't you understand that?”

“Cas,” Dean said, reaching out and grabbing Castiel's shoulders and forcing him to look Dean in the eye. “*I don't care*. I'll take you, broken or not, in any way

you'll have me. Lord knows I'm no prize myself, alright?"

Cas shook his head. "Dean, if you could see yourself the way I can see you, as an *angel*, you'd understand the complete bullshit that just fell out of your mouth."

Dean gaped at him for several seconds before letting out a bark of laughter. He stifled it with his hand because *hey*, still naked, and he didn't exactly want anyone walking in to check on the two of them. Still, even though it was happening with ever-increasing regularity, Castiel swearing was a novelty in its own right and Dean loved it.

"Not that I believe you, but Cas, man, you've given up...fucking *everything* for me. Even when you fucked up and screwed everything to hell you did it for the right reasons, and you did it all for *me*. Don't think I don't know that, okay?"

Cas sighed. "I want this. I shouldn't want this, I should leave. I should be stronger than this, but —"

Dean kissed him. It shut him up, and it told him exactly what Dean thought about his arguments.

They fought it out via kiss, and by the time they were laying together in bed, curled up naked and exchanging soft, close-mouthed, affectionate kisses, the war was won.

Dean and Castiel went to sleep under both of their new comforters, limbs tangled and the both of them content.



Dean hadn't set his alarm for the next day; he'd been a little distracted the night before. So it really shouldn't have been a surprise when Sam burst into their room at 10 a.m., wondering why the two of them had slept in so long.

Dean wasn't actually asleep; he was staring at Castiel's face, relaxed as it so rarely was awake and holding him close. It was cheesy and romantic, and *absolutely* something Dean didn't want anyone else to witness. But Dean was also pretty used to not getting what he wanted, so he just threw Sam a dirty look.

"Be *quiet*," he hissed. "Cas is sleeping."

Sam stared at the two of them, jaw working as he tried to figure out actual words to put to how the scene before him made him feel. Dean was pretty sure the two of them made quite a sight: both completely nude (although they had blankets up to their waists, thank Christ), limbs tangled up, looking *thoroughly*

debauched. In their defense, Dean'd just woken up about ten minutes before and Castiel pretty much always sported bed-head.

Finally Sam seemed to settle on, "I thought you two *weren't* together?"

Dean shifted slightly, suddenly very aware of the fact that Cas had morning wood, and grimaced. "That was then. This is now."

Sam stared at him some more, which made the predicament that much more uncomfortable.

"Seriously, Sammy, *go away*," Dean said, pulling Cas closer to him. He realized that he was feeling somewhat overprotective, but instincts were instincts. "Cas is asleep."

"Not anymore," Cas muttered, his lips vibrating against Dean's clavicle. Dean looked down to find bright blue eyes blinking up at him sleepily. "You're loud."

Dean smirked and shrugged his left shoulder.

"Uh," Sam said.

"And brilliance finds human form in Sam Winchester," Dean sniped, throwing his little brother another glare. "Dude, *leave*."

"Right," Sam said, backing out and closing the door behind him firmly. There was an exasperated sigh from behind it, and both of them could hear the younger teen

spit out, “Finally!” as he trod away.

Dean looked at Cas and snorted.

Castiel shifted under the scrutiny, and his erection bumped up against Dean’s thigh. He flushed, and Dean smirked, reaching underneath the covers.

“I think I can do something about that,” he said, his breath tickling at the hair around Castiel’s ear.

Cas froze for a second, and then all but melted into Dean’s grasp. “That – ah – would be nice.”

Dean kissed him, sour morning breath and all. This was definitely something he could get used to.



By the time the two of them came downstairs (sated, showered, and dressed), Sam had settled down on the living room couch and was flipping through the standard Thursday morning programming. He’d just settled into the Price is Right (probably the best thing available) when the two older teens appeared.

Sam just stared at them for several seconds. “That was quick,” he deadpanned.

“That’s why they call it a *quickie*, asshat,” Dean retorted, bypassing the couch altogether and heading

for the kitchen.

Cas followed him. It was coming up on lunchtime, so Dean made the both of them sandwiches out of leftovers from Christmas dinner, going heavy on the sliced ham roast and cheese. They ate in silence, listening to Bob Barker in the other room (and that was really the only good thing about being stuck in 1996; Drew Carey had never really lived up to Dean's standards as a game show host. This was saying something, because those standards were pretty low to start with) as he urged his guests to guess the price.

Cas wrinkled his nose. "This television show is nonsensical at best, Dean."

"No shit, Cas. That's sort of the point."

This seemed to perturb Castiel, who finished his sandwich in silence while he contemplated the vagaries of humanity. Dean snorted at him and got up to wash their plates and clean up the mess he'd made.

Seriously, if they ever got back to the real world, Sam was going to be in Heaven to have a Dean who knew how to clean up after himself.

Speak of the devil, there was Sammy himself, loping into the kitchen with all of the awkwardness that a gangly 14-year-old possessed. He stood there uncomfortably for about twenty solid seconds, regarding

Dean from over by the fridge, before he spoke up.

“Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?” he asked.

Dean turned to look at him. “Are you *insane*?” he replied.

Sam sighed. “You can’t ask me to hide that kind of secret, Dean. At least tell Mom.”

“If you wanna tell Mom, you tell her,” Dean said. “I mean, how do you even bring that up? ‘Oh, hey, Mom, that one kid you accepted into your house, the one who’s now a legal adult? The one you regard as a third son? The one who’s been my best friend for, like, ever? Yeah, just so you know, there’s gonna be kissing and nudity from now on, under the roof you pay for. Kay, thanks, bye!’”

By the time Dean reached the end of his speech, his voice was so high-pitched that he was almost reaching girl territory, but he couldn’t deny being freaked out at the idea. Cas was legal here, now. If the two of them managed to piss Mary and John off, well, Dean didn’t know them well enough to know if they’d kick Cas out, and he couldn’t lose Cas. Not now.

Sam shifted uncomfortably. “I can’t hide this, Dean. You can’t ask me to. I’d feel *guilty* all the time.”

Dean closed his eyes.

“If you feel we should tell Mary, we probably

should,” Cas said from the table. He shifted in his seat. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable hiding anything like this from her, Dean. She’s done a lot for me.”

Dean swallowed and opened his eyes. Cas was looking at him in appeal, blue eyes earnest in his desire to do right by Dean’s fake-family. Dean sighed and looked back at Sam.

“I’m not gonna bring it up,” he told Sam. “But you do what you gotta do, and I won’t stop you.”

“I don’t like putting you on the spot like this,” Sam said. “Really, Dean, Cas, I don’t. I just – that’s too much. I don’t mind, you know, as long as I never *hear* you, but Mom and Dad have the right to know.”

“My advice is to tell Mom first,” Dean said, turning back to the sink to finish rinsing the dishes. “She’s less likely to try to stab one of us.”

“Dad won’t stab you, Dean,” Sam said, sounding amused. “He can be an asshole a lot of the time – which, by the way, you do too – but he *does* give a shit about us. All of us.”

Dean sighed. “I know, man, I just – I worry he’ll freak and do something stupid.”

“I think that’s probably a good assessment of the situation,” Cas said. His voice sounded weak.

“Alright, I’ll tell Mom,” Sam said, like he was

presenting it to them as an actual option. “And she’ll decide what to tell Dad.”

Dean set the last plate in the dish drainer before leaning up against the sink. His head dipped down, and he let out a sigh.

“Yeah, Sammy, that sounds alright,” Dean said. “Fine.”

He could hear his brother plodding out of the kitchen behind him. After he was sure Sam had gone, he turned and looked at Cas.

“Do you think I should start packing my things?” Cas asked. It was a serious question.

“Nah,” Dean said, shaking his head. “Mom might make you move to Sammy’s room, but I don’t think she’ll kick you out. Besides, you don’t even own any luggage, and we threw the mystery Piggly Wiggly bags away.”

“Right,” Cas said. He looked distressed, and Dean sighed and made his way over to the angel. Squatting down in front of him, he looked him in the eyes.

“I won’t let anything happen to you like that, Cas. I won’t,” he insisted. Still marveling that he was allowed to do this, he leaned close and kissed Cas, just a chaste peck on the lips. It was, apparently, exactly what Cas needed, because all of the tension in his frame drained

out as soon as Dean touched him.

Dean let his hand creep toward the back of Castiel's head, cupping his neck and jaw in his palm. As he pulled away he looked back into the angel's eyes. "We're in this together, okay? Just cuz my feelings for you aren't exactly brotherly doesn't mean you're not still family. If they kick you out, I go with. We'll figure something out between the two of us."

Cas closed his eyes, and in a very human gesture, leaned forward, resting his forehead against Dean's.

"I just wish I knew what Gabriel was trying to do," Cas said. "None of this makes *sense*."

Dean grinned, even though he knew full well Cas couldn't see him. "I know, man, but hey, look at what it got us."

That caused the corners of Castiel's lips to quirk up, and then they were kissing again. Still chastely, but that didn't prevent Sam, from the living room, from calling out, "Oh gross, my eyes!"

"You think that's bad, you should see this thing I can do with my *tongue*," Dean shot back, sticking his tongue out at his little brother and wiggling it.

Sam screeched bloody murder and Dean laughed. Even Cas chuckled.

All in all, it was actually a pretty good morning.



Things changed once Mary and John got home from work. Dean made dinner for everyone, because fuck what everyone said, he was actually pretty good at this cooking thing. In an attempt to sort of butter Mary up for the discussion Sam was about to have with her, Dean made chicken carbonara, which filled the house with all sorts of delicious smells.

Cas helped, although he didn't really understand what he was doing. Dean tried to walk him through the process of slicing bread and smearing butter and garlic salt on it, but the entire thing just confused him.

"That's alright, I guess," Dean said, sliding the partially-mangled loaf of french bread into the oven. "I can always cook for both of us. Good thing I'm used to the shit Sam gives me about being a housewife."

Cas looked confused and Dean explained. "You gotta eat, Cas, even if my parents aren't providing the food."

"You think we'll be stuck here beyond this school year," Cas said. Dean shrugged.

"I have no freaking clue, man," he said. He ruffled

Castiel's hair, which made him frown up at Dean, before sitting down next to him at the table. "But if we are, you gotta eat, and you'll be pretty damn bad at doing it yourself. I don't mind doin' it."

The smile Cas gave him for that comment was almost worth being a complete sissy for.

By the time the food was finished (Cas managed to not fuck up salad too badly, which was mostly because it was left over from the day previous), John and Mary were walking in the door.

"You cooked," Mary said, eying the kitchen table (which Sam had set in what Dean suspected was some sort of premeditated penance). "What's the occasion?"

Dean shrugged. "I was bored," he said, easily, slipping into his seat in between Sam and Cas.

Dinner was pretty quiet; Mary and John were both tired from work and the three teenagers were all dreading Sam's upcoming conversation with Mary. After dinner, John settled down into his recliner to watch TV for a while and Dean offered to wash the dishes. Cas silently rose to help him, which left Sam an opening to drag his mother to her office.

Dean swallowed and did his level best to get through the dishes as quickly as possible. They were just finishing the drying and putting-away portion of the

chore when Mary walked into the kitchen and observed them for several minutes.

When they were done she raised her eyebrow. She didn't look pleased, but she wasn't pissed, either, which Dean took as a good sign. She gestured for them to follow her and they did.

She led them to the office and closed the door behind them before sitting down at her desk with a sigh.

"You both have to know I saw this coming," she said. Dean and Cas both nodded, mechanically, dreading the next words to fall out of her mouth. It was a feeling Dean had never liked, that *oh-shit* feeling you got when you were expecting to be punished for something. It burned in his stomach, roiling and acidic.

Mary sighed again. "You two are both adults, or near enough to count, by now." Her smile wasn't exactly happy. "As you pointed out before, Cas, there's not much I can do to stop this, and I don't necessarily want to make either of you unhappy." She glanced up at Dean, her eyes softening. "I knew something was going on with Cody, and he never seemed to care about you very much." She turned to look at Cas. "Cas, on the other hand, has basically spent his entire life in your orbit, and he cares so much it hurts to watch sometimes."

Dean swallowed. Mary didn't even know the *half* of it.

"So this is how it's gonna go," she said, sitting upright. She held out her fingers and began ticking off points. "I don't want to hear it, I don't want Sammy to hear it, I don't want your father to hear it. I want you guys to keep PDA to a minimum, not because you're both boys but because I didn't raise you that way, either of you. I want both of you to endeavor not to get all ...weird and emotionally closed-off like you like to do, because you're family and what you do is going to affect all of us. I would *really* rather you not have sex in my house, but I suspect that if I ban it *no one* will be able to sit in the Honda with any level of comfort, so instead I want you to be considerate of the rest of us." She frowned at Dean, who twitched uncomfortably under her scrutiny. "I know I made you take that STD test after the Cody thing, but I'd rather you two use protection."

"*Mom!*" Dean protested. "It's *really* awesome that you're being all open-minded and crap, but you're acting like Cas and I are – I dunno, *fuckbuddies* or something." He crossed his arms and glared at her defiantly, adding, "Also, add 'talking about my sex life' to the list of shit I never wanted to hear my mom do, ever."

"Language," Mary said, but her expression had

softened. "Sam wasn't really clear on the details, Dean, but I know you and I know how many girls you went on dates with before Cody. I don't know *what* this is."

Dean glanced at Cas, who looked very much like he wanted some clarification too. Which, *ow*, that kinda hurt, and it must have shown on his face because Cas almost immediately let his face go blank.

Dean shrugged, his face flushing red. This was the kinda stuff he hated talking about. "We're, you know. A thing."

"The term is 'dating,'" Mary said. It wasn't often she got this kind of chance to embarrass Dean, and she was clearly enjoying the experience.

"Fine, yeah, *dating*," Dean said. This was the kind of shit you didn't have to deal with as an adult, man. He tightened his arms around himself, feeling pretty damn insecure as he did it.

Mary sighed and reached up, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose before she continued. "Either way, I *know* you, Dean, and I know what this is going to mean. I want you two to exercise caution and be kind to each other because if you split up, you'll be sharing a bedroom with your ex. Doesn't sound very pleasant, does it?"

Dean tried to imagine sharing even a *house* with

Lisa after breaking it off with her and shuddered. “Yeah, *no*,” he said. “I get it, okay? I do.”

“I just – you’re my son,” Mary said, sounding a little helpless. “I want you to be happy, both of you, but I certainly don’t want to think about the fact that my little boys grew up to be sexual beings, okay? It’s not something any parent wants to think about.”

Dean tried and failed to imagine Ben, all grown up and pawing at some girl. He shuddered. “Yeah, I get that. No hints at sex, ever. Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

“Exactly,” Mary said. “And – don’t tell your dad just yet. I’ll work on him.”

Dean nodded. Relief spread through him so quickly that he felt like collapsing on the floor right there, but he held it together long enough for Mary to dismiss the two of them and for the duration of the trip up to their room.

“That went remarkably well,” Cas said, surprise evident on his face.

“Yeah, no shit,” Dean said, sitting on the bed. “Man, I’m in my fucking thirties, introducing my boyfriend to my parents shouldn’t make me this nervous.”

Cas chuckled and sat next to him on the bed. Dean had noticed almost immediately that Castiel’s body language had shifted with the change in their relationship, and it was extremely apparent with how

close the angel was sitting next to him. “You’re in your thirties, Dean, but your body is still sussing out hormones and this isn’t a situation you’ve ever been in before. The life of the average American teenager is nearly as much a mystery to you as it is to me.”

“Good point,” Dean acknowledged with a grimace. “Dude, being a teenager again *blows*.”

“It’s unpleasant,” Cas said, his head cocking to the side as he regarded Dean. “But it has been...enlightening, I suppose, and it *did* get us to this point, so I don’t really regret it.”

Dean smiled. “Yeah, remind me to thank Gabe right after I punch him in the face,” he said, bringing his hand up to cup Castiel’s face. He leaned in and gave him a kiss, lightly, smiling with delight. The newness of it hadn’t worn off, and Dean wondered if it ever would.



The rest of the week flew by quickly. Dean and Cas resumed their morning workout routine, although because Mary and John were working this generally culminated in a lengthy, shared shower. Dean actually thought he was going to miss that part of it, because he

took a strange delight in washing Castiel's hair despite it being almost entirely nonsexual.

Castiel gave up his internet research shortly after Christmas. The Internet wasn't *nearly* as vast in 1996 as it had been in 2013, and so instead he took to reading the Enochian book Dean had bought him before they retired for the night. Dean was usually able to distract him right around when they'd be settling in anyway, which was fun for both of them.

There weren't enough baseball-related metaphors in the *world* to describe the sexual hijinks Dean managed to convince Castiel to try out: it was one *serious* benefit in having a relationship with an Angel of the Lord. Cas didn't have preconceived notions about what was and was not sexually appropriate and was *way* more willing to give anything a try than Dean expected. The fact that neither of them seemed too inclined, at the moment, to hit a home run – well, that bothered Dean less than he expected it to. After a lot of consideration, it made sense: Dean actually gave a shit about Cas. This wasn't just about sex or chasing an orgasm. It was about being with Cas.

Suddenly, porn made a lot less sense. If it ever had in the first place.

By the time New Year's Eve rolled around, Dean

was pretty sure he didn't want Christmas break to end. During the days, he and Cas got to hang out in the context of their *thing*. They got to curl up together on the couch or in bed (which had the added benefit of making Sam highly uncomfortable). If Dean wanted to, he could reach out and twine his fingers together with Castiel's and not worry about who saw. They could shower together, lean in for a kiss spontaneously, or just hang out as usual, and the only judgment they got for it came in the form of one of Sammy's bitchfaces.

They couldn't do that at school, nor when Mary and John were around.

Dean brought it up shortly after lunch on New Year's Eve: the two of them were laying in bed, spooning (Dean was so the big spoon), each of them reading a different book. It was a position that he never would have considered comfortable before, and it had taken several minutes of adjustment to work it out, but it was so, so worth it.

"We can't do this at school, you know," Dean said. His chin was tucked up against Castiel's shoulder, almost buried into the crook of his neck, and he knew his breath was probably tickling Castiel's ear.

"Hm?" Cas asked, flipping a page in the humongous Enochian book. He wasn't even a quarter of the way

through it, because every time he got started Dean managed to distract him.

“This,” Dean said, gesturing at the two of them with the paperback he held in his left hand. “The touching, the kissing, all of the best parts of this. We can’t do it at school.”

“Probably wouldn’t be prudent, no,” Cas said. He leaned back into Dean, relaxing further.

“I dunno, I’m just sort of gonna miss it,” Dean said. “And for *Christ’s* sake don’t tell anyone I said that, because it’ll ruin my manly charm if people know that one of my favorite things is cuddling with my live-in angelic boyfriend. But I will.”

A sort of sappy look – for Cas, anyway – had come over Castiel’s features. “I promise I won’t ruin your hyper-masculine image, Dean. I’m certain you’re capable of doing it yourself in the long run anyway.”

Dean rolled his eyes and planted his lips on the other teen’s cheek, giving him a kiss. “I am not hyper-masculine, I’m just a dude.”

“Whatever you say,” Cas said, smirking as he turned back to his book.

Yeah, afternoons with Cas were nice. Dean really was going to miss them.

It probably should have alarmed him how easily he

fell into this, but Dean decided, after several hours of panicked introspection, that it was just because he trusted Cas. Cas had seen everything, seen his *soul*, rescued him from Hell when he was at his worst. There was nothing Dean could do that Cas would judge him for, outside of maybe murdering kittens or something, because Dean had been *actively torturing* people and Cas had forgiven him anyway.

By the time he'd gotten over himself, Cas had already wandered downstairs and Mary and John had come home. Vicky and her moms (and a few of John and Mary's friends and coworkers) were coming over for New Year's celebrations, and Dean found Cas in the kitchen, attempting to help Mary prepare dinner and munchies for their guests later. He looked completely lost.

"Sit down, man, I'll do it," Dean said, taking the fork from Castiel's hand. He nudged him toward the table with a slight touch to the small of his back, before turning and doing what Cas had been screwing up – whipping sour cream into some sort of dip, from the looks of it.

Man, Castiel was a real badass when you got down to it. He could smite demons, go head-to-head with Leviathan, and face down all of Heaven and Hell with a

smirk on his face, but you put him in a kitchen and he was completely helpless.

The Winchester family had a very quick dinner of heat-and-eat pizza, Dean automatically standing with Cas to clear the table after they were done, as Mary had made comments about needing the table free to hold the smorgasbord of finger foods she'd prepared. Dean started on the pile of dishes left behind from both dinner *and* the party prep, figuring that it'd be pretty good to be in his mother's good book if he was expected to impress her coworkers.

Cas tried to help him, but Dean eventually told him to go read or something. It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with Cas, it was that the easy, familiar way they were standing together was earning them strange looks from John. Not to mention that Dean had figured out pretty early on that he actually got the dishes done more quickly if he just did them by himself.

When he finally finished, he threw himself into one of the kitchen chairs, groaning slightly. "Dishwashers are a *thing*, right? I'm pretty sure they are, and I'm pretty sure we should have one."

John snorted at his son's antics from the recliner, which was the closest seat to the kitchen by far. "We got one, son. His name's Dean."

“*Ugh*,” Dean said. He held his hands out; in the real world, his hands were hard and calloused from years of handling guns, improvised weaponry, and Baby’s steering wheel. Here, his hands were soft (although certainly not feminine, he was pleased to note) and boring. Office-worker hands. And they were currently wrinkled and waterlogged, which made everything he touched feel slightly disgusting.

“Go upstairs and get changed,” Mary said, physically pulling him from his seat and pushing him. “If you hang out in here you’ll eat everything.”

“I *just* ate,” Dean protested as he was dragged out of the kitchen.

“You have a secondary stomach, I’m almost sure of it,” Mary said. “Besides, you’re wet all up your front and it’s getting late. People will be here soon.”

Dean sighed and headed upstairs. He got to his room and pulled his shirt (which was, indeed, soaked through) off, before taking stock of the rest of the situation. Yeah, his pants and boxers were soaked down the front, too, from water splashing. It was kind of gross-feeling, actually, and he quickly pulled those off as well, taking his shoes and socks with them.

He turned around and caught sight of Cas staring at him.

“I’m just changing,” he warned him. “Got wet doing the dishes.”

“I figured as much,” Cas said. “That doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to look, does it?”

He smirked. “What, you like looking at me naked?”

“I like looking at you any time, Dean,” Cas said, marking his place in his book and closing it with a snap. “Why do you think I do it so often?” Cas crossed his arms and regarded Dean intently.

And God, *why* was that a turn-on?

Dean let out a shaky breath and turned back to his dresser, fishing out a pair of boxer briefs and sliding them on – *slowly*, so Cas got as much of a view as he wanted. Then he located a slightly-too-tight-for-comfort pair of black jeans, because he figured if he was going to do a reverse strip tease, he should do it right.

He slid them up his legs, slowly, and a glance backward showed that Cas was watching the proceedings with interest, following the waistline of the pants as they crept up Dean’s backside and settled low against his back. Dean buttoned his fly, watching as Cas took in the view of his now denim-clad ass with appreciation.

Dean swallowed, bending over to slide his socks back on before lacing up his sneakers. Finally, he stood

and picked out a T-shirt, once again going for something just a teensy bit too tight but not outright obscene – in this case, a *Night of the Living Dead* shirt he'd had since he was twelve or thirteen (he recognized it and assumed that Gabriel had put it in his house, but Sammy had won it at a carnival darts game and hadn't wanted it. Dean actually still owned it, back in the real world).

When Dean turned back around Cas was staring at him, taking in all aspects of his body, his hand moving rhythmically underneath the comforter.

Cas was jerking off while watching him get dressed. God, why, why *why* was that so hot?

Dean walked over to stand near the bed, twisting and grinning. "How do I look?" he asked.

"Just this side of inappropriate," Cas replied, his hand still moving. In fact, his hips were rolling now, thrusting up into his hand (Dean couldn't see this clearly, but good *Christ* could he picture it). "It's very provocative."

Dean's grin widened.

"I've been wondering," Cas said. "What you were thinking about on Christmas."

His grin turned into a frown. "What?"

Castiel's eyes dragged from Dean's crotch back up

to his face, although his hand didn't slow down at all.
"When I caught you."

It took several seconds for Dean's brain to catch up to Castiel's words, but when he did his pants became uncomfortably tight. "Are you asking me to tell you about my jerk-off fantasies, Cas?"

Cas bit his lip. "Yes," he said. "All of mine seem to revolve around you; I'd like to hear what yours involve."

God. Dean had never been one for dirty talk before, but if this particular brand of it was going to be a trend, he could *really* start to like it.

He checked the hallway really quickly to make sure no one was around to overhear this, then he shoved his dirty t-shirt up against the bottom of the door. That way, if anyone went to walk in, the sodden material would catch the bottom of the door and stop it from opening all the way. It'd give him and Cas precious seconds to get their shit together.

Not that he wanted that to happen or anything, but it was best to be prepared.

Finally, Dean settled down next to Cas in bed, letting the angel take in the fact that he was visibly aroused but not, for the moment, doing anything about it. He leaned back into his pillows, letting his head rest on his hands behind him, and started talking.

“You know, not that I don’t want you now, but I’ve always had kind of a thing for you,” Dean began, his face heating up. “So I was thinking about what could happen when we got out of here.”

Cas raised an eyebrow, hand working slowly under the blanket. “So you were thinking about me as I normally am.”

Dean nodded enthusiastically. “Although you weren’t wearing the trench coat anymore.”

He took Castiel’s interested expression as permission to continue. “You were wearing jeans and a T-shirt, one of mine. Sneakers, too. For some reason it was even hotter than usual.”

“And?” Cas asked.

Dean fidgeted, his erection insistently pressing against the fly of his jeans. He was suddenly very glad he’d chosen a button-up pair rather than a zip-up pair.

“Sammy was gone, and we were in one of our motel rooms,” he said. His voice, without his permission, had gone all husky, but Castiel seemed to like that, so he let it continue that way. “You pushed me up against the wall, like you did, uh —”

“With Meg,” Cas said, both eyebrows up now. He seemed keenly interested.

“Yeah,” Dean said, nodding. “And, uh, you ripped

my shirt off. The pants didn't look very salvageable either."

Castiel's face was flushed with exertion now. Dean gulped, taking in the look of him like this, on display for him, and just for his own pleasure. He lifted the edge of the blanket and took in the glorious sight of Castiel's cock, disappearing within his own hand as his hips pistoned up and down into it. He flexed his own legs, unconsciously mimicking the action.

"Continue," Cas said, clearly struggling with the words.

"I kinda fast-forwarded the rest of the foreplay," Dean managed. "It's fun in real life, but kinda boring for fantasy, you know? So I got to the good stuff. You had us both naked, and I was kneeling against the side of the bed —"

Cas let out a quiet whimper.

"And I was all ready to go, so you were behind me, you know," and Dean gulped at how vulnerable telling Cas this made him feel, and how much that vulnerability turned him on. "And you were fucking me, you know, almost no prep but it was *good*, great really, and I was *begging* for it, Cas, just begging you to go harder, deeper, and you did because you're an *angel*, you're stronger than me, and you pushed my head down into

the mattress, and —”

Cas made a small whining noise and Dean lifted up the comforter again, just in time to see Castiel come, splashing milky white up along the crease of his hip and lower belly.

Before Dean could really register what was happening, Cas had grabbed him by the neck, pulling him closer and pressing a near-violent kiss to his lips, molesting his mouth as he rode out the rest of his orgasm. It still wasn't the way he'd kissed Meg, and Dean was getting that Cas was probably *never* going to kiss him like that because it hadn't been the sort of kiss you gave to someone you care about. That had been a power struggle, a fight for dominance, and as much as the idea turned Dean on, he liked the idea of his kisses being special.

“Dean,” Cas whispered, once he'd pulled away.

“You're a kinky fucker, Cas,” Dean said, laughing. He pressed another kiss to the other teen's lips and fished down the side of the bed for the towel, handing it to Cas without another word.

Cas made to reach for Dean's fly, and Dean shook his head, kissing him again. “Mmm, not enough time,” he said, smiling. “Give it a few minutes, it'll go away.”

Cas looked outright surprised at that statement.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Dean shrugged. “Later tonight you can tell me what you beat off to and we’ll call it even,” he said, letting a grin spread across his face. Cas finished cleaning up, looking a little *too* satisfied with himself. He pulled his pants back toward his hips, yanking his legs out from under the comforter and standing up to zip his fly.

“Just uh,” Dean said, gesturing to him. “Go change your shirt, wash your hands... whatever. I gotta calm down and I’m pretty sure I can’t do that if you’re here.”

The flush that spread across Castiel’s face was priceless.



The party, if you could call it that, was boring. Sam, Dean, Castiel, and Vicky staked out a spot in the office, door propped open and lights off, sitting on the floor and eating food. Occasionally one of them peered out to watch the adults – maybe ten of them, total – talking and chattering away.

“I swear to God, if I ever think it’s a good idea to invite my coworkers to watch me get plowed on New Year’s, someone just shoot me,” Vicky said,

surreptitiously downing a shot of vodka. She'd managed to nick nearly a pint of the stuff from one of her parents, and was sharing the results of her thievery with the group.

Dean was okay with it, as long as Sammy only had one or two shots and kept his hands to himself. He said as much, and after Sam downed his first shot, he didn't think he'd have to worry about him taking the second one.

"Ugh, that stuff is *awful*," Sam said, making a face.

"Well, it's *Smirnoff*," Dean said, rolling his eyes as he took a swig directly from the flask. He grimaced and passed it to Castiel, who took a small sip, wrinkled his nose, and passed it back to Vicky. "I swear, Vicky, you guys could have shelled out for some Stoli or something."

"Better would have been *scotch*," Castiel said. He was making odd tongue movements, like he was trying to push the taste out of his mouth. Finally, he just shoved a small sandwich in there and chewed it up fervently.

Vicky and Dean finished the flask off between themselves. Vicky handled the stuff like a pro, which Dean suspected meant she'd done her time as a party animal (she was turning 16 shortly before Dean was

supposed to turn 18, so she was the right age), and Dean knew how to pace himself. By the time they had finished Dean had a pleasant buzz going, but he was nowhere *near* drunk. Castiel had managed to sneak a can of beer, instead, which he split with Sam.

Dean advised everyone to eat as much as they could. "It'll get the taste of booze off your breath," he said, smirking. "And it'll sober you up quicker."

Eventually they settled in to do what all teenagers in their situation – mostly unsupervised, in the dark, partially drunk – did, which was start up a pretty boring game of Truth or Dare that Castiel didn't understand in the slightest.

"Do *not* tell the truth about us, about the hunting," Dean hissed in his ear. Cas was just tipsy enough to let something slip. Cas nodded acknowledgment of his warning.

Eventually Dean, bored with all of the truthfulness flying around, picked dare, which seemed to delight Vicky.

"Make out with Cas," she said, clapping her hands. He stared at her. "Seriously? I do that *all day*."

Sam looked like he was going to be ill. "Those are my *brothers*, Vicky. I don't wanna see that."

"Yeah, you do it all day," Vicky pointed out, ignoring

Sam (which Dean had to give her props for). “But you don’t do it in the dark at a party full of adults you don’t want to *know* about it.”

Okay, point.

He scowled at her, making sure he and Cas were out of sight from the living room before pushing Cas up against the wall and pressing their mouths together.

Cas tasted like beer and canapes. Their kiss was sloppy, wet, enthusiastic, and punctured by Victoria’s gleeful chuckles. Off to the side Dean could hear Sam theatrically dry-heaving.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Vicky said, about a minute later. Dean pulled back, smirking as he saw that Castiel looked stunned and breathless.

They’d settled down back in their circle, and Dean was just about to choose Sam, when the light flickered on above them. Esmeralda stood in the doorway, her arms crossed and a suspicious eyebrow raised.

“What are you guys up to in here?” she asked. Dean snorted.

“Nothing,” Vicky said, clearly going for innocent.

“Yeah, cuz she’s gonna believe you if you act *blatantly* guilty,” Dean said, jabbing his finger at her. Esmeralda chuckled at him.

“Well, it’s almost midnight, *chicos*. Time to get in the

living room with all of the boring grown-ups and watch the ball drop.”

The four teens all obediently stood, trooping in after Esmeralda over to where the adults were huddled together by the television. John was involved in an in-depth discussion about something with a dude that Dean recognized sort of vaguely – it was the guy he’d talked to in Lawrence who’d co-owned the garage with John. Dean assumed he had the same role here.

Mary was talking to some guy that Dean was pretty sure had been there when Castiel had been getting the third degree about Balthazar, but he wasn’t entirely certain. She nodded at Dean, smiling. He nodded back, turning and, from an instinct that he didn’t realize he still had after months languishing here, scanned every other person in the room for threat level.

Castiel was visibly doing the same thing next to him, and Dean smirked at his friend when their eyes met.

“Ah, here we go,” Carla said, pointing to the TV. The adults all chanted along with the count down with an enthusiasm that Dean didn’t quite share.

After all, New Year’s just meant that he and Cas had both somehow failed to get themselves back to the real world. Even if that meant Cas was still here with him, instead of rotting in Hell or being tortured in

Heaven. Dean frowned, decided to count his blessings, and joined into the countdown at four.

Across the room, at the stroke of midnight, Sam leaned over and kissed Vicky. Dean smirked at them and glanced at Cas, who was smiling a lot more benignly.

There was a lot of cheering and shouting, and eventually catcalls when Mary and John kissed. Dean chuckled as he headed into the kitchen to scout for more food.

He found himself leaning against the kitchen sink, eating a leftover quarter of a sandwich. Once he finished, he smiled at Cas, leaned in, and pressed his lips to the other teen's.

"New Year's tradition," he whispered. "You're supposed to kiss at midnight."

"It's past midnight," Castiel said. He nudged forward slightly. "I suppose we could make an exception, just this once."

Dean smiled and brought his hands up to frame Castiel's face, deepening the kiss.

The sound of someone walking into the kitchen and opening the fridge startled both of them apart, and Dean and Cas found themselves staring, wide-eyed, at John.

Who was very casually reaching into the fridge for a

beer. Dean was just beginning to hope that John hadn't seen them when his father straightened up and looked at the both of them with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" he asked. "I saw this coming *years* ago, and your mom didn't believe me." He twisted the top off of his beer, deposited it into the garbage, and strode back out to the party.

Cas and Dean blinked at the spot John had so recently occupied.

"...Did that *seriously* just happen?" Dean asked.

Cas blinked a few more times before hesitantly offering up, "I...*think* so?"

Dean turned to Cas, and Cas turned to Dean, and they both began to laugh. If it was a little bit hysterical laughter, well, no one would know but them.



No one mentioned it until the next afternoon. John had arranged to have the day off of work for the New Year, and it was an official state holiday so Mary was off as well. The entire family was crammed together and it became obvious that they were all suffering from cabin fever; so shortly after one, Mary dragged Sam off to get

a haircut.

“You’re lucky I don’t make you get one,” Mary said, waving a threatening finger in Castiel’s face.

“I don’t want one,” Cas replied, his face completely blank.

“Yeah, Cas looks good with long hair,” Dean piped up, just to be contrary. Mary glared at him.

“Man, everyone’s at each other’s damn throats today,” Dean said, watching a few minutes later as Mary pulled Sam out the door.

“It’s common when people live in close quarters, stuck inside most of the time,” Cas said. “It’s good that they got out. We might consider doing the same.”

“Yeah,” Dean said, hunching over. He didn’t like that idea *at all* – at least at home he and Cas didn’t have to be on guard constantly from homophobic dickwads as well as the supernatural.

John walked in through the door in the kitchen that led to the garage, wiping his hands clean on a rag. Dean had absolutely no idea what his father did when he disappeared in there, but apparently it got his hands dirty and didn’t involve cars, as the Impala and the Honda were both in the driveway.

Dean and Cas shot each other a look and shifted anxiously in place. Dean had an uncomfortable feeling

that a *discussion* was about to happen, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

"Oh for God's *sake*," John said, tossing the rag on the kitchen table and frowning. He pointed at the two of them. "This, whatever it is with you two? Does it make you happy?"

Dean nodded, slowly. He could see Cas nodding next to him and tried to ignore the little bubble of warmth that Castiel's happiness invoked in him.

"Then *whatever*," John said, gesturing. "Look, Dean, I can't promise I'll *ever* be comfortable with it, that you like guys too," and John sighed and sat himself down on the edge of the couch, resting his elbows on his knees. He looked...*helpless*. It wasn't a look that Dean was entirely comfortable with on his father, and he dreaded what was coming next. "Even if I saw it coming from a mile away, it was always going to be a shock to my system. But I'm your *dad*. Your happiness is *always* going to be more important to me than my comfort, okay? You too, Cas."

That...wasn't what he'd expected. A, "Look, I just don't want to see it," or even, "Keep your noses clean and don't get busted in public," yeah, Dean could have dealt with. But uneasy acceptance? A genuine wish for his happiness? No, that...that wasn't something he'd

ever allowed himself to even entertain the *idea* of. He found himself swallowing around the lump that had formed in his throat, felt the pinprick of tears unshed beneath his eyelids. “I, uh, I gotta go, uh, upstairs,” he said, turning quickly and heading in that direction.

Dean wasn’t really ashamed to admit that he was a crier; hell, he’d cried more in the last decade than most people did in their entire *lives*, and with good reason. He wasn’t ashamed of showing grief or sadness. Although he eschewed chick-flick moments and other assorted feely-feely bullshit, Dean had come to terms with the fact that he often wore his emotions on his sleeve, especially around those he considered family. It wasn’t something he thought of as a weakness, even if it did leave him open to exploitation.

But *this*. This was too much. This was something he’d waited his entire life for – John Winchester’s acceptance and love. And while he wasn’t dumb enough to think that this would have happened in the real world, the world he’d actually grown up in, it meant a lot.

Dean sat on the edge of his bed and tried to get a grip on himself. He propped his elbows on his knees, an unconscious mimicry of his father, and ran his hands down his face, wiping away tears and his expression all at once.

Cas had spent the better part of the last few years of his life learning everything he could about Dean Winchester, and it showed in how he reacted to his friend's emotional breakdown. He gave Dean an hour by himself, and it wasn't until Dean heard Mary and Sam coming in downstairs that the angel even bothered coming up to check on him.

Dean had managed to get a handle on his breathing and overall panic. He'd even managed to stop crying, which was a pretty huge obstacle in it's own right. But he was still sitting there, in the same position he'd started in, staring at the wall and lost in thought.

"Dean?" Cas asked, putting his hand on his shoulder. Dean startled, jumping slightly before turning to look at his live-in *whatever*. "Are you alright?"

"Hey, Cas," Dean said. His voice was rough with disuse and tears, but he managed a smile. "Yeah, man, I'm fine. I'm just...I dunno. Wasn't expecting that, I guess."

Cas sat down next to him, close enough that Dean could feel the other teen's leg pressing against his, but far enough away that Dean wouldn't misconstrue it as smothering him. Cas, Dean realized, had been paying attention.

"I wasn't expecting it, either," Cas admitted, a small

smile playing on his lips. “The human propensity for unconditional love is something I’ve witnessed, but to be *included* in that is...” He made a gesture, words having failed him.

“Yeah,” Dean said, nodding. He sighed. “I know that’s not, you know, not really my dad, but *damn*.”

“Well, *that’s* not right,” a familiar voice said from the desk. Both Dean and Castiel’s heads shot up.

Gabriel was sitting in their computer chair, eating a Twix. He grinned at the two of them and wiggled the fingers of his left hand, which wasn’t currently involved in holding candy.

Dean shot upright, his hand immediately going for a gun that wasn’t there. “Gabriel,” he said, his voice steady.

Cas came to stand next to Dean, his gaze not wavering from his brother for even a second.

“Oh, calm *down*, princess,” Gabriel said, rolling his eyes. He let his Twix wrapper fall to the ground as he finished the candy. “I’m not here to hurt you. Trust me, if I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn’t have stuck you in some Stepford universe version of yourself.” The archangel looked upward, considering, and smirked. “I’d have put you back in the universe where you were an actor. Man, that was a *good* one, Castiel. I couldn’t have planned it

better myself.”

Dean restrained the urge to growl, because he was pretty sure Gabriel wasn’t above dog jokes.

Gabriel reached into his coat pocket. Goddamnit, he even *looked* the same: same dishwater-brown hair, same hazel eyes, same unselfconscious smirk. Dean wanted to strangle him.

“Seriously, you two morons, sit down before I make you,” Gabriel said. He lifted his left hand warningly. His right had managed to retrieve a different candy bar from an inner pocket of his jacket, this one a Snickers.

Castiel sighed and sat. After several seconds of not-so-intimidating staring on Gabriel’s part, Dean sat as well.

“I don’t have a lot of time, so if you have questions, you should ask them now,” Gabriel said, munching on his candy. “But just so you know, that *is* your father down there. And your mother. And even little Sammy-boy. Creating souls is hard work, and it’s not like I had a lot of time to do it. So I borrowed a few. You two, your family, your brother’s little girlfriend, and a few others are all the real deal; they’re like milk chocolate, and everyone else is imitation karob.” Gabriel wrinkled his nose. “Ugh, whoever invented Sixlets *had* to be working for Lucy.”

Dean snorted. He couldn't help it – Gabriel was using *candy analogies* to explain souls.

“What is this place?” Castiel demanded.

Gabriel shrugged, tossing the Snickers wrapper on the floor and licking the chocolate off of his fingertips.

“You guessed it right the first time, bro. It's a pocket universe. I was technically *dead*, you know. You should be grateful I even went to this much effort to keep your asses safe. I just went back to where I wanted in 1996 and kinda...copy-pasted the Midwest.” He squished his hands together, shrugged, and started digging through his pockets again.

“Dude, how much candy do you *have*?” Dean asked.

Gabriel raised his eyebrow. “I spent the last few years in Purgatory, Dean-o. I have as much candy as I damn well please.”

“So this is an imitation,” Cas interrupted. Clearly he didn't think a dissertation on candy was important right now.

“Uh, *yeah*?” Gabriel said, turning to regard his brother face-to-face. “I was *dead*. I mean, even dead an archangel's a powerful thing, but you were on Heaven's radar and I had to keep you and your little boy-toys safe.”

Cas looked surprised. “Keep me *safe*?”

“*Big* plans for you, little brother,” Gabriel said, smirking. Cas hunched in on himself slightly.

“*What* plans?” he asked.

“Did you know there’s two ways for an angel to develop a soul?” Gabriel asked. The non-sequitur startled both Dean and Cas, who leaned backward in shock. Gabriel fished yet *another* candy bar out, and Dean resisted the urge to smack it out of his hand in frustration. “The first is the way your buddy Anna fell – you rip out your grace and you fall to Earth. She fell for of a thirst for knowledge of humanity, a real desire to experience the human condition. Angels aren’t supposed to *want*, Dean, do you get me?” At this, Gabriel focused his gaze on Dean exclusively, and it sent a terrified shiver down Dean’s spine. He nodded understanding, glancing over at Cas as he did so.

“Anna got a soul for it, then lost it when she got her grace back,” Castiel said.

Gabriel leaned back in the chair, nodding. “But there’s a second way, a more gradual way, to fall. When an angel falls for *love*, they keep their grace and develop a soul alongside it. It’s only ever happened *three times*, little brother, and the three angels in question? They’re like genetic aberrations. The only

angel-born to develop souls. Don't you think *someone* would be interested in that?"

"Fall for love," Cas repeated. The look he threw Gabriel was skeptical. Dean snorted.

"I know, right? Cheesy," Gabriel said. "Dad's kind of a romantic at heart, I think. But when an angel falls because of love – love for humanity, love for a single person, love of free will, whatever – they get a soul all their very own."

"Uh, why is this such a big deal?" Dean asked, raising his hand like an idiot. He let it fall back to his lap. "People fall in love literally *all the time*."

"That's just it. *People* fall in love, not angels," Gabriel replied, easily.

"Love and righteous vengeance are the only emotions angels are programmed to feel. It's how our Father created us. We are *made* of love and Godly wrath," Castiel told Dean before focusing his attention back toward his brother.

"But when that love overwhelms everything else, you learn how to really *feel*. That's how you know you have a soul." Gabriel winked at the two of them. Dean was pretty sure that was supposed to be some sort of innuendo, but he couldn't connect it to what the archangel had just said, so he ignored it.

“What about Lucifer?”

Gabriel shrugged. “He fell for love too. Love of himself, mostly, and love of his brothers. Love of our father. His soul’s ugly as sin and twice as black, just for your information. I’d know, it’s the last thing I saw before I died.”

The three of them were quiet for several moments while Dean and Castiel absorbed that knowledge.

“It’s only ever happened twice before, not including Lucifer?” Dean asked, blinking suddenly. “But that means —”

“*Bingo*,” Gabriel said, winking at Dean and mock shooting him with his finger. “I ran from Heaven to get away from my brothers, but I *fell* because of love. I know, I know, who’s the lucky girl? Or guy, if that’s your thing. Which, you know, it *is* in your case.” Gabriel smirked. “Long dead by now, of course, but *man*, you’d be impressed with my taste.”

“So you two are the only earth-bound angels who have souls,” Dean said. “So *what*? Cas doesn’t belong to you, you don’t get to choose what he does —”

Gabriel’s face closed up and Dean was very quickly reminded that he was facing down an archangel. He looked *pissed*.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking that just

because I like you doesn't mean I won't destroy you," Gabriel said. He leaned forward, staring at Dean with deadly intent. "*I'm* not the one who has big plans for him, but even if I were, *don't* tell me I can't make him do what I want to. I'm an *archangel*, kid, and I know where Castiel's weak spot is."

Dean blinked. "I don't know whether to feel threatened or warm and fuzzy," he said.

Gabriel stared at him for several seconds and then let out a bark of laughter. "See, that's what I like about you Winchesters. *Zero* self-preservation skills and a fabulous sense of humor. Man, you know who you would have got along with? *Noah*. Guy was a total smartass. Dad tells him to build an ark, he makes sure to include lifeboats."

Dean snorted.

"To summarize," Castiel said, verbally dragging them back to the conversation again. In fact, he had an expression on his face that made Dean feel like Castiel was trying to pull him and Gabriel through a petting zoo, and they were both toddlers. "You put Dean and I into a pocket universe, and most of the people here are not real souls, save Dean's family and a few key others."

Gabriel nodded. "No one can get in or out except me unless I want them to. It was the safest way to do

things while I went about resurrecting myself.” Gabriel gestured down to his vessel. “Which is done, by the way, but now there’s other shit in the works, so you two get to stay here for a while. So do they. There are just certain people, certain *souls*, that need to be protected right now. Orders from above.”

“How long?” Dean asked, automatically. Then he remembered what he and Cas had been talking about before Gabriel showed up, and – “Wait, this is *really* my family?”

Gabriel smirked. This seemed to be his default expression for this conversation, and it was starting to really grind Dean’s gears. “Yup! Snuck into Heaven, right past Naomi’s nose, to get your parents and grandmother. Sweet-talked Crowley into giving up your grandfather, too. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter. Crowley’s good, but I’m *better*.”

“Then why don’t they *know*?” Cas asked. He looked almost physically pained at the idea of hiding anything from his adoptive family.

“Because they don’t need to?” Gabriel said, twirling a package of Twizzlers in between his fingers. “You and your boy-toy – by the way, Cassie, *nice choice*. You always *did* have a really good appreciation for the beauty in Dad’s creations – needed to be aware of what

was going on. No one else did; I gave them the memories they needed and they ran with it. Souls are adaptable that way.”

“So what I’m getting from this is you think I’m pretty,” Dean said. He smirked to cover up his unease. “Doesn’t explain what’s going on.”

“There are key people here, Dean, who needed to be protected or otherwise exist for the benefit of you two idiots.” Gabriel gestured at Dean and Castiel. “While I take care of things that you couldn’t even *comprehend*. The ones who are already dead’ll remember this; if they’re dead, remembering won’t affect anything. The ones who are alive *won’t*. Except for you two, cuz I’m a romantic like that.”

“So when are you letting us out?” Dean asked, ignoring the jibe about romance. He thought this was a pretty reasonable question considering the circumstances.

Gabriel shrugged. “Whenever I want to? You should know, the soul is pretty flexible when it comes to age. I could keep you here for an entire life if I wanted, let you live out the whole picket fence thing, and right as you’re about to die you’d wake up back in Texarkana. Or maybe I’ll take you tomorrow. I’m flighty like that.” He grinned.

"I fucking hate you," Dean said. It wasn't said with rancor, but he was pretty damn serious at this point.

"Ah, you love me," Gabriel replied, dismissing his criticisms with a wave of his hand. "Your whole family is together and you get to play nice with each other before you run off into the sunset with your angel husband.

Who *else* gets a chance like this?"

Okay, so maybe Gabriel had a point.

"This is the life you could have had, Winchester. If your parents had never been marked by Azazel, if your brother had never been given demon blood. This is the life you would have lived. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Then, just as suddenly as he'd appeared, Gabriel was gone.



"That son of a *bitch*," Dean said, pacing across the room restlessly. "*We have to get out of here*, Cas. Last time Gabriel stuck Sam in an alternate reality I died about a million times in a row and gave my brother a fucking *complex*."

Cas just looked sad. "I didn't ask Gabriel about Jimmy," he said, his tone mournful. That brought Dean

up short, and he sat next to Cas and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “Gabe’s a dick, but he’s not that big a dick. I’m sure Jimmy’s alright.”

Cas shook his head. “We don’t know that, Dean, and if he’s dead or gone... it’s my fault.”

Dean shot up out of bed again, pacing some more. “Come *on*, Cas. You were trying to send him home. You couldn’t know that the universe’s most annoying archangel would choose *now* to decide that, hey, maybe he should go take charge of Heaven cuz some new bitch is throwing orders around.” He paused in his pacing. “And *who the fuck is Naomi?*”

“She was Zachariah’s superior,” Castiel said. He was still sitting, either thinking over what Gabriel had told them or still being emo about his possibly-disintegrated vessel’s soul. “Directly between Michael and Zachariah.”

“So, wait, you were fourth in command of *Heaven?*” Dean turned to regard Castiel with some amazement.

“Not exactly,” Castiel said, smiling wryly. “Should Michael fall, Raphael was to be given command. You can see how well that went.”

Dean snorted in amusement.

“After the archangels there is another class of

seraph, the first class, which Naomi belongs to. There were four in that rank, including herself, Enoch, Elijah, and Joshua. These are all angels who were once human and ascended to Heaven without dying. They exchanged their immortal souls for the grace of angels.”

Dean blinked at him. “There are angels who were once *human*?”

Castiel nodded. “Those who were true servants of God not in belief but in *righteousness*. They’re the only angels who have true gender and don’t need vessels, and should all the archangels fall they were to be the ones who rule Heaven in God’s place.”

Dean sat down again. “Huh.”

“Enoch disappeared some years ago after transcribing the Word of God; you know him as Metatron. Elijah was killed during the war with Raphael, and Joshua has since stepped down and refused to rule. In the absence of any archangel, Naomi would be in charge of heaven.” Castiel sighed. “I am unsure if she would be any better or worse than Raphael.”

Dean shuddered, trying to imagine an angel worse than Raphael. The only one he could think of was Lucifer.

Castiel continued his explanation without being prodded. “After Naomi comes Zachariah’s rank, of which

there were five, and then my rank, of which there were fifteen, including Uriel, Rachel, Hester, Inias, and Anna. So, yes, assuming everyone before me died, there is a small chance I would be placed in charge of heaven, had I not chosen the path I did.” That was a reminder of something else, and Dean swore before he spoke again.

“If Gabe’s out, d’you think you’ll still, you know,” and Dean shrugged, gesturing helplessly.

Castiel shrugged as well. “I don’t know, Dean. If our Father has plans for me, or some other angel that Gabriel is colluding with, I don’t know where my fate lies once we leave this place.”

Dean resumed pacing, wishing he’d thought to ask about Castiel’s punishment before Gabriel had taken off. Finally, after several minutes of wearing a groove into the carpet, he sat back down next to Cas.

“Were you in charge of a lot of angels?” Dean asked, trying to take his mind off of an unsolvable problem. It wasn’t often that Cas was in such a giving mood with his knowledge of Heaven, and these weren’t things Dean had ever considered before: he’d assumed that Castiel was just a grunt, just like he’d assumed of all of the other angels he’d met.

Castiel smiled. “I am the lowest level of seraph,

Dean, but the seraphs direct the cherubim. I had several hundred under my command, although not all of them were soldiers. Anna, Uriel and I all shared leadership of them, and when Anna fell, Uriel and I split the duties.” He considered Dean for several seconds. “You would make a good commander, I think. Your father trained you well in tactics and battle, and you understand that sacrifices have to be made. But you also understand how valuable life is. It’s something that I always lacked, before.”

Dean chose to ignore the compliment, because he didn’t like the idea of being in charge of *anything*. Everything he touched turned to shit; he was half-expecting Castiel to break it off with him every day. He changed tactics again, pumping not-so-subtly for more information.

“So I met this angel at this weird auction. Samandriel,” Dean began. Castiel’s eyes flashed with humor.

“Samandriel was amongst my rank, although he and two others commanded a separate garrison,” Cas said. He seemed to find this highly amusing. “He was in charge of the cherub, third class.”

“He commanded the *Cupids*?”

“He *is* the angel of fertility and inspiration,” Cas said.

He pondered some more. "I wonder who was given command of my garrison? After Uriel's death and my fall from grace, my soldiers were leaderless." He sighed and stood.

"I meant to tell you that your mother was starting dinner," he said. "After I checked on how you were doing. You *are* alright?" The look he gave him told Dean that he was skeptical that Dean would *ever* be alright, and Dean rolled his eyes in response.

"I'll be fine, Cas, I'm just trying to...you know. Get my shit together. This is really weird; I'm not used to suburbia."

"I know," Cas said, holding a hand out to help haul him up. The two of them started to leave before Dean stood completely stiff and upright.

"Oh my *God*, Gabe can probably see us have sex," he blurted out. He blushed bright red and Castiel laughed.

"Odds are, Gabriel saw you have sex well before this. Even *before* he left heaven he was known to be fascinated with the process of coitus, and you've had rather a lot of it in the past."

"You've gotta be *kidding* me," Dean said, running his hand down his face. "That *fucker*."

They headed downstairs, Castiel's laughter

following Dean the entire way.

Part Five



he three teenagers returned to school the next week, and almost immediately Dean was set upon by teachers, faculty, and his parents to start applying to schools. He should have been writing his essays before Christmas, according to them, and there was much moaning and groaning over his laziness.

In Dean's defense, he had absolutely no idea how one went about applying to college. It became fairly obvious the first Wednesday after their return to school, when Castiel found him at the kitchen table, having a complete meltdown while looking at college pamphlets.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Dean said, helplessly. "Man, I never even considered college, before. I didn't even graduate *high school*. School isn't my thing."

"*Dean*," Castiel said, sliding into the chair next to him as he began to sort through pamphlets. "Obviously,

school *is* your thing, as you're currently maintaining a 3.6 GPA in your own right. Calm down."

It'd taken Cas several weeks to get the hang of the grading schedule and how schools tabulated results, but once he did, he understood with a *vengeance*.

Dean took a breath and let it out slowly. Then he looked at the two piles Cas had sorted the pamphlets into.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"These schools are all located in places known to be fairly liberal," Cas said, gesturing to the smaller pile. "These others are less likely to have a friendly populace and I doubt you want to attend them."

Dean let out a bark of laughter and began to sort through the "acceptable" pile. This was a lot less overwhelming, as there were only ten of them.

"Ten? That's it?"

"Those are the ones I expect you could attend with a minimum of hassle," Castiel replied, shrugging.

"They're all decent schools, as well, although I expect some are better than others." Dean stared at him for several minutes while Cas fidgeted under the attention.

"How do you *know* this?" he blurted out.

Cas sighed. "I learned a lot when I was playing God, Dean."

That shut Dean right up and he started flipping through the pamphlets again.

“MIT?” he yelped, several minutes later. “You want me to apply to fucking *MIT*?”

Cas stared at him like he was crazy. “I don’t see why not?” he offered. Like it was a question that didn’t make sense.

“Cas, MIT is a *really* good school. I’m a high school dropout and *I* know that,” Dean argued.

“Then why shouldn’t you apply?” Cas was genuinely bewildered.

“Because places like MIT don’t *take* fuckups like me,” Dean hissed. The two of them dropped silent for several minutes as Sam came into the kitchen and got a soda, and then they continued their conversation.

“I’m not applying to MIT.”

“Yes, you *are*,” Cas replied, his eyes narrowing. “You heard Gabriel, Dean. We could be stuck here for a *long time*. If you’re going to be stuck in an alternate universe where you’ve proven your academic merit, you may as well go to a decent school.” He sighed, shaking his head. “I understand that this is hard for you to acknowledge, but if you’ve learned anything here, it should be that you’re *not stupid*. Your teachers have sent letters home to your parents praising your intellect,

you have near-perfect grades, and you obviously understand the material you're learning."

"This ain't my first rodeo, Cas," Dean said, shoving the pamphlets away from him with a sigh. "Sam's the smart Winchester, alright? I'm no slouch when it comes to MacGyvering shit, but I'm not the engineering genius you think I am. I learned that the first time, okay?" He hunched in on himself, crossing his arms in an automatic defensive reaction.

"*Dean*," Cas said, grabbing his chin and forcing him to look up into the angel's eyes. He looked annoyed, almost angry. "Your brother is very intelligent, but that doesn't mean you're his opposite. You have *proof*," and at this, Cas gestured to the fridge, where Mary was still hanging up their report cards. "Numerical evidence of your intelligence, right there, and you're *ignoring* it."

"Cas, I only got through that shit because you helped me," Dean said, shaking his head out of Castiel's grasp.

"Dean, I only ever help you in history," Cas said, with a pointed glance. He gave Dean a frustrated sigh and stood. "If you're going to be obstinate, I'm not going to solve this for you." Dean stared at Castiel's retreating back in a strange mix of awe and frustration.

It took him the better part of two hours to suck up

his pride and go to talk to Cas. Mary was preparing dinner and shooed him out of the kitchen, forcing him to take his ten college brochures (he'd tossed the other twenty or so; if they didn't want his bisexual ass, he didn't want their education) with him up to his bedroom.

He knocked on the door, tentatively, and opened it. Cas was sitting on the top bunk, his legs hung over the fall-rail as he kicked them restlessly.

"Have you decided to stop being an ass?" Cas asked, his voice thick with sarcasm.

"Maybe?" Dean said. He stepped inside, hesitant, and closed the door behind him. He sighed and shook his head. "Cas, I just don't see what the point is in spending good application money on a school like MIT. I'd never get in; I remember when Sammy was sneaking around, applying to colleges. You have to write all sorts of entrance essays and prove that you're good enough, and I'm just *not*."

Cas crossed his arms and glared at him. "You've managed to talk your way into *how* many waitresses and bartenders' bedrooms, and you don't think you can convince MIT into accepting you? Despite your excellent track record in school and borderline genius SAT scores?"

"Yeah, but that's different," Dean argued.

“No, it’s *not*,” Cas replied. He grabbed the railing and swung himself down from the top bunk in a graceful move that Dean found himself impressed with. Then he didn’t have time to be impressed because Cas was closing in on him. “Dean, you convinced an angel to rebel against *Heaven* for you. Two of them, in fact, as Gabriel eventually joined your cause, and he’s an *archangel*. Your powers of persuasion are a force to be reckoned with.”

“Well, when you put it *that* way,” Dean said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I *do* put it that way,” Cas said, crossing his arms. He was pissed, and Dean couldn’t believe that his and Castiel’s first fight as a *thing* was going to be about fuckin’ *college*. The angel sighed and let his arms fall to his sides, before crowding in on Dean’s personal space, getting right up in his face. “Dean, I *fell from Heaven* for you. When are you going to accept that you’re worth it?”

“Yeah, well, when are you going to accept that you don’t deserve to be tortured for all eternity for making a fucking mistake? Two can play this game, Cas, so don’t get all holier-than-thou on *my* ass.”

Castiel’s face went blank. “This is not about me, Dean, this is about you.”

“No, see, it’s two sides of the same fucking coin,

Cas,” Dean said. He pushed back, got up in *Castiel’s* face. “I’ve been trying to make you believe you’re worth saving since *Purgatory*. You don’t get to make judgments about my self-worth if you don’t have any yourself, you asshole.”

“This has no bearing on what school you attend,” Castiel said. His expression had grown stormy, and he pushed Dean away from him with force. Dean slammed backwards into the door. “My fate is none of your concern, Dean. Your future *is*.”

“Your fate damn well fucking *is* my concern, Cas!” Dean shouted. He dropped the pamphlets on the ground and stepped back toward Cas, grabbing a handful of his shirt and pulling him toward him. “You’re the only thing I can count on around here, man, and I don’t want to lose that when we go home.”

“Of course, it’s about what *you* want,” Cas said, and Dean took a moment to reflect on how Castiel had *really* mastered the Dean Winchester patented Turn It On Your Opponent move before Cas was pushing him against the wall, Dean’s hands shoved away from him. Cas pinned him against the drywall with so much force that Dean was very briefly reminded of what he’d deemed the Alley Incident, back when he was thinking of saying yes to Michael, and he wondered if he should

prepare for blows.

“It’s always about *you*, Dean,” Castiel said, his breath tickling Dean’s face. “*You* sold your soul so you could keep your brother around, yanking him out of Heaven to return after he’d died. *You* had to take the weight of the world on your shoulders and stop the Apocalypse because *you* didn’t think Heaven’s plan was good enough. *You* want me to be around because it makes *you* feel better. For someone who hates himself, Dean, you’re certainly a selfish bastard.”

Cas threw Dean to the side, pushing him away and storming out of the room.

Dean stared at his retreating back, furious both with the angel and with himself. He closed his eyes, turning around and letting his head fall back into the wall and letting out a sigh.

He had no idea why he was so surprised he’d managed to fuck it all up. This is what always happened, wasn’t it? Dean is happy, Dean plays normal for a while, Dean screws everything up and throws it all away. That was the natural order of things.

He sighed and threw himself, face-down, on the bed.



“Dean, this is ridiculous.”

“Leave me alone,” Dean muttered around a mouthful of pillow.

“No,” Mary said, crossing her arms. “I have no idea where Castiel is, and I know you two were fighting. You’re going to get up and help me find him.”

“I don’t want to help you find him,” Dean said, lifting his head so that she could hear him pronounce every word. “I don’t want to see him right now.”

“*Dean*,” Mary said. She slapped him alongside the head, which hurt like a bitch and was apparently a family trait, because Sam had done that to him so many times he’d lost count. “It’s *January* and Cas is out there wandering around without a jacket on, mad at *you*. If he freezes to death, you’re going to feel like a jackass, which is good because you *are* one.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Dean said, angrily, as he sat up and began shoving his shoes back onto his feet. “Where the hell are we even going to look? Lawrence is *huge*, in case you haven’t fucking noticed.”

Mary’s jaw clenched. “I know you’ve just had an argument with Cas, but you will *not* talk to your own mother like that unless you really have a desire to be backhanded.” She let out a steadying breath and

continued, glaring at him the entire time. “Get your damn coat on and meet me outside. We’re taking the Impala.”

Dean shivered as he shrugged into his winter coat. His mom was fucking *scary*.

In a matter of minutes Dean stomped his way downstairs, stormed past a startled Sam and John, and petulantly threw himself out into the freezing cold front yard. He even managed to slam the door to the Impala, although he mentally apologized to her as he did so.

“You’re being an asshole,” Mary said, her voice tight. “Can you put your bullshit away for like twenty minutes while we find your wayward boyfriend?”

“Not my boyfriend anymore,” Dean muttered, crossing his arms and staring out the passenger window as Mary backed out into the street.

“What the hell did you *do*?” Mary asked, as she carefully began steering the car down the road, following Castiel’s footprints.

Dean huffed.

“I swear to God, Dean, one of these days I’m gonna strangle you. Puberty was the *worst* thing to happen to you,” Mary said. Her bitchface rivaled any of Sammy’s, and Dean was reluctantly impressed.

He was silent for several minutes as they navigated

the icy roadways. Long enough for him to start to get nervous. It was freezing outside, and slick besides. He had a tortuous image of Cas flick through his mind, fallen into a ditch somewhere with a broken ankle or something, and a pang of worry overtook his anger. He sighed.

“Cas wants me to apply to MIT,” Dean muttered, kicking his feet.

Mary stopped the car and turned to look at him, incredulous. “You guys are seriously breaking up over what *college* you’re going to go to?”

Dean fidgeted in his seat. “We haven’t technically broken up yet,” he said. “And anyway, it’s stupid. I couldn’t get into MIT if I tried, it’s a waste of a fifty dollar application fee.” This was a stupid thing to talk about right now. Why had he brought it up? Cas could be *dying*, and Dean didn’t know if Gabriel was going to make sure he came back this time.

“You,” Mary said, “are an *idiot*. I cannot believe I raised someone so stupid. Dean, what the *fuck*?”

He stared at her in awe. His mother had just dropped an F-bomb.

“What?” he asked, intelligently.

She glared at him. “You honestly just aren’t going to *try*? You think your dad and I haven’t been saving up for

you and Sammy to go to college since the *moment* we got the positive pregnancy tests? Do you *really* think a fifty dollar application fee to find out for sure is going to put us out? Dean, do you *seriously* think this is the sort of thing you should be breaking up with the only person who's *ever* put up with your shit over?"

"*He* walked out on *me*," Dean said. He crossed his arms.

"Probably because if he didn't he was going to pound your stupid face in," Mary said. She was furious, and for a second Dean was legitimately terrified of her. Then her face softened. "Dean, couples *fight*. That's just something that happens, okay? Your dad and I have had some doozies, in case you don't remember."

Oh, Dean remembered. He winced.

"Just because Castiel ended the argument doesn't mean he's breaking it off, honey," she said. "He *cares*, and he wants you to succeed. Just like all of us do. And just like the rest of us, he gets angry when you refuse to live up to your potential. Which you have an annoying habit of doing." She smiled at him, and he twitched, unable to keep still under her gaze.

"I won't get in," he said. "It's a waste of effort."

"No, Dean, it's not," she said. She put a hand on his shoulder. "The worst they can say is no, right? And I

don't think they will, but even if they do, it's no skin off your back. It won't hurt anyone for you to *try*."

She sighed at him and pulled the car back out.

While they kept an eye out for Cas, Dean ruminated on these thoughts. It was a hard pill to swallow, that he might not be entirely worthless: he'd based the bulk of his adulthood on the concept that everyone else was just *more important* than him. And yeah, he'd fought off the Apocalypse out of sheer stubbornness, but that didn't make him special. That just made him not a complete *asshole*.

Well, not as much of an asshole.

And he'd had a *lot* of help. Mostly he just stood around not saying yes and getting people killed. Except for the one time when he almost *did* say yes. Which Cas saved him from. And then Sam went and jumped into Hell to save the world, so really, none of the credit was his anyway. Dean sighed.

"I fuck everything up," he said. His face itched, and when he reached up with his fingertips he found that they were wet, and he was crying.

"Yeah, you kinda do," Mary said, smiling at him. "But the point is that there's not many things out there that can't be fixed, and you're pretty good at fixing things, too."

Dean sighed again, wiping his eyes before letting them drift back toward the outside. Almost immediately he spotted Cas.

“Hey,” he said, pointing.

Cas was sitting on a bench in the middle of one of the smallish parks that were scattered around Lawrence. Snow had started to fall, and it was dusting his head and soaking into his T-shirt. His jeans were bedraggled and wet around the cuffs, and his shoes were absolutely *not* acceptable for this weather. He was leaning over, his elbows on his knees and his head resting in his hands, fingers digging into his hair in frustration and anger. Maybe in disappointment.

“Shit,” he said, as Mary pulled the car over. He hopped out before the Impala had even had a chance to stop.

He walked up to Cas almost hesitantly, not wanting to startle him but wanting to let him know he was there. As it turned out, walking quietly in the snow? Kinda impossible, because Cas was alerted to his presence almost immediately.

“Dean,” he acknowledged. Dean sighed and shrugged out of his jacket.

“Jesus, Cas,” Dean said. He held out his jacket. “It’s freezing out here.”

Cas blinked, like he'd just realized how cold it was, and he accepted the jacket. "Thank you," he said. His voice was stiff and ultra-polite, and Dean realized that Castiel had never done this before, never had a fight with someone he was involved with (From what Dean knew, anyway; he'd got the impression that Daphne and Emmanuel had an almost perfect marriage, seeing as Emmanuel was a total blank slate). He didn't know where to go from here any more than Dean did.

Dean stood there for a while, staring at Castiel's profile as the cold began to seep under his sweatshirt, wondering at what to say, before he finally blurted out, "Look, we can talk about this later, just – come *home*, so you don't freeze to death before we have a chance to fight it out. Please?"

Cas sighed and rubbed at his face with his hands, which were slowly turning frostbite-blue. "I don't want to fight with you, Dean," he said.

"Yeah, well, join the club," Dean said. "This is probably the worst I've felt since I thought you died last time. But I'm here, and you're here, and we're both alive. I can work with that."

"I *deserved* to die, Dean. That I'm still here is a miracle in its own right," Cas said.

"Are you seriously going to bring that argument up

here? In public? When I don't have a fucking jacket and you're wearing shitty neon Converse? Because if that's what you want, sure, we can duke it out, Cas." He crossed his arms defensively before continuing. "Maybe some day I won't think I'm a complete piece of shit; Lord knows you've been trying to make me believe that since day one. But it's a two-way street, pal." Dean sighed and squatted down, forcing Cas to look him in the eyes. "Yeah, it's selfish, Cas, but I want you around. You mean more to me than anyone, except maybe Sammy, okay? I went to Hell for him. Don't think I wouldn't do the same for you."

Cas looked away, and Dean continued.

"You fought through Hell for me, you know what it's like down there. The idea of you going through any of the shit I went through makes me wanna puke, okay? You don't deserve that. *No one* does. And even though Heaven is supposed to be the good guys, they do the same crap, and you and I both know it. And you *still* don't deserve it. You were in a shitty situation and you had to make shitty choices because of it."

"People *died* because of me, Dean," Cas said, shaking his head.

Dean shuffled over so that Cas had to look at him again.

“Do you think that I never got innocent people killed because I thought I was doing the right thing, Cas? Seriously, that’s like, the Winchester way. You’re practically one of us now. Innocent blood spilled in the name of the greater good. And yeah, it blows, and it weighs on your mind, and you’ll probably have nightmares about it for *years*. I’m not saying it’s not gonna fucking *suck*, I’m just saying that it doesn’t mean that a good man has to suffer Hell’s torture for all eternity.”

Cas let out a strangled laugh. “I’m not a man, Dean, let alone a *good* one. I’m an angel. I don’t get to make that choice.”

Dean leaned his head toward his angel, letting their foreheads touch. “You kinda *do*. You fell from Heaven for free will and got yourself a soul. Kinda the *epitome* of being able to make that choice.”

Cas sighed and closed his eyes. “I didn’t fall from Heaven for free will, Dean. I fell because you asked me to. Selfishly, I wanted to help *you*.”

“Yeah, cuz saving the entirety of Creation is so selfish,” Dean retorted, trying to squish the uncomfortable feeling that rose up when Cas said he fell for *him* down. Hell, that was just one more sin to add to his checklist. Cas opened his eyes and he actually

looked amused. “I’m not saying I don’t wanna continue this conversation, Cas, because the shit we got between us? It needs to be said. But it should be said at home, where it’s warm and there’s food and I know you’re not dying of hypothermia. *Please?*”

Cas sighed again, but he made to stand. Dean helped him up, because he was moving stiffly from the cold. Before they headed toward the Impala, Dean put his hands on Castiel’s shoulders, looking him in the eye.

“Are we okay?” he asked. “If you think – if you wanna stop this, I think can deal with that, as long as we’re still friends.”

Cas swallowed. “I don’t – Dean. I would *never* – stop this. This, you, it means everything to me.” His shoulders hunched up. “I’m yours, for as long as you’ll have me.” He sank deeper into himself before admitting, “I thought *you* would want to –”

“*God*, no,” Dean said, drawing the other teen into his arms and settling his chin into the crook of his neck. He let out a shaky exhale. “I fought through all of *Purgatory* just to find you, man, do you really think I’d let you go after a stupid fight over a fucking college application?”

Cas snorted and let his arms encircle Dean. “Among other things. I don’t know, Dean. You’re very

unpredictable sometimes.”

Dean pulled away from Cas and let his lips touch the angel's, kissing him briefly before pulling back and grinning. “That’s me,” he said.

Cas looked up at him, smiling back, and Dean hadn’t thought it possible, but he maybe felt just a little bit more in love with him.

“C’mon, enough of this feelings crap,” Dean said, forcing himself to let Cas go. He grabbed his hand (which was ice cold) and entwined their fingers, pulling him toward the car. “Mom was pissed that you left without a jacket, by the way.”

Cas made a huffing noise, but he allowed himself to be led. “I wasn’t in a very good state of mind. It’s hard to remember to take care of myself sometimes. It was never something I needed to worry about before.”

“I know. It’s okay,” Dean assured him. “Just come home before you freeze to death next time.”

“I sincerely hope there’s not a next time,” Cas said. Dean looked over and saw him frowning.

“There probably will be,” Dean admitted, as they walked up to the car. “I’m kind of an asshole.”

“I’ve noticed,” Cas said, and his voice was wry. Dean nudged him with his elbow and opened the back door, shoving Cas in before climbing in next to him.

“What, am I a chauffeur now?” Mary asked, exasperated, as she put the car into gear and started to head home.

“Absolutely,” Dean said, grinning. He reached out and let his fingers grasp for Castiel’s again, and was insanely gratified when the angel clutched back.



Eventually, Castiel and Mary’s words got through to Dean, and shortly after his 18th birthday he sent off applications to the five schools he thought he’d most like to attend. MIT, Berkeley, Gonzaga, and Cal Poly all had really good mechanical engineering programs, and he sent off an application to study mathematics at Occidental College against his better judgment.

Castiel had *his* college meltdown the week before Dean sent off his applications.

He walked into the dining room to discover Castiel in a remarkably similar state to the one Dean had been when *he’d* been trying to suss out schools.

“Cas? You alright?” he asked. The other teen was sitting at the table, his elbows propped on it and his hands running through his hair. It was a nervous habit

Cas had developed since being forced to live a mostly-graceless existence, and Dean secretly thought it was kind of adorable.

Plus it gave him sex-hair, which he found irresistible.

“I am having problems determining a major,” Cas said. “I understand mathematics quite well, but I don’t have your flair for engineering, so I don’t feel that would be a good place for me.”

“No, probably not,” Dean agreed, sitting down next to him.

“There’s a wide array of courses available at the five schools you’ve chosen,” Cas said. “I can’t seem to pick one thing I feel I’d be particularly good at.”

His voice was tense, and Dean managed to figure out that Castiel thought this was very serious.

“Well, hey,” Dean said, sliding the Cal Poly brochure out. “What’s interesting to you?”

Cas gave him a look that told him, clearly, that he thought Dean was being stupid. “Up until very recently, Dean, I wasn’t *allowed* to cultivate real interests. I have no idea what’s interesting to me, outside of following Winchesters around like a lost puppy and leading failed wars against Heaven.”

Dean laughed. “Okay, well, let’s do it this way –

what do you think you'd be good at and wouldn't hate?"

Cas shifted nervously in his seat. "I don't know," he said. He looked as close to frustrated tears as Dean had ever seen him. "How do human teenagers deal with this sort of decision-making so young, when their bodies are full of confusing hormones? This sort of thing affects their entire life!"

"Preachin' to the choir, man, trust me," Dean said. He flipped through the UC Berkeley booklet, his mind on Castiel's dilemma. "Is there any particular reason why you're freaking out about this?"

Cas sighed. "I need to go where you go, Dean, which means I need to find a major that applies to all of these schools."

"Hey," Dean interjected. He set the Berkeley booklet down and turned to face Cas. Reluctantly, Cas turned toward him as well, and Dean put his hand up to cup his cheek. "If you can't figure something out, you can just come with me. You don't have to go to school if you can't figure it out. We'll get an apartment or something, no big."

Cas sat up, stiff in his chair. "I won't be a burden," he said, his voice a warning to Dean.

"No burden," Dean said, shaking his head. He smiled and kissed Cas softly. "Where you go, I go,

yeah?”

Cas sighed into Dean’s mouth and nodded, letting his eyes fall closed. Dean kissed him one last time and sat back, reaching for the Berkeley booklet again.

After several hours of research, Castiel settled on religious studies. Dean laughed for a week about it.



School was school, ever-unchanging for the most part, until the week before Valentine’s Day.

“I’m warning you,” Dean said, that Monday (Valentine’s Day fell on a Friday this year) as they walked to history together. “I don’t *do* Valentine’s Day.”

Cas raised an eyebrow. “I fail to see what the feast of Saint Valentine has to do with anything.”

Dean laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Best part about dating you, Cas, bar none, is your total lack of understanding about holidays.”

The second eyebrow joined the first. “What?”

Sam, who had English three classrooms down from the duo and was walking with them, piped up.

“Valentine’s Day is about romance! You buy your, uh – *significant other* – candies and roses and stuff. And you

take them out on special dates.”

“That has literally *nothing* to do with Saint Valentine,” Castiel replied, his expression perplexed. A flash of recognition lit his eyes, and he opened his mouth; Dean realized that he was remembering their encounter with the Cupid during the Apocalypse, and rushed to cover for him.

“No *shit*, Sherlock,” he said, rolling his eyes. “It’s a corporate holiday, man. The card companies want an excuse to sell more cards, the chocolate companies want an excuse to make women feel inadequate, the condom companies want you to get it on with *their* latex on your junk. I don’t do Valentine’s Day unless I’m single and looking for a quick lay.”

“You’re *disgusting*, Dean,” Sam said, wrinkling his nose at him. Then he brightened. “I’m taking Vicky out.”

“Aw, is Carla going to drive you guys out for a date?” Dean teased. Sam flushed and stormed away angrily. It was a bone of contention these days, as Vicky had failed her first driver’s test and wouldn’t be able to retake it until shortly before the end of the month.

“Am I expected to buy you something for Valentine’s Day? Or take you somewhere?” Cas asked Dean, his eyes taking on the pinched, squinty look that they got when he was trying to figure out some weird human

thing that he claimed made no sense.

“Nooooo,” Dean said, shaking his head. “No way, man. If you have an unfulfilled desire to go out on a date, we can do it any other day of the year. February 14th is an official stay-at-home night for us.”

“I don’t want to go on a date, Dean,” Cas said, rolling his eyes. “The practice seems redundant, considering the aim is to get the person you’re going on a date with naked by the end of the night. We do that every night already.”

“Damn straight we do,” Dean said, winking. They quieted down as they crossed the threshold into their history class, setting their things down at their table before sitting themselves.

Neither of them really thought much about their discussion until the next day. In retrospect, Dean realized that mentioning his and Castiel’s sex life in a public hallway probably wasn’t the best idea. But in his *defense*, he was so used to the way things were now, where most of the school was pretty accepting of him because he’d proven himself physically, and people just kind of *assumed* he and Cas were together. Even the burnouts had mostly taken their hinted-at relationship at face value, occasionally making gay jokes in their direction but otherwise welcoming them with open, if

patchouli-scented, arms. Not to mention that at home, the entire family was aware that Dean and Cas were a *thing* – even John didn't think twice if he walked in and spotted the two of them squished together against one end of the couch, or entirely too close at the table doing homework.

So really, he could be excused for forgetting that he and Cas weren't exactly public knowledge.

By the next morning it had somehow spread all over the school. The moment Dean and Castiel walked through the front door they were accosted by the yearbook photographer, snapping pictures.

"And you said you weren't a couple," she said, slyly, winking at them. "Are you going to the dance on Friday?"

"I – *what?*" Dean asked, blinking. Her camera's flash was every bit as aggressive and blinding during the day as it was in a darkened gymnasium.

"The Valentine's Day dance!" she said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "I checked the rules, you know, and there's nothing in there about same-sex couples not being able to attend."

"Uh, no thanks," Dean said, backing away. He glanced at Castiel, who looked somewhat alarmed to have the camera pointed at him now. "Hey, dude, back

the fuck off.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, you’re so protective of him!” she squealed. Once again she reminded him of Becky Rosen, and he wondered with an ill feeling if Chuck had ever let her read his unpublished manuscripts, the ones with Cas in them. Oh God, what if she’d written *porn* about them?

“So which one’s the chick?” some other girl said, walking up and giving them the stink-eye.

“What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?” Dean demanded.

“You know, which one of you is the pitcher and which one is the catcher?” the new girl asked. Castiel was now regarding her with a cocked head and a severe expression, like he’d very much like to smite her.

Dean opened his mouth to tell her off, because seriously, this was fucking *ridiculous*, when Sam walked up to them.

“Uh, Dean,” he began.

“Not now, Sammy,” Dean said, brushing him off and turning back toward the baseball-metaphors chick.

“Seriously, Dean, this is kind of important,” Sam said, urgently, tugging at his jacket sleeve.

“I think we should listen to Sam,” Cas said, suddenly standing upright. If looks could kill, the group

of teenaged boys behind the camera-girl would be complete fatalities, because Castiel was giving them the evil eye. Which, *whoa*, that was kind of terrifying.

Thus, Dean allowed Sam to tug him off toward a mostly-empty corridor, where Vicky was waiting for them.

“You guys aren’t going to like this,” she warned. “Amy Johnson heard you guys joking about going out for Valentine’s Day yesterday right before your history class, and now it’s all over school.”

They both stared at her.

“I guess that kinda puts all of the weird sex questions into perspective,” Dean blurted out.

“It’s going to make things all *kinds* of difficult,” Sam said. “You’re just lucky you’re both 18 now, because if you weren’t the school could get Mom and Dad into all sorts of trouble.”

“What? *Why*?”

Sam looked at Dean like he was a complete moron. “I dunno, I mean, how many DCF employees do you think just let their foster children get into physical, homosexual relationships with their own kids?”

“Huh,” Dean said, blinking. He’d never really considered it in those terms before, and put into that perspective, Mary had taken a pretty huge risk giving

them her blessing. “Never really thought about that.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t seem like the kind of thing you *would* think about,” Sam sniped. The five minute bell rang. “Anyway, so that happened and you might wanna watch your back. The baseball guys are already pissed you decided not to try out for the team this year, and now they’re talking about, I dunno, beating the gay out of you or something.”

Dean groaned. “Are you *shitting* me? Man, we took on most of the varsity football team and they think a fucking *baseball* team is going to gank us?”

Sam smiled. “Just be careful, Dean.”

Vicky nodded at him as she and Sam took off for Spanish together.

Dean turned and stared at Cas, who looked nauseated.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Cas nodded. “I was thinking about Halloween,” he said, voice tight.

Dean’s shoulders tensed up. “That’s not gonna happen,” he promised.

“I’m fairly certain it won’t, but it was an uneasy thought,” Cas replied. “Come on, we’re running late.”

The majority of the morning was spent dodging shitty comments and by the time they sat down at lunch,

Dean had heard just about every variation of the term “butt buddies” that existed.

“Seriously,” Dean groused to Justin. “You’d think they’d come up with a better insult.”

Justin laughed. “Yeah, I just tend to stick to the classics, man.”

“Hey, whatever happened to a good old-fashioned ‘queer’?” Dean said, rolling his eyes. Justin laughed even harder; Dean was pretty sure he’d lit up in the bathroom before coming to the cafeteria.

By the end of lunch, Dean had had six people approach him and Castiel and ask who the woman was. Finally he’d just about had it.

“Dean, what are you doing?” Cas asked, as Dean stood up and climbed on top of his table.

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing, Dean, *don’t*,” Sam advised him. Dean ignored him, instead cupping his hands to his mouth.

“Hey!” he called out. Silence fell in the lunchroom. “Yeah, Dean Winchester here. Just so you all know, Cas and I? We’re *both dudes*. So since you all seem so curious, *neither* of us is the chick, because we’re both dudes. Both *guys*. Both in possession of a penis. Got it? Good. *Stop fucking asking*. Thanks.”

He flopped back down into his seat with a frustrated

sigh. There was a moment of silence and then slowly, everyone went back to their conversations (although Dean suspected that their conversations were all suddenly more Dean-n-Cas flavored than they had been previously).

Their own group had been in the process of packing up to go to class, and they stared at him for several seconds. Then, from next to him, Castiel giggled.

Actually *giggled*. Dean gaped at him; he'd made an Angel of the Lord *giggle*.

And suddenly their entire table, Dean included, was laughing hysterically, and Dean began to think that maybe everything would be okay.



For the most part things continued in that vein throughout the rest of the week. Some people still heckled Dean and Castiel, but mostly everyone ignored them. After all, their schoolmates had been assuming they were a couple for several months now anyway.

Thursday was when things went to shit. It was always *Thursdays*; Cas had been right, they were out to get him. The universe and Thursdays were colluding

and they even dumped a hugely awkward Angel of Thursday in his lap.

Which, okay, *that* wasn't so bad. But the rest of it fucking blew.

It started when Dean and Castiel were both pulled out of their fifth-period English class and brought to see the Dean of Students.

Her name, according to the plate on her desk, was Sue Tansy. She was probably in her late thirties, brown hair with blue eyes and curves in all the right places, and were Dean single and in his right body he might have tried to hit that. The bitchy look on her face told him it probably would have been a no-go anyway.

"Mister Winchester, Mister Novak," she said, sitting down at her desk. Dean started; he still wasn't used to the idea of Cas having a last name. Or rather, a last name that wasn't *Winchester*: Cas had been an honorary member of his family for so long that the idea of him being a Novak, genetically or otherwise, was completely foreign.

"Uh," Dean said. Cas threw him a sort of disappointed look before refocusing his attention on Ms. Tansy. He wore an expression of polite indifference that Dean attempted to mimic.

He was pretty sure he failed miserably.

“News of your alleged relationship has been circulating the school the last few days,” she said, picking up a pair of reading glasses and settling them on her nose. Dean wondered why she was wearing reading glasses when she clearly wasn’t *reading*, but decided that asking her would probably be a bad idea.

“*Alleged?*” he said, instead. “I think I pretty much *confirmed* it in the cafeteria on Tuesday, but since no one’s handing out promise rings I guess we can go with *alleged*.”

Her lips tightened and Dean realized that they might be in actual trouble.

“Be that as it may,” she said. “The school doesn’t *currently* have any restrictions in place against ...your type of relationship,” and this was said with something of a sneer. Dean found himself getting angry.

Cas shot him another look that was clearly intended to make him not say whatever he’d been about to say. Dean’s mouth had already been half-open; he shut it with an audible snap.

“I’ve spoken with the administration of this school, and we’ve all come to the agreement that for the sake of maintaining the learning environment, we’d like you to restrict your displays of affection to places not on the school grounds,” she said. “Additionally, we regret to

inform you that we will not be allowing you to attend any school dances as a couple.”

“Displays of affection?” Dean asked. Now he was *furious*. “Just, you know, to clarify, what displays of affection are we talking here? Because I’m pretty damn sure I saw the vice principal walk past a couple who was full-on *making out* yesterday and he didn’t even *blink*, and Cas and I barely hold hands on-campus.” He stood, knowing perfectly well that he towered over her even when they were *both* standing. “Also, *not* that I had any interest in actually going to any of your shitty dances, after the last sub-par piece of crap we went to, but do you *realize* who’s on your PTA? Esmeralda Mendoza? Lawyer for the *ACLU*? Ringing any bells?”

Ms. Tansy’s lips tightened again, and Dean realized he may have gone too far.

“I’m not sure what kind of household your parents run, Mister Winchester,” she said, the expression on her face clearly telling Dean that she thought she knew *exactly* what kind of household the Winchesters ran, “but while you’re at school you’ll watch your language. I’m afraid you’re going to have some detention for this.”

“Fuck your detention,” Dean spat, grabbing Castiel by the wrist and hauling him up. “Fuck your detention, and fuck you trying to dictate whether or not I’m allowed

to hold someone's hand, and just *fuck you*." Cas was struggling to follow him as he headed out the door. "I can't *believe* these people trust you to help take care of their kids, because lemme tell ya, you're a heartless bitch. I'm outta here."

Cas twitched the entire way out to the car. He waited until they were leaving the campus before he turned to Dean and asked, "Do you think that was wise?"

"Probably not," Dean admitted. "But dude, *fuck* that lady. I'm not about to let her tell me I'm not allowed to stand close to you or whatever the fuck it is she has a problem with." He gunned it, shifting from second to third gear as he headed toward Lawrence's main drag.

"Where are we going?" Cas asked, his hands tightening slightly against the center console and the door armrest.

Dean glowered. "Esmeralda's office," he said, speeding up some more.



The fact that Dean knew exactly where the ACLU office was kind of disturbed him, but he'd looked it up

after Cas had been stabbed.

The offices were actually kinda nice, done in soothing pastels and beiges, and Dean would never, ever admit to anyone that he felt pretty damn comfortable there. The receptionist didn't seem bored, and looked up at them politely as they entered. This was a first for Dean, who had seen his fair share of bored, apathetic receptionists in his day.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

"Is Esmeralda in?" Dean asked. Cas gave him a look.

"She's a bit busy with a client at the moment. Can I take a message?" The receptionist reached for a pad of paper and a pen.

"It's kinda important," Dean said, trying and failing to not feel impatient with the lady.

Cas sighed and stepped in between Dean and the desk. "We're friends of her daughters'," he explained. "Ms. Mendoza has been interceding on my behalf in a court procedure."

"Oh, you must be Castiel," the receptionist said, smiling at him. "She really *is* busy right now, but I'll let her know you're here if you guys wanna take a seat." She gestured toward the reception area, which had several chairs and a plush couch.

Cas shot Dean a look like he was at fault for the wait or something. Dean shrugged and the two of them sat while the receptionist called Esmeralda and let her know they were here.

Twenty minutes later, she walked out from a hall, escorting a black woman who looked a little teary-eyed. Dean watched as Esmeralda calmed the woman down with soft, unheard words and a kind hand on her shoulder: this, he could tell, was a woman who actually gave a shit about the people she worked for.

It was refreshing, and Dean wondered if he should have just let Sammy go on with being a lawyer. He was willing to bet that if he'd ever come out to Sam back in the real world, Sam would have very suddenly been a crusader for good; hell, he may have wound up working for ACLU himself.

He sighed, and the two of them stood up as Esmeralda turned toward them. She *clearly* wanted to read them the riot act for coming during school hours, but instead she just jerked her thumb toward the hallway in an obvious gesture for them to follow her. They did.

Her office was nice too, also done in pastels but with lots of personal pictures sprinkled around. Her law license hung from the wall with a highly-unprofessional

frame that seemed to be comprised entirely of macaroni or some other dried pasta, and Dean suspected that a much-younger Vicky had made it for her.

The two of them settled into the chairs in front of her desk as she sat down behind it.

“I’m going to assume that you have a good reason for skipping school to come talk to me,” she said, giving both of them a frown that would have been at home on Mary Winchester’s face. *Must be a mom thing.*

“We do,” Dean said, scowling. Without waiting for Cas, he launched into a vitriol-filled description of their accidental outing at school and what had just gone down in Sue Tansy’s office. As Dean got further into his explanation, Esmeralda’s face grew darker, until her frown matched Dean’s.

After he finished talking, she sighed, bringing her hand up to rub at her forehead for several seconds. “Alright,” she said. “This is definitely something we would get involved with. If you guys are both okay with the visibility, we can contact the school board this afternoon and let them know you’re considering legal action, which might change their minds.” She looked at Dean, a little helplessly. “Did you guys want to attend the dance tomorrow evening? Because I’m not sure I can do anything about that.”

“*Hell* no,” Dean said, making a face. “Lawrence High’s dances suck ass. But I don’t like not having the option when everyone *e/*se gets to have it. And what if some other gay couple wants to go? There’s enough crap in the world, people shouldn’t have to deal with that on top of it.”

Cas stared at him. Esmeralda did too. After a few seconds of this Dean began to fidget uncomfortably. “What?”

“I had no idea you were a freedom fighter,” Esmeralda said, smirking.

“I’m not,” Dean said, crossing his arms. “I’m just not a complete *asshole*. I see something wrong and I say something about it.”

“That’s kind of the *definition* of a freedom fighter,” Esmeralda replied, easy. She opened a drawer in her desk and rifled through it, coming up with some paperwork. “You’ll need to fill these out to officially give us the right to represent you in discussions regarding this matter. Once you sign them, you really shouldn’t talk to school district officials about this without me or another one of our lawyers present.”

“We don’t have to have my parents come in and look at this?” Dean asked. Esmeralda regarded him for a moment before speaking.

“You’re 18 now, Dean. You and Castiel both. You certainly *should* talk to your parents about it, but you’re on your own in this.”

Dean blinked. He’d been so used to being under someone else’s control in this weird alternate universe that Gabriel had set up that the idea of controlling his own fate was completely foreign to him.

He glanced at the clock on Esmeralda’s wall. It was just after 1:30 p.m. and Mary would be back at work from her lunch break. John’s breaks varied, but he rarely took lunch in the afternoon, seeing as he went to work so early most days.

“I should call them,” he said, slowly. “I want to do it anyway, but I don’t wanna blindside ‘em with this.”

Esmeralda nodded her approval of that line of thought, and gestured to her phone before standing up. “Press nine to get an outside line. I’ll be back in ten minutes.” She turned to Castiel. “Would you like some coffee or tea? Either of you?”

“Coffee would be nice,” Cas said. Dean nodded as well, and Esmeralda went off on her task.

Dean exhaled, slow and steady, before reaching over and turning the phone toward him. He pressed nine and dialed John’s work number first.

It took several minutes for his father to get to the

phone; apparently he'd been elbow-deep in a Volvo and had to wash his hands before he came into the main office of the garage.

"Dean? You should be in class," John said. His voice took on a worried tone when he asked his next question. "What's wrong?"

In a much calmer tone than Dean had explained it to Esmeralda, he gave John a blow-by-blow of what had been happening this past week, and what it had led to. There was a moment of silence before John started swearing.

"Where are you? Do you need me to pick you up?" John asked, once he'd let his initial anger out.

"No, we're fine," Dean reassured him. He swallowed. "We're at Esmeralda's office."

John was quiet, and Dean could hear him let out a shaky breath after he realized where his son was going with this. "I'm not telling you you can't, because you get to make that decision for yourself now, son," he said. "But I want you to think about what this is going to do for you, and for Cas, before you make a decision. This kind of thing could have lasting consequences."

"I know," Dean said, softly.

John was quiet for several more moments before he spoke again. "Alright, I'm going to get washed up and

come down there. Have you called your mother?"

"No," Dean said. "I, uh, thought I'd start with you this time around."

John chuckled, a bit sadly. "Alright, well, call your mother. I'm sure she's going to want to be there too. I'll be down in twenty minutes."

"Okay. Bye, Dad," he said. Shaking slightly, Dean put the receiver down.

"Is everything alright?" Cas asked. "You look kind of pale."

"Yeah, everything's fine," Dean said. "He's coming down. I've gotta call Mom. Gimme a sec."

The conversation with Mary was somewhat more streamlined and certainly more full of cursing. She wasn't able to get away from work right away, but she was going to try to get out in time to pick Sam and Vicky up.

"I'll call Esmeralda and see if you're still there when I'm done here," she said. Then: "Whether or not you decide to do this, honey, I just want you to know that I'm really proud of you, okay?"

Dean swallowed. "Yeah, Mom. Thanks."

He was spared the necessity of breaking down when Esmeralda came back in, bearing two cups of coffee and a bottle of water for herself. She handed

them off and sat back down.

“So?” she asked.

He looked at Cas. “Dad’s coming down. Mom might be coming down. They’re pissed on our behalf. I wanna do it, but it’s up to you, Cas.”

Castiel looked surprised. “Me?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, man, you’re the one that got stabbed over this shit. I think you’ve earned the right to decide whether you’re gonna get publicly dragged through the mud over this.” He tried to communicate with Cas the thought at the back of his mind: that this wasn’t their universe, that half of these people weren’t *real*, that they didn’t have to do this if Cas didn’t think it was worth it.

Cas smiled at him; he seemed to *get* it. Then he looked thoughtful and they lapsed into silence for about five minutes while he pondered his options. Finally he looked up at Dean.

“I’ve never refused to fight a battle you thought was just, Dean.”

Dean smiled back. “Alright, let’s get started on this paperwork.”



By the time everything was filed and John arrived, Esmeralda had already placed a rather vitriolic call to the Lawrence school district office, notifying them of the situation. Shortly after Mary called to let everyone know that she'd picked up the two younger teens and was driving them home.

"Do you need me there?" she asked Dean. She sounded worried.

Dean looked over at where his father was having a terse conversation with Esmeralda about what to expect, and shook his head. Realizing his mother couldn't see him, he then spoke aloud. "No, Dad's here and I think he's...he's got it. We're going to head back to the school to talk to the Dean of Students, and it's probably best if you *don't* hear what she's got to say about you."

Mary sniffed in disdain. "Alright, I'll get started on dinner then. Want anything in particular?"

Dean turned to Cas. "What do you want for dinner?"

Cas blinked. "I don't have a particular preference," he said. Then he snorted. "I'm not sure I could eat anyway."

"We're okay with whatever," Dean told his mother.

He could practically hear her smile. "Alright, kiddo. See you in a few."

After he hung up with Mary, their little group piled into Esmeralda's intimidating SUV and headed back to Lawrence High. School had got out just around thirty minutes prior, and luckily for them, Mrs. Tansy was still in-office.

Dean and Cas took the seats they'd had just a few hours previous; Esmeralda and John stood behind them. Dean could tell just from her stance alone that the lawyer was used to this sort of high-stress thing, because she kept her body language open but assertive, where John's arms were crossed in anger.

Esmeralda started the conversation.

"Mrs. Tansy," she said. Her voice was calm and professional. "By now I hope the superintendent has given you the phone call he promised me about an hour ago."

Mrs. Tansy stared at her.

"I'm sorry, I should introduce myself," Esmeralda said. She stepped closer and held her hand out.

"Esmeralda Mendoza. I'm a lawyer for the ACLU. I'm assuming you know Dean and Castiel already. This is John Winchester, Dean's father."

Mrs. Tansy shook Esmeralda's hand stiffly. "I haven't received a phone call at this time," she said, her mouth pursed so tight that Dean was surprised she was able to

talk. “My secretary may have gotten it. I’ll check her notes momentarily; she’s already left for the day.”

“That’s alright, I can summarize the discussion I had with him,” Esmeralda said, smooth as silk. She had a slightly self-satisfied smirk on her face. “As you are no doubt aware, seeing as you were there, this afternoon my clients – Dean and Castiel, if that wasn’t clear – were informed by the administration of this school that they are specifically being targeted for their relationship. They were asked to curtail any physical signs of affection and informed that they would not be allowed to attend any school dances as a couple.” She shuffled through the paperwork in her hand before passing Mrs. Tansy a sheet of paper. “Directly afterward, both of them contacted me at the ACLU offices and requested that we represent them in this matter. This is the necessary paperwork, which I’m sure the school will want a copy of. It states that we’re now the legal representation for Dean Winchester and Castiel Novak.”

Mrs. Tansy read through the paper, her face growing steadily more stony.

“What this means, Mrs. Tansy, is that any further attempt to question either of these students about this matter without an ACLU lawyer present will be construed as intimidation and grounds for a lawsuit.”

Mrs. Tansy removed her reading glasses and set them on her desk, taking in Esmeralda for several seconds before speaking.

“I understand,” she said. Dean had to give credit where credit was due: the woman very *clearly* wanted to tear Esmeralda to pieces and was restraining herself pretty well.

“When I contacted the superintendent he expressed a strong desire to attempt to settle this out of court,” Esmeralda continued. “I’m sure that if he hasn’t contacted you already, he’ll do so at some point in the next 24 hours. The verbal agreement that the two of us reached was that, for now, there will be no restrictions placed on Dean or Castiel during school hours – of the normal sort, that is. Any targeting them for behavior that is allowed for heterosexual couples will be documented and submitted should we decide to press suit.”

Mrs. Tansy nodded, sharp and jerky.

“In the matter of the dances, Superintendent Harrow asked that we bring the matter before the school board. Dean and Castiel have agreed to forgo any dances until the school board meets next month, as a gesture of good faith.”

Dean resisted the urge to snort.

“Additionally, when I informed the superintendent

that you were in the process of giving Dean several detentions when he – understandably, I’m sure – got emotional during the meeting, he informed me that the detentions wouldn’t be necessary.”

Mrs. Tansy now looked absolutely *murderous*, but she faked a polite smile. “I hadn’t gotten around to filing Mister Winchester’s detentions, so I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

There were all sorts of other legal things that needed to be cleared up, which Esmeralda dispatched with efficiency. Dean allowed himself to zone out for a while, considering the decision he had just made and second-guessing himself.

The fact remained, this wasn’t the real world, but it *was* likely to be his home for the next several years. He refused to let a pocket universe dictate who he or any of the other real people here (or hell, even the karob-souls) was allowed to be with. Dean had never been much of a freedom-fighter or a political activist. That was more Sammy’s thing, always *had* been. Dean’d been too busy fighting monsters and saving people’s lives to worry about whether or not he was going to fall in love with a dude in the future.

But here? Here, in this little pocket universe? It *mattered*.

He could hear Esmeralda winding the meeting up behind him and reluctantly refocused his attention.

“Wednesday, March 12, is the next school board meeting,” Esmeralda was saying. “I will be on-site anyhow as a representative of your parent-teacher association, but the ACLU will likely send a brief, and of course Dean and Castiel will be allowed to present their case should they choose. Only after that will any decisions stand.”

“I’ll be sayin’ my piece, too,” John said, ominous in his displeasure. The look Mrs. Tansy threw him looked honest-to-god wary, and for a brief moment Dean was suffused with a warm feeling that was perilously close to happiness. He let a smirk play on his lips, because grinning outright was just too damn sappy.

Mrs. Tansy’s lips had compressed to a very thin, tense line. Dean felt an irrational burst of pleasure at her discomfort.

“It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Tansy. Have a nice day,” Esmeralda concluded. Man, she was *slick*. Dean smirked to himself as their little group stood and made themselves ready to go.

“Evil bitch,” John muttered, as they left the school. Dean snorted.

“I’m afraid I have to agree,” Esmeralda said. Her

expression was dark. “We’re not just dealing with a traditionalist here. I’ve seen enough outright homophobes in my life to know that she’s going to try to make your life a living hell, Dean. Watch your back.”

“Man, *screw* her,” Dean said, as the group of them clambered into Esmeralda’s car. “What’s she gonna do? I’ve already sent in my school applications and got my letters of recommendation and even my stupid aggregate GPA. If she wants to ruin me she’s gonna have to try to find out which schools I applied to – and they’re *all* liberal schools – and *then* try to convince them that they shouldn’t let the two faggots join their club. This shit needs to stop, but she ain’t gonna ruin *me*.”

Besides, Dean had gone head-to-head with *Satan himself*. Sue Tansy was *nothing*.

Castiel seemed to be having a similar thought, because he was smirking in a way that strongly reminded Dean of when the angel threatened to send him back to Hell.

Esmeralda smiled at him, although it was a sort of sad smile, before turning to start her car. “That’s a very adult viewpoint to take, Dean. I hope you don’t reconsider your position if the situation changes.”

Dean shook his head. “I’ve got, what, four months

left at this school, a little bit longer? Cas and I are outta here after that. We'll be fine."

"Just...be aware of your surroundings," she cautioned him. "I don't want another incident like Halloween."

Cas shuddered next to him.

"I'm gonna sit in on your sparring, boys," John said. "Just for my peace of mind."

"Sure thing," Dean said, easily. Wouldn't hurt.

"Sparring?" Esmeralda asked.

"What, you think we held off most of the varsity football team by accident?" Dean asked.

"Dean and I work out every morning," Cas said. "And we've been learning self-defense as well."

"That's very, uh, proactive," Esmeralda said. Dean shrugged.

"Better kick some ass and go to jail than wind up dead," he said, cheerfully.

And wasn't *that* the truth.

The rest of the car ride was silent. By the time they reached the ACLU offices and split up, it was nearing four thirty. John climbed into the Impala, which was parked next to the Honda, and then paused, looking up at Dean.

"I know I haven't been very accepting of all of this,

Dean,” he said, a little gruffly. “But I *am* proud of you. You’re sticking to your guns. That’s pretty damn commendable.”

Dean swallowed the lump in his throat down and nodded. “Thanks,” he replied, quiet.

John smiled up at him, a genuine, if tight, smile, and then started up the Impala.

Cas and Dean watched him drive away before they bothered to get into the Honda. The days were lengthening in preparation for spring, but it was almost dark out already, and Dean was starting to feel kinda jumpy about being out in the open.

“Your father didn’t know you at *all*,” Cas said, shaking his head. He turned to look out the passenger side window as Dean backed out of his parking space. “It’s something I’ve always loved about you, Dean. That you try to stick to your convictions.”

Dean huffed a bit. “And here I thought I just had a nice ass.”

Cas smiled and turned to him, eyes glinting. “That too,” he said. Dean rolled his eyes and began the drive home.



Dean expected that until the school board meeting, the faculty would keep this to themselves. After all, it wasn't often that Deans of Students and Superintendents looked like a bunch of idiots, and they'd probably like to hush that shit up.

The difference was that now, if Dean wanted to, he could sit close to Cas at lunch, or hunch into him for warmth during a fire drill, or even hold his hand if he so desired (he didn't. Dean liked keeping the overt displays of affection at home). They still got shit, but no one tried to jump them. Vicky and Sam were a veritable *mine* of information, both of them socially active and thus fully aware of the gossip mill, which helped avoid conflict.

Their burnout buddies were pretty awesome, too; when a rumor started that the baseball team was planning to jump Cas and Dean after school, their little group of twelve or so potheads surrounded them at their last class and walked with them to their car, acting casual and average. Like being a human shield was completely normal.

One day Dean walked out to his car at lunch and found that someone had broken his driver's-side car window and stenciled "FAGGOT" on the side in permanent marker. That night, in the relative security of John's shop, John and Dean installed a new window

and painted a fresh coat of primer over the door (it wasn't that big a deal; the whole car was painted a not-so-alluring shade of primer gray). Then, just because John had apparently decided to go on a winning streak of not sucking, the two of them went over the brake lines and did a complete tune-up.

"Whoever it was probably didn't know much about cars," John commented. "They made it uglier, but it's an easy fix and it still runs."

"Yeah," Dean said, patting the car. It wasn't the Impala, but he'd started to become a little bit fond of his faithful Japanese-imported steed. "Thank God for small miracles."

By the time Vicky got her license, they'd all settled into this new routine, punctuated as it was with ACLU meetings and the occasional small property damage. Dean had absolutely *no* delusions that this wouldn't change: the school board meeting was just over a week away and after that, the information that Dean and Cas had banded up with the ACLU would become public knowledge. But for now, things were alright.

Vicky got her license on the last day of February, a Friday. Sam was a complete optimist and had scheduled their first-ever solo date (in that it didn't involve Dean or one of their two sets of parents

dropping them off somewhere).

By the time 5 p.m. rolled around that night, Dean was laying on his back in bed reading the latest Anne McCaffrey book he'd checked out from the library, when Castiel walked in. The angel closed the door firmly behind him and, with absolutely no warning whatsoever, climbed up onto Dean's lap, pinning him to the bed.

It was still the tail end of winter but the weather had been *glorious* that week, especially after a very long, very *cold* winter. The central heating in the house was still on, although lowered, and Dean had actually stripped his shirt off and cracked the window to let a breeze in before he'd laid down. There were slight dots of sweat along his skin, which didn't exactly bother him, but seemed to catch Castiel's interest.

"Uh," Dean said.

"Your parents were very suddenly invited out to dinner with one of your mother's work friends," Cas said. He took the book Dean had been reading from his hands, marked Dean's spot, and set it on the night stand. "We're on our own for dinner and we have several hours to ourselves."

Dean chuckled. When he'd thought about sex with Cas before they got together, he hadn't imagined how enthusiastically the angel would throw himself into it.

Cas was (if it was possible) more horny, more often, than even Dean himself.

Not that Dean was complaining.

Cas leaned down and planted his lips on Dean's, kissing him soundly, and in response Dean framed the other teen's face with his hands, gentle and light, but pulling him closer. What followed was a make-out session of epic proportions that left both teens breathless and panting.

"Cas," Dean whined, thrusting up slightly. He was still pinned down to the bed, which was actually kind of an interesting experience. It wasn't so much that Dean had a *problem* with being pinned down in bed; he'd just never really been with someone he trusted enough to let him go when he asked them to. But Cas he trusted on instinct, and in that light it was kind of hot. And new: Castiel's relative inexperience with sex and sex-related things meant that Dean usually took the lead. Not that Cas was any slouch about announcing when he was horny, just that Dean was usually the one running things.

By now he'd explored almost every inch of Castiel's borrowed body.

Cas stripped off the t-shirt he'd been wearing, lean muscles flexing in the dim light of Dean's bedside lamp.

He, too, was covered in a fine sheen of sweat, which Dean found *highly* distracting, and he reached up to swipe at it alongside Castiel's ribs. The angel huffed out a quiet bark of laughter when Dean hit one of his ticklish spots.

"You know I hate it when you do that," Cas said, snagging Dean's wrist and pressing it into the pillow above his head. Dean smirked up at his boyfriend.

"Maybe that's *why* I do it," Dean suggested, raising an eyebrow. He shifted, letting his erection press up into the space between Castiel's legs, which were currently planted on either side of his hips.

Cas rolled his eyes and leaned down to kiss Dean again, his other hand reaching out blindly before capturing Dean's other hand. It joined its twin on the pillow, pressed into place by an Angel of the Lord and held there tight.

Dean's dick twitched in his pants.

He lifted his head slightly into the kiss, letting his arms stay pinned to the bed, and thrust his hips up again. Castiel's eyes narrowed, and he let his weight settle firmly onto Dean's lap.

Cas sat a little more upright, letting go of Dean's hands, and on automatic Dean reached up to settle them on Castiel's hips. Cas pushed them back into the

pillow.

“Stay there,” he said. Dean pouted, but obliged.

Cas scooted down, taking in the sight of a teenaged Dean Winchester spread out on his bed with a consideration even more intense than their *normal* sort of staring. Eventually Dean grinned up at him, nervous and wondering what Castiel was planning.

“Just – let me –” Cas said, quiet, as he leaned over and began an exploration of Dean’s neck and torso with his fingertips (gently tracing patterns and memorizing all the spots that made Dean whimper) and mouth (wet and slick and leaving a sloppy trail of saliva in its wake).

“Yeah,” Dean gasped out. “*Yeah* – okay.”

Cas bit down on Dean’s neck, off to the side, before laving the wound with his tongue, in time to Dean’s panting, soothing the harsh red mark down to something manageable. His tongue trailed across the skin covering Dean’s clavicle as he planted his hands on Dean’s shoulders, thumbs tracing idle patterns into the skin there. Cas moved down slowly, inspecting every inch like it was every bit as important as the last, before finally meeting Dean’s right nipple. He bit down, perhaps a bit less rough than Dean would have liked, but it still sent sparks arcing through his body and he hissed, spine arching.

He had damn sensitive nipples, and while a few people had been interested in the phenomenon, Cas was the first who seemed to have taken an outright interest in them as a study in foreplay.

The angel put all of his intensity into examining them, memorizing them, drawing stifled moans out of Dean, before leaving them (bitten, bruised, flushed, erect) and placing a series of light kisses along Dean's ribs. He counted them with his fingers, gentle fluttering touches that made Dean's chest heave.

Dean had never had a lover bother to learn him like this, and it sent a flush down his chest, dipping low onto his belly. Cas seemed to notice this, and it intrigued him, so he chased it down, letting his tongue slide briefly into Dean's navel and his chin brush the trail of hair that started there.

Cas moved his hands down, shifting his own body so that he was hovering over Dean's legs, trailing his fingertips along the soft skin of Dean's stomach and tracing the edge of his jeans. Dean shuddered in response, his breath hitching at the promise of something *more*. Cas unbuttoned Dean's fly with a *purpose*, coaxing him to lift his hips so he could slide both pants and underwear down. Shimmying to the side of the bed, Cas pulled the clothing to Dean's knees

before stopping and removing Dean's shoes, unlacing them quickly and tossing them to the side of the bed. The pants and underwear soon joined them and then Dean was naked but for his assorted jewelry.

Cas sat back on his stocking feet, surveying his handiwork with a satisfied air.

"You're looking pretty pleased with yourself," Dean commented, just this side of breathless. He was pretty sure his smirk was more *dazed bliss*, but he couldn't summon the energy to try harder.

"Hmmm," Cas agreed, leaning back over him to kiss him again. The angel's denim-covered erection brushed Dean's and he hissed into Castiel's mouth, earning a slight nip on his upper lip in retaliation.

Cas pulled back from the kiss, regarding Dean intently for several seconds before ducking lower. Propping himself in between Dean's legs, his tongue peeked out and cautiously licked the underside of Dean's cock.

Dean's hips jumped up. "Holy *sh—*" he said, cutting himself off and trying to settle back into the mattress. Cas was smirking up at him, blue eyes dancing with mischief, before he opened his mouth wide and took the head of Dean's cock in.

"Oh, *fuck*," Dean hissed, closing his eyes and

leaning his head back into the pillow. Cas pulled him in deeper and hummed in agreement, sending tingling shocks through his dick and down his legs, up his spine. “Shit, shit, Cas,” he chanted, opening his eyes to take in the sight of a literal *angel* kneeling between his legs.

Cas looked immeasurably pleased with himself. He pursed his lips, pulling them along the shaft for several more minutes before sliding off with a light pop, leaving a wet trail from hip to perineum. Dean swore under his breath, throwing his head back into the pillow and letting his eyes clench shut again, breath coming faster as Cas explored everything that turned Dean on.

Castiel’s tongue slipped lower; his hands, previously occupied with spreading Dean’s legs out, slipped underneath his hips, pulling them upward and propping them on a mass of blankets beneath his tailbone. Before Dean could really register what was going on – Cas licking out his taint had *really* distracted him – the angel’s tongue was circling Dean’s asshole, and his breath hitched in arousal.

It wasn’t that this hadn’t been done to him before; it was just that Dean had never done it to Cas, and he’d never really brought it up, because that’s a weird conversation even with a one-night stand, let alone someone you have to look in the eyes the next day.

“Oh, hey, sometimes I like it when people shove their tongues up my ass.”

Yeah, *weird*.

But Cas was doing it anyway, the tip of his tongue slipping through the pressure of the muscle in light touches. Dean exhaled, clenching his fists in the sheets, mind *reeling* as Cas licked his way into him, moaning in a way that he *absolutely* would call whorish any other time.

Cas spent a lot of time down there, spreading him open with first his tongue and then the addition of a finger, and Dean surfaced briefly to wonder where this was going – what Cas was expecting right now. Then Cas found his prostate and Dean stopped wondering about much of anything.

“Jesus shit, *fuck!*” he cried out, tensing as a wave of warmth swept from his ass all the way up his spine. His eyes were clenched so tightly that he was starting to see sparks at the edge of his vision.

Cas let out a pleased noise from around his tongue, still halfway inside Dean’s ass, before subsequently removing it and putting his mouth back on the other teen’s cock.

Sucking ferociously, Castiel jerked his lips over Dean’s dick, letting his tongue drag across the frenulum

as he stroked in tandem with his finger – no, two of them now – right across his prostate.

“Cas,” he tried, and couldn’t find the words. “Shit, *shit*,” he said, instead.

He felt a warm, drawing sensation begin to build from where he was pressed down into the blankets, his tailbone lighting up with it and sending shivers of heat up his spine. “Cas –” he choked out. “I’m –”

Cas murmured encouragingly from around his cock, looking directly up into Dean’s eyes.

Dean closed them and let out a stuttering groan as his release slammed into him. Seconds later he felt warmth flood Castiel’s mouth, cock twitching in between those warm, wet lips as the dark underneath his eyelids lit up with bright flashes of light. His hips jerked beneath the other teen; Cas had *clearly* been paying attention, because he followed the motion smoothly, eagerly sucking down Dean’s release and worshiping his dick through orgasm.

Several moments later, Dean felt his entire body relax, melting into the mattress, and he let out a lengthy breath. Cas let him fall from his mouth, slowly easing his fingers out of Dean, and then sat back and regarded Dean with a smug look.

“Fucking A, Cas,” Dean said, opening his eyes to

look at him. “How the *hell* –”

“I’m very good at observation,” Cas said, his tone triumphant. Dean let out a laugh and reached out, tugging Cas toward him for a languorous kiss. There were hints of come still lurking at the corners of his lips, and Dean licked them clean.

He tugged at Castiel’s jeans as he finished up the kiss, but Cas batted his hands away, electing instead to unbutton his fly on his own. With an impatient huff, Cas pulled away and shucked the pants, letting them fall to the floor alongside Dean’s clothing, and sat himself across Dean’s thighs.

Dean looked up at him, considering, and Cas let his own hand close on his erection, stroking himself.

“*Fuck*,” Dean whispered, realizing that Cas fully intended to jerk off over him all on his own. The very thought sent a flash of new arousal through him, his cock twitching between then. Cas smirked before biting down on his lower lip, staring at Dean with intent.

Watching Cas writhe around on his lap was probably one of the most erotic things Dean had ever seen in his life. When Cas got down to sex, he *really* got into it, his entire body breaking out in goosebumps and a red flush creeping down his neck and shoulders. Dean fumbled with his right hand, reaching into the

nightstand's drawer and coming up with a bottle of unscented hand lotion he'd been using to jerk off with occasionally. His hands shook as he struggled to uncap the tube before drizzling a fair amount right down onto Castiel's cock.

Cas hissed slightly at the cool touch before letting out a moan, eyes fluttering shut as he relished the feeling of slick lotion over taut skin. His hands were covered in the stuff, a real mess, and the head of his dick was disappearing into his fist, fingers covered with white salve.

The angel's eyes opened again after a few minutes, staring down at Dean, and he scooted slightly upward. Dean's cock had taken a renewed interest in the proceedings, and Dean thanked whatever God was in charge of his sexual escapades for the increased recovery time of youth as Cas brought their dicks together, enclosing them both within his slick hand and pumping.

Cas propped himself up on his left arm, letting his right one sit still around their cocks for several seconds before he timidly thrust with his hips.

"Shit!" Dean exclaimed, jumping slightly at the rush of overstimulating pleasure that shot through him. He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, capturing

Castiel's lips in a fervent kiss as the two of them thrust in opposite time to each other. Cas let his forehead rest against Dean's, his eyes closing as the rhythm began to break and stutter, and Dean took the opportunity to look down and take in the fucking *glorious* sight of their cocks pushing against each other within Castiel's hand.

With a hiss, Dean stiffened, his second orgasm nearly dry but so intense that it almost *hurt*. His muscles clenched up and he thrust one more time and let out a cry, his groaning nearly covering up Castiel's when the angel followed him over the edge.

Castiel's elbow gave out at that point and the other teen collapsed on top of him, panting heavily. They were a mess of saliva and sweat and come, a complete *wreck*, and Dean found himself totally uncaring of the situation as he let one of his arms come up to rest along Castiel's shoulder blade.

"Mmm, tickles," Cas said into his neck. Dean laughed, pressing a kiss to his angel's temple before beginning the slow process of coaxing him off of him.

Ten minutes later he'd managed to clean up the majority of the mess with the ever-present towel, but they were *absolutely* going to need a shower, especially if they decided to go anywhere.

"Shower, then dinner?" Dean suggested. Cas was

laying flat on his back now, unashamed in his nudity, his breathing evening out. Dean reached over and let his fingertips trail down the center of his chest, liking the feel of smooth skin over muscle.

“Hmmm,” Cas said, opening his eyes. “What did you want to eat?”

Dean grinned. “Diner food, man. It’s been *forever*, we should find a diner.”

Cas made a noise that indicated that he was okay with that, and the two of them struggled out of bed and stumbled, naked, toward the bathroom.

Showers with Cas were very occasionally sexual, but mostly just *intimate*. Dean enjoyed them, although he’d already threatened Castiel with the worst kind of fate if Cas ever told anyone that (Cas seemed to find this highly amusing, because there was literally *nothing* Dean could do to stop the angel). After the water had warmed up and the two of them had got in, water sluicing off their skin and rinsing off the last bit of residue from their encounter, Dean reached for the soap and washcloth, lathering it up before swiping it down Castiel’s back. Cas hummed his approval, relaxing under his touch.

It was kind of terrifying how easily he’d slipped into this, Dean thought, as he soaped Cas up and then let

the other teen do the same for him. Normally by now he'd be having some sort of manly freakout about this level of intimacy and the concept of commitment; even Lisa, who Dean had legitimately loved, had precipitated a borderline panic attack when Dean realized he was in an actual relationship instead of a friends-with-benefits situation.

The difference lay, of course, in the fact that Dean had known Cas for years; they'd fought beside each other against the end of the world, given up *everything* for each other time and time again. A little bit of domestication with Cas was *nothing* compared to fighting off Leviathan in Purgatory with Cas, and in fact was kind of relaxing and pleasant in comparison.

There was also the fact that Dean was fully aware that he was head-over-heels smitten in-love with Cas, but that was his little secret.

He lathered up Castiel's head with shampoo. "You really *do* need a haircut," he said, flexing his fingers through the mess. "You're starting to look like a hippy, and just – *no*." Dean still remembered 2014 Cas, all drugged up and screwing anything that walked.

"I guess," Cas said. His eyes were already closed from relaxing into Dean's touch, so he ducked under the shower head and rinsed out his hair. Grabbing the

shampoo, he returned the favor, carding his fingers through the mess of dirty blond that liked to live on Dean's head. "You need a cut as well; your resemblance to Sam has never been so pronounced before."

Dean let out a bark of laughter.

They finished their washing quickly and shut the shower off, drying quickly and bolting down the hall completely nude.

Evenings like this, Dean thought to himself as he struggled into a clean set of clothes, were something he could get used to, even back in the real world.



That night, after everyone had eaten and come home and tucked themselves into bed (and after Dean had teased Sam *relentlessly* about flying solo for the first time), Dean reflected on the whole thing.

He generally avoided being honest with himself, especially *about* himself, but Dean wasn't blind. He was pretty good at recognizing his own faults, and he knew that even if Castiel had gotten out of Purgatory and back into the real world on his own, it was unlikely that

Dean would have ever admitted anything that would have led to...*this*.

He'd always been attracted to Cas, on a physical level, because Jimmy Novak was *hot* and Cas was powerful and *that* was attractive in its own right. But he was beginning to suspect that he'd fallen in love with Castiel, Angel of the Lord, well before they'd fallen into this universe together.

Hell, before they'd fallen into *Purgatory* together.

He remembered that painful year when he'd thought Castiel was dead. After the Leviathan, after his betrayal. He recalled drinking even more than usual and trying to pretend everything was okay, and if he thought really hard, he could *also* clearly remember Sam and Bobby treating him like some kind of heartbroken widow.

Even *they'd* known. Those fuckers.

Dean sighed, pulling a sleeping Cas closer to him. Cas muttered something in his sleep and snuggled into Dean's shoulder, drooling slightly from the corner of his mouth.

He had no idea when Gabriel was planning on yanking them out of this place, but when he did, Dean was pretty sure he owed the archangel an apology. If not for his meddling, he wouldn't have this, this *thing* that made him deliriously close to being happy. He had

his family here with him, safe and sound and *normal*, and his angel asleep by his side, and so far they hadn't even been attacked by any wayward members of the supernatural. This was basically as close to perfect as it got, although Dean still itched to go out and kill something on a daily basis.

He supposed that there was still time for that at some point. After all, Samuel and Deanna were hunters. There had to be a need. Hell, if he got his mechanical engineering degree (assuming he got accepted anywhere), he could probably figure out shit that led to all sorts of help with the supernatural. He remembered his homebrew EMF; he could only imagine what he might be able to accomplish with actual education behind him.

Dean stiffened in bed as the realization that Castiel had been *right* washed over him. Dean had created his own EMF in his teen years, had figured out the mechanics behind a sawed-off shotgun when still in middle school, and had created an ad-hoc electromagnet to wipe out a computer lab on-demand.

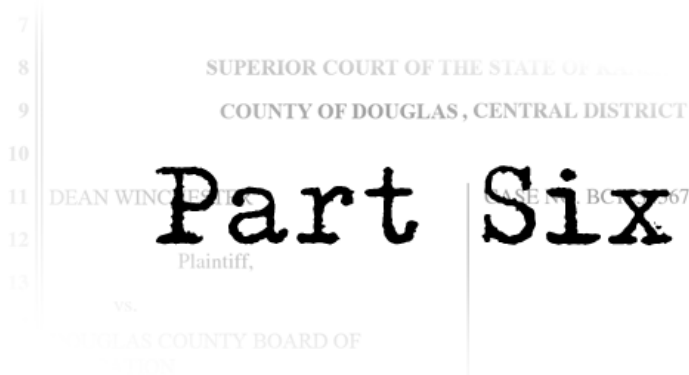
Dean had always intrinsically understood how things worked. It was just the way he was, and he'd figured it came from having a mechanically-inclined father. But this was his own gift, something he *himself*

was good at, and he had an actual possibility of contributing to the hunting community in way that didn't involve alcoholism and bullets through plaster.

The idea had appeal. Very suddenly, Dean imagined a far-flung future, him and Cas together in a house that looked suspiciously like Bobby's, manning phones together. Castiel was looking up lore in some esoteric book and Dean was tinkering with some new machine or other. And fuck if they didn't look *happy*.

Dean shivered. It wasn't a good idea to dwell too much on that sort of idea, because in his experience Winchesters didn't get happily-ever-afters. The one time he'd tried he'd nearly got Lisa and Ben killed.

Frowning, he rolled over to go to sleep. He achieved it eventually, but his dreams kept him restless throughout the night, and when he woke up the next morning, he felt like he hadn't gotten a wink.



he Monday before the school board meeting, Dean checked the mail as their little group walked into the Winchester house after school. This was his routine; Dean had never had something resembling a real life and something as easy as checking the mail still made him slightly giddy, like a twelve-year-old with a foreign pen-pal.

There was the usual junk mail, which Dean tossed into the garbage, a letter for John from some company, a car magazine that he was willing to bet he and his father would fight for custody of, a few bills, and –

A large, bulky manilla envelope for Castiel and a regular one for him. Both bore the logo from Occidental College.

Dean wasn't stupid, and he knew what this meant.

He walked into the living room, ignoring the looks Sam and Vicky were shooting him, and handed Cas what was doubtless his acceptance packet. Then he walked up the stairs to his bedroom, clutching what he was pretty sure was a rejection letter in one hand.

He waited several minutes to open it, ensuring that no one was going to come in and interrupt him, before he did.

Dear Mr. Winchester,

We regret to inform you that –

Dean didn't bother reading the rest of it, electing instead to toss it in the garbage can and flop over, face-down, on his bed.

He fully expected Castiel to show up and try to cheer him up, and he wasn't in the mood for it.

He did *not* expect Sam to wander in after letting his big brother mope for an hour.

"I take it you didn't get into Occidental," Sam commented, taking in the crumpled-up letter in the garbage can and his brother's pouting countenance.

"Nope," Dean said, face still half-buried in his pillow. "G'way, Sam, I don't wanna talk about it."

"Too bad," Sam said. He sat down in the computer chair, spinning around in it for a few minutes before he spoke again.

“I thought you didn’t want to go there,” he said. Like he was offering some sort of solution that evaded Dean’s awareness.

“I don’t,” Dean said. “Cas does, but they don’t have an engineering program.”

“Then why are you so pissy about it?” Sam asked. He sounded frustrated.

Dean sighed and sat up, looking his brother in the eye. “I *really* don’t wanna talk about this, Sammy,” he warned.

“*Too bad*,” Sam said, glaring. “You know, Occidental’s one of the best schools in the country, and once I told Cas that you probably didn’t get in, you know what he did? He *threw the damn acceptance papers in the garbage*. I want a good reason for why you’re being a mopey asshole while your boyfriend is *literally* throwing his future away.”

Dean stared at Sam like he’d lost his mind. “He *what?*”

“He threw them the fuck away!” Sam said. He stood up and started pacing. “I don’t even know what the hell is going on with you two half the time, alright? But Cas refuses to go *anywhere* without you, and you’re up here moping about a school you didn’t even want to go to!”

“Because it’s gonna be the first of a bunch of ‘em,

okay?” Dean shouted, standing up and facing off with his enormous baby brother. “They’re the first of a bunch of schools who are gonna wise up about me and realize *I shouldn’t be there!* And I don’t wanna hold Cas back! I shouldn’t have even wasted the fucking application money, this is fucking *stupid*.”

Sam stared at him with this forlorn look on his face that Dean couldn’t fucking stand. “That’s – I’m sorry, Dean, but that’s *really* sad.”

Dean gaped at him.

“Seriously,” Sam said, sitting back down in the chair. He sighed. “Dean, you’re my brother, alright? I’ve spent most of my life idolizing you and trying to live up to the standard you set. And it’s *hard* sometimes. You’re smart, and funny, and strong, and attractive, and there’s *no way* I’ll ever live up to that. It’s just –” and Sammy looked up at him and his eyes were liquid, and it sent alarm bells off in Dean’s head because he *did not want to deal with a sobbing Samantha*.

Sam sighed and looked back down at his hands, which were twisting themselves into knots in his lap. “I don’t even know where you got this weird complex where you hate yourself and think everyone else around you is more important, okay? But it’s *not true*. Just cuz Occidental didn’t take you doesn’t mean you won’t get

into any of the other schools you applied to. You're an engineer and they're a liberal arts school, Dean; you just weren't a fit for them. That's all."

Dean lowered himself back down to his bed, slowly. "Sam," he began, his voice suspiciously hoarse. "You're a *genius*, okay? You're the smart Winchester, trust me. You'll get into any college you want. That's just – *not* me, alright? I'm not good enough for all that shit."

Sam was quiet for several minutes, and it was just starting to get awkward when he said, in a tiny voice, "Why can't we both be smart? Why does it have to be one or the other?"

Dean tried and failed to come up with a good answer for that, so he just stayed silent.

"Dean, I owe you a lot, really," Sam said, finally looking up at him. At least he'd managed to get some semblance of control over himself, because if he started crying Dean was a hundred percent done with this conversation. "Ever since we were kids, you've taken care of me when Mom and Dad were busy with work. You were like in this weird space somewhere in between brother and parent, alright? And I *really* appreciate it, I do, because I wouldn't be where I am without you. But you've gotta get over that shit. Just because you put me first doesn't mean you can't take

something for yourself sometimes.”

With that, Sam stood up and left the room, giving him a tremulous smile as he exited.

Dean stared after him, thunderstruck. He had no answers, and no questions. He had nothing.



Cas came up a while later to convince him to come downstairs for dinner.

“Why’d you throw your letter away?” Dean demanded. He was sitting at the computer, browsing through whatever he could find that didn’t involve thinking about his self-esteem issues. He didn’t look up when Cas walked in.

Cas was silent behind him for several seconds, and Dean got the creepy feeling that he was just staring at him. Finally, he turned, and damn if he wasn’t right.

Castiel’s eyes were wide and unblinking as he considered his friend. When he spoke, it was with a harsh edge.

“Where you go, I go. I thought that was the deal?” Cas replied.

“Yeah, but it goes both directions. You wanted to go

to Occidental. I could get a job in LA, easy.”

Cas shook his head. “There will be a school that both of us will get into, Dean, and that’s where we’ll go.”

Dean was quiet for several seconds before blurting out, “But what if I don’t get into any of them?”

Castiel regarded him with some disdain. “Dean, are we going to have this argument again? You’ll get into a school. Probably several of them. Your SAT scores alone would guarantee it. I expect I won’t get into MIT, but there are several small schools I could attend in that area of Massachusetts if we go that route.”

Dean scoffed. “Why wouldn’t you get into MIT?”

“Because they don’t have a religious studies program,” Cas said, easy. “And their Philosophy program, to be honest, leaves much to be desired. But either way, I don’t want to attend a school that wouldn’t take you.”

Dean blinked. “Wait, what? You’re refusing a completely stellar education because you’re *offended on my behalf?*”

Cas huffed. “Dean, I’ve killed my own brothers for the same thing. Why this surprises you is beyond me.” He sighed and came up alongside Dean, placing his hand on Dean’s shoulder. “I once told you that I always come when you call, Dean, and that still holds true. I

have virtually no powers here; what if you need my help and I'm a continent away? If Occidental doesn't believe *you* belong there, then *I* don't belong there."

He said it like it was immovable *fact*, like their friendship and subsequent relationship was a baseline of the universe.

Dean closed his eyes, willing himself to swallow around the sudden lump that had developed in his throat and breathing heavily through his nose. After several minutes he was able to speak.

"I don't know how long we'll be stuck here, Cas," Dean said. "If we're going to be living a lifetime here I don't want you to not have everything you need to be successful. You deserve it."

"Yes, I do," Cas said, smiling a bit sadly. "But part of that is being near you." He was quiet for several seconds before continuing. "And I wish you would take your own damn advice, Dean."

"What." It wasn't even really a question, and it blurted out of Dean's mouth before he really had a chance to consider it.

Cas squatted down near him, and Dean wondered where he'd picked up that little bit of body language. "You deserve every advantage too. Some of the things I've done are *unforgivable*, Dean. If I deserve them, you

do as well, because you've done nothing wrong in comparison."

"Oh *god*, is this going to become a 'who's the worse person' dick-waving contest?" Dean groaned out, bringing his hand up to pinch at the bridge of his nose.

Cas snorted. "Dean, I've had billions of years to screw up. If it were, I'd have a slight advantage."

Okay, that was kinda funny, and Dean laughed to cover up the unease he felt at realizing that this crazy asshole, this renegade angel that he'd fallen in love with, was actually some ethereal wave of celestial intent who'd seen the beginnings of the universe.

"I dunno, making an angel fall is probably a pretty big black mark," he replied, instead, smirking.

Cas rolled his eyes. "For someone who supports free will so much, you seem ready to dismiss it easily. I made my choices, Dean, and the fault – if there ever was any – for my Fall lay exclusively with me. That's not a burden you get to take on your shoulders."

Dean sighed. Cas stood again, letting his hand drift from Dean's shoulder into his hair. He wasn't petting him, so to speak, but he did drag his fingers through, scratching lightly at Dean's scalp.

Dean sighed again and relaxed into the touch. "I just

– I have no baseline for comparison here,” he said, struggling to find the words. “I can go to Hell, no problem. I can find about thirty different ways to kill a demon, and I can take care of Sammy, but I am *terrified* of school, man.”

It hurt, admitting that fear. That was scary in its own right, but even scarier was that this was Cas – Cas, who Dean trusted but who had betrayed him in the past. Cas, who was throwing away a perfectly good education just for Dean. Cas, billions of years old, who thought he was *worth* it.

Castiel, Angel of the Lord, who’d rescued him from Hell and subsequently threatened to throw him back there.

Cas smiled down at him. “You’ve at least got something resembling an understanding of it, Dean. Imagine how a fallen angel feels.”

Dean tried, just for a second, to put himself in Castiel’s place, and shuddered. Going from being an extremely powerful warrior of God to a puny human teenager trying to face the human condition head-on?

“Okay, yeah, no, I’m being an ass,” he said. Cas laughed.

“I knew you’d see it my way eventually,” he said. He bent down and kissed the top of Dean’s head, an easy

mark of affection that Dean found himself cherishing. He had an ugly feeling that once they got to wherever it was they were going – MIT, Occidental, wherever – Cas would finally get to interact socially with other people than Dean and Sam. And then he'd realize why Dean wasn't good enough for him.

But until then? Dean would take this.

Unaware of Dean's thoughts, Cas was speaking. "Your mother sent me up to let you know that dinner is ready."

"Alright," Dean said. "Lemme just shut the computer off, and I'll be right down."

Cas nodded and, with one final swipe of his hand through Dean's hair, turned to leave.

Dean sighed, and followed his angel's lead.



Wednesday morning, Dean woke up jittery. Castiel wasn't much better, but he was considerably more talented at hiding his nerves. Still, school was hell.

At lunch Dean barely ate, and even then only because Cas harassed him into it.

"You'll be of no use to us fainting from hunger," he

hissed into his ear, prodding at Dean's lackluster cheeseburger with his finger. "*Eat*, Dean. The school board isn't nearly as terrifying as the hordes of Hell."

"That's what you think," Dean replied, his voice dark. He obligingly took a small bite of his burger, chewing with mechanical precision and swallowing before setting the sandwich down. "This tastes like shit."

"It's cafeteria food, man," Justin said from across the table. "Don't go all pretty pretty princess on us now."

Dean rolled his eyes and lobbed a french fry at him. It eased the tension a little bit, but that didn't leave him any more able to concentrate on his last two classes of the day.

Castiel wrote him off as a lost cause entirely halfway through history, taking notes and walking him through the worksheet rather than trying to prod him to think for himself as he usually did.

Dean had no idea what he was going to say. The school board was meeting to determine their policies on gay relationships, which was fucking *ridiculous* by the way, and they were going to expect Dean to say something.

He was no motivational speaker. You want a dirty joke or a wink with innuendo, Dean was your man, but if you want to be inspired? *Hell* no.

“Need I remind you,” Cas said, low so that their fellow students wouldn’t overhear him, “that you convinced an angel to fall from heaven?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty so I had that going in my favor,” Dean pointed out, tapping restlessly against the table with his pencil. “These guys are a whole different game, man.”

Castiel rolled his eyes. “Yes, because I *obviously* wished to give up my entire family and risk a death sentence or *torture* just for the opportunity to have carnal relations with you. Your looks had very little to do with my fall, I assure you.”

Dean batted his eyelashes at him. “Are you saying I’m *not* pretty?” he asked.

“You’re beautiful, Dean,” Cas deadpanned. “And no, those pants do *not* make you look fat.”

Dean stared at him in awe. “Wow,” he said. “You’re *really* getting the hang of that sarcasm thing.”

Cas looked entirely too pleased with himself for Dean’s comfort.



By the time their little quartet piled into the Honda

after school, Dean felt like he was going to crawl out of his own skin. This lasted the entire way home, and Castiel had to call his attention back to the road six separate times. Everyone was pretty much in a shitty mood at that point, because Dean's driving was becoming hazardous to their health.

It lasted until Dean checked the mail and found two manilla envelopes inside, both with the UC Berkeley logo on them – one apiece for him and Castiel.

He stood at the mailbox for several minutes, staring at the packets and wondering if there was some sort of mistake. Finally, Cas became concerned for his mental health and came out to check on him.

“Dean?” he asked, walking up. “What’s wrong?”

Dean turned the packets around and showed them to him. “We got into Berkeley,” he said. He sounded stunned, even to himself.

A grin broke out across Castiel's face, the kind he rarely indulged in when he wasn't cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. He pulled Dean into a hug. “I told you there would be a school that would take both of us,” he said, his breath tickling Dean's ear.

They stood there for a few minutes, just enjoying the physical proximity, and Dean felt like a huge weight had lifted from his shoulders. At least one school was

gonna take him, and he was pretty sure there weren't take-backs on college acceptance letters.

He'd have to ask Sam to be sure, but it seemed like one of those things you probably couldn't retract.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Vicky called out from the front door. "We're gonna make quesadillas, you want any?"

They parted and turned toward where Sam and Vicky were standing. Sam had a questioning look on his face, and Dean held up the packets.

"We got into Berkeley!" he said, grinning and waving the paperwork over his head like an idiot.

Sam beamed at him like he made the sun rise and set every day, and for just a brief second, Dean felt like he *did*.



The school board of the Lawrence School District met at 7 p.m. at the civic center. Dean didn't even know that Lawrence *had* a civic center, let alone that the civic center had individual meeting rooms.

The Winchester family, including Castiel, sat next to the entire Mendoza family, taking up a whole row of seating to themselves. A few parents had come for other

reasons, and a few had heard about the shit-stink that went down with Dean and Cas, but it was by no means a packed house. Some students had come as well, and Dean was somewhat concerned about whether they were there to support him or decry him.

“Calm down,” Sam said from next to him. He didn’t listen to his own advice, however, and fidgeted for the entire damn meeting.

Finally, last item of the evening, the subject on how the district was going to treat same-sex couples. There was some proselytizing from Mrs. Tansy about how they had a responsibility to raise children to understand the proper order of things, and some other dude on the actual school board about how he didn’t want to make kids feel like the schools were lending legitimacy to homosexuality and some other shit that just pissed Dean right the fuck off. One of the parents called out something about how God explicitly stated that gays were against nature, and Castiel looked like he very *strongly* wanted to contradict her.

They’d had almost-daily strategy meetings about this for the past two weeks, and they’d all decided that Mary would go first when the floor was opened up for public comment. She introduced herself as a parent and social worker and talked about how gay, lesbian,

bisexual and transgender kids were more likely to wind up in the system because they were kicked out of their houses, and more likely to commit suicide. She didn't have a whole lot of statistics but she did have her personal experiences, and she begged the school board not to do something that might increase the already-high suicide rates amongst gay youth.

Dean thought she'd done pretty good, considering how much her voice wobbled when she talked about finding one of her charges dead at the group home he'd been placed in.

Then Esmeralda stood up and talked about her work with the ACLU for a bit, reminding the school board of potential consequences should they throw this out.

A few other parents stood up and talked too. Some of them were for letting gay couples just be couples, and some of them were against it, and Dean started to feel a little bit better about the whole situation because clearly *some* people didn't have their heads up their asses.

Finally John got up to talk. Dean bit at his lip slightly, and Cas squeezed his hand.

John let out a slow exhale before starting. Just like the other parents, he was standing at a podium that had

been set up specifically for the public commentary section of the evening, facing the board, and it reminded Dean creepily of a trial.

“Most of you probably know me,” John began. “John Winchester, and my son’s Dean,” and here John turned and pointed to Dean, who flushed under the scrutiny. “He’s the reason we’re even having this discussion.”

John swallowed. “Most of you also probably know about what happened a year ago. When it happened, I’m sorta ashamed to admit that I didn’t take it very well. My dad was a man’s man, and I was a Marine.”

Cas squeezed Dean’s hand again. He squeezed back. He had no idea what John was planning to say, but he knew he was on his side. To be honest, that felt good. It felt *great*, actually.

“Like I told Dean, I’m not sure I’ll ever be a hundred percent on-board with it,” John continued. “It’s hard to try to fight through a lifetime’s conditioning, you know? But Dean’s my *son*. I’ve seen what happens when people refuse to accept that their children are actual human beings and not just carbon copies of themselves; hell, my wife’s a social worker. I hear about it on a daily basis. And I may not understand it or be totally comfortable with it, but I *do* want my kids to be *happy*. Whether that means Dean’s with a man or a

woman or alone, whatever it takes.”

John sighed, rubbing at his eyes slightly. “If I could make Dean straight, I probably would – not cuz I want him to only like women, but because I want him to have a good life without the crap that’s gonna come his way. But I *can’t*, and I’m not gonna dwell on it. But I’m *also* not gonna sit here and let the school district that I fund with the tax money that I pay every year, as a small business owner and a homeowner and a working-class citizen, tell my son that he’s not allowed to fall in love with whoever the hell he wants. So if you decide to tell a whole group of kids that they’re evil, that the way they feel is somehow less than the way you feel, I’m gonna fight it. With everything I have. Whether that means the ACLU and lawyers, or dragging everyone I know out to carry signs in front of your offices. I’m guessin’ most of you would do the same for your kids.”

Very abruptly, John turned and walked back to his seat. There was a small smattering of applause from some of the kids in the back as he did so, and it took Dean several seconds to gather his wits and mutter, “Thanks, Dad,” to him.

John smiled at him, slinging his arm around his shoulders and hugging him close for several seconds before letting him go.

Soon enough, it was Dean's turn to talk to the school board. Castiel insisted on walking up with him, too, so it was basically just the two of them against the world.

Just like old times.

"So, uh," Dean said, restless with nerves and twitching slightly. "Yeah, I'm Dean Winchester, and this is my boyfriend, Cas," he said. "A few weeks ago we sort of accidentally came out at school, and a few days later the Dean of Students pulled us into her office and told us we weren't allowed to, uh," and Dean scratched at the back of his head, trying to recall the words.

"Attend any dances as a couple, and that we were to restrict our displays of affection to those times when we were off school grounds," Cas said from beside him. He scowled. "Despite the fact that heterosexual couples are allowed both those things."

"Yeah," Dean said, shooting Cas a grateful glance. He let out a shaky breath. Goddamn, he sucked at this stuff. "It's not like we're going around making out in front of people, okay? So the administration has a problem with us, *and* they're trying to head off a situation that doesn't even *exist*. And, uh, no offense or anything, but I think they should be policing the straight kids more than us, because I dunno if you guys have walked through

the halls at Lawrence High lately but I kinda accidentally got a nip-slip from some girl the other day while she was feeling her boyfriend up.”

There was a titter of laughter from the kids at the back.

Dean grinned crookedly. This was something he could do – he was an expert at *fake it ‘til you make it*, a fucking *pro*, and if there was anything he could do it was make a joke. He felt a renewed burst of confidence from the laughter at his joke, and plowed forward.

“Look, I’ve only got three more months left at LHS,” he said. “I’m not even gonna *be* in Lawrence next September, but this kinda thing doesn’t just affect *me*. You guys might like to think that I’m the only dude who’s into other dudes in all of Kansas, and I’m gonna tell you, you’re *wrong*.”

Cas snorted next to him, muttering something quietly about the Kinsey reports. The school board heard him anyway.

“Kinsey reports notwithstanding, Mister Novak,” said one of the older school board members. “The community of Lawrence is a God-fearing community. What you do once you leave our halls isn’t something we can control, but while you’re here there’s a certain standard to uphold.”

Castiel looked like he was about to smite the guy, so Dean interjected.

“Okay, for the sake of argument, let’s go into the religious repercussions,” he said. “*Which God?*” Seeing as Dean had met several of them in his life he felt he had a pretty good idea of how they’d feel about this. “Kali? Loki? Zeus? Odin? Okay, so say we mean the Christian God. *Which Christian denomination?* Cuz you know, my family goes to a Lutheran church and they don’t think there’s anything wrong with being gay, but the Catholic church across the street has some pretty strong feelings on the subject. What about the Jewish God, who’s sorta the same dude? The Jewish community seems pretty divided on the subject. What about the atheists? Do they get a say? Uh, or maybe we should just ignore them, because clearly exercising your right to free will and choosing not to believe in God makes you less of a person. Oh, *wait.*”

He crossed his arms and glared at the people assembled before him. “There’s a reason we have separation of Church and state here, man. Sinners got just as much of a right to the whole *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* thing as you do. Maybe more, cuz if you’re right this is the only life we’re gonna have to chase it.”

“I’m ashamed that I’m explaining this to a collection of people who are, ostensibly, functioning adults,” Castiel butted in, sarcasm dripping from every word.

“But your responsibility isn’t to infect the social policy of the day with your personal beliefs. You’re tasked with the goal of producing good, productive members of society. Your job is to nurture, care for, and educate the minds of tomorrow, and the treatment I’ve received – recall that I’ve been *stabbed* on school campus, while under *your care* – means that *you are failing*.”

“So yeah, basically,” Dean said, winding down. “I’m not on the school board so I don’t get a say in all of this shit.”

A severe-looking woman dressed all in red glared at him for the swear word, but Dean plowed on.

“But you can *damn* well bet that I’m not gonna let you guys tell anyone that they’re horrible because they’re capable of feeling love. You guys gotta do what you gotta do, but if you screw this up you can bet I’m gonna fight it. I’ve got nothing to lose, and I’ll be damned if I’m ever going to let another kid feel like I did when your shitty choice for LHS’s Dean of Students tried to tell me that I’m not allowed to hold my boyfriend’s hand at school.”

Just to prove a point, Dean reached down and laced

his fingers through Castiel's. Tugging him, because Cas looked like he had a *lot* more to say on the subject, Dean led them to their seat amongst applause and assorted whooping noises.

As he sat down next to his father, John smiled at him and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good job, Dean."

John's pride in him was the highlight of Dean's night. It was even better than when the school board decided that, barring sexual escapades, they were going to allow same-sex couples the same rights and privileges that other kids were.

It wasn't unanimous, but it was a start.



The next month was a flurry of activity. Dean was flying high from his acceptance at UC Berkeley and the victory with the school board, and a week later Beefaroni's conviction and sentencing for stabbing Castiel. It felt like things were finally going alright.

Maybe, just *maybe*, Dean didn't fuck everything up that he touched. He didn't quite believe it and existed in a sort of "waiting for the other shoe to drop" state, but for the most part he was content.

There were several end-of-year projects that he aced, several tests that he did astonishingly well at. He was starting to understand that part of the reason he'd never done well in school was because he'd been unhappy as *fuck*; he didn't resent raising his little brother, but he *did* resent the lack of help he'd received from his father in the effort. Not to mention that a thorough understanding of the monsters that went bump in the night had left him in a constant state of anxiety. Things were different now, and he could let his guard down enough to focus on his schoolwork.

In April, Dean and Cas both got acceptance packets from Gonzaga and Cal Poly. That was three choices between them, and Mary seemed to feel that this merited some sort of celebration, so toward the end of the month they had a barbecue. The Mendoza clan brought beer for the adults and ice cream for the teens; several of Sam's friends and representatives from the burnout table also attended. It wasn't packed, but there were at least twenty-five people that didn't live in the Winchester household squeezed into their backyard, which Dean had spent the greater part of Friday afternoon cleaning in preparation for the next day's event.

After several hours of smiling and taking

congratulations from assorted friends of the family and people he barely knew, Dean was exhausted and ducked around to the side of the house. There, a tiny portion of the yard existed out of sight, in between the fence and the house. Dean clearly remembered huddling there when he was little and Mary and John were fighting with each other, and while it seemed considerably smaller now, it was just as hidden as he'd remembered.

Which, he supposed, is why he found Justin lurking there with a joint hanging out of his mouth.

"Man, your family is loud," the stoner commented. He took the doob from his mouth and shook it out slightly before replacing it. "Awesome, but loud."

Dean snorted and went to stand next to his sort-of friend. "This is nothing. You should see us on Super Bowl Sunday."

Justin snorted and offered him the joint. Dean considered it for several seconds before shrugging and accepting it.

A few hits in and he was comfortably relaxed enough to tap out. It made the noise coming from the back yard bearable.

They existed in a quiet, friendly silence for several minutes until Castiel walked around the corner. Dean

tensed automatically, but to his surprise Cas didn't seem to have any problems with his current state of inebriation.

"Last hit," Justin said, offering Cas the joint. Cas stared at it for several seconds and Dean felt a low feeling of upset in his stomach. It must have shown on his face because Cas shook his head no and thanked him instead.

Justin shrugged and finished it himself before crushing it out into the dirt and burying it. The three of them eventually gave up on standing around and instead sat in the dirt, uncaring of whether it messed up their clothes or got them covered in assorted weeds and detritus.

"Man, I can't believe I'm about to graduate," Dean said, incredulous.

Cas rolled his eyes and Justin snorted.

"Man, you and me both," the pothead said. He reached out with his hand and ran his fingers through a tuft of weeds that was nearby.

Dean smiled and leaned back, letting his head rest against the side of the house. "What are you gonna do, man? College?"

"Nah," Justin said, shaking his head in the negative. "My grades ain't good enough for that. I like workin' on

cars, though. Might try to get a job as a mechanic, maybe go to trade school.”

“What kinda cars?” Dean asked, interested.

Justin laughed. “Nothing like that piece of shit you drive, Winchester. Although I like your dad’s piece. I got an old ‘69 Chevelle SS I’ve been restoring on weekends.”

“Nice,” Dean replied, and the two of them got into an intense discussion on the merits of the 1960’s-era Chevrolets. Castiel had absolutely no idea what they were talking about, but looked pleased to be there anyway.

By the time the food was finished cooking, the two of them had gotten into a nitty-gritty talk about the most efficient way to treat an engine, which is how John found them.

“The synthetic stuff’s good, man, it really is,” Justin was saying. “But then you gotta stick with it forever. No goin’ back to regular oil if you make the switchover, and the bleedout’s a bitch.”

“Yeah,” Dean argued. “That’s a downer, for sure, but better performance overall seems worth it. It’s not like most places don’t carry the stuff, and it’s worth the extra cash.”

John looked at the two of them with an eyebrow

raised. "Since when do you have opinions on motor oil, Dean?" he asked. He looked amused, although that might be at the clueless look that was currently spread across Castiel's face.

"Since I'm an engineer who looks at engines for fun," Dean replied, petulant. John snorted.

"Chow's up," he said, jerking his thumb toward the backyard. "Since you two are the guests of honor you might consider gracin' us with your presence."

Cas huffed in amusement and made to stand up, dusting the ass of his pants off with his hands before holding a hand out to help Dean up. John disappeared back around the corner while the two of them helped Justin up.

"Listen, man," Dean said. "Not that I got a problem with smoking up every now and then, but if you mostly knock this shit off I could probably talk to my dad about hiring you on after graduation."

Justin blinked. "Really?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah. You just can't fuck it up and make me look like an asshole for recommending you."

The look on Justin's face was priceless. "Yeah, man. I'll think about it. Your dad's pretty cool."

Dean snorted. "Not the word I'd use, but yeah, he's alright."

Justin thanked him again and wandered off; the munchies had clearly taken effect. Dean sighed and turned to Cas, taking advantage of the privacy to lean into him.

“I find it interesting that you have no problem indulging yourself, but that you seemed to dislike the idea of me doing so,” Cas commented, sliding his hand across the small of Dean’s back and letting it settle on his hip. Cas didn’t sound angry, but he didn’t seem very pleased, either.

Dean sighed. It had been years, he probably should come clean at this point.

“Remember when Zachariah zapped me into 2014?” he said.

Cas squinted slightly, turning to look at him, before nodding.

“Well, I mean, I know I said that you and I were there,” and Dean shifted slightly, uncomfortable in explaining this. “And we were. Future me was actually kind of an asshole, no joke. I wanted to strangle him, and he treated you like shit. But *you*, man.” and Dean shook his head, letting out a slow exhale. “It was *depressing*. You were more human than angel, at that point, and you followed future me around like a lost puppy. You were angry and jaded and *constantly* stoned

on something. Hell, you offered me speed, dude. Said it took the edge off the absinthe.”

Cas looked startled.

“When I walked into your cabin you were, no *shit*, organizing an orgy with like, six different girls and spouting some new age bullshit to hook them in. It was *really* creepy. You were you, but...not.” He finished off his explanation lamely, knowing that it didn’t accurately project the horror he’d felt at knowing how far his angel had fallen.

Cas stared at him for several moments; their close proximity made Castiel’s natural interest in Dean even more uncomfortable than usual, and Dean kept his gaze on the fence in front of them. Finally, Cas spoke.

“I imagine that incarnation of me was looking for some way to fill the void that you left in his life,” he said. “Even back then, I was,” and Cas stopped, pondering, searching for the right word. “My entire world revolved around you, in a way. It was only a matter of time before those feelings turned into *this*,” and Cas gestured with his free hand, at the two of them.

“Heh,” Dean said, his face slowly turning bright red. “Well, losing Sammy woulda made me completely unable to have this. Even if I’d got my head out of my ass enough to want it at that point.” He still remembered

his denial, from the moment he met Cas, that he wanted to bone him. The concept of developing actual *feelings* for the angel would have sent any other incarnation of himself running for the hills.

“I’m aware,” Cas said, with a wry twist to his lips. “I’m almost positive that the version of me that you saw was trying to use drugs and alcohol to dull the feelings of unrequited love and desperation. Losing access to the Host was painful in its own right; losing access to all of my family would have been devastating.” Cas sighed and let his head lean against Dean’s. “Not something either of us has to worry about right now.”

“No, probably not,” Dean said. He slung his arm around Castiel’s shoulder and pulled him closer; even all these months later, the fact that he was allowed to do this, to have this, made him marvel at his luck. “Still, it freaks me out thinkin’ about it.”

“Understandably,” Cas said. “If it makes you uncomfortable, I don’t mind not indulging, Dean. Although I would miss scotch.”

Dean snorted and pressed a kiss to the angel’s temple. “I’m not gonna tell you what you can and can’t do, Cas. I learned my lesson. And I’m not one to lecture on temperance or whatever, so I’ll just keep my mouth shut.”

Cas sighed. They heard Mary calling for them from around the house, and obligingly let their arms fall from each other, instead curling their fingers together as they walked back to their party.



Sam's 15th birthday was basically the best thing ever. For a few reasons.

Dean had always tried, in his real life, to make sure Sammy got a real birthday. Up until the kid had developed a nerve-wracking fear of clowns and stopped wanting to go, it was that stupid Pennywhistle's place for pizza, or they'd go to a park. Usually Dean stole something from Target so his brother had at least one gift, but the parties were pretty much guaranteed to be a two-man show.

This one was *huge*.

Well, huge in Dean's estimation. Sam was actually pretty popular, and the fact that he chose to sit with Dean at lunch while eschewing his own group told the older brother how much Sam loved him. It was heartwarming, which Dean would never admit to for any amount of money, *ever*.

Still, there were about thirty teenagers crawling around the house. Dean and Mary had been up at 6 a.m. cooking munchies and preparing somewhat healthy drinks and snacks for this event, and even though it left the both of them exhausted, it was well worth the effort. Sam was having a blast with his friends; some of them were playing a (monitored) game of Twister in the living room, some were climbing the tree in the back yard, some were watching a movie and *avoiding* the Twister game, and some were dancing to music near the boom box that Mary had set up on the back porch. John had dragged out the barbecue again, grumbling about having burger duty two weekends in a row, which was kind of hilarious because there were no actual burgers.

Sam was still *Sam*, even in this universe, and he'd requested chicken because it was healthier. There was a joke there, but Dean left it unsaid because it was Sammy's birthday.

Still, the chicken had barbecue sauce slathered all over it and it smelled delicious. It would go perfectly with the potato salad Dean had helped Mary whip up that morning, and even better with a helping from the bags of chips sitting on the kitchen table.

Castiel seemed somewhat bemused and alarmed at

the activity, and he kept making steady trips back up to their bedroom, but he *did* attempt to stick around for Sam's sake.

After everyone ate and Sam opened his presents, Dean urged Cas to retire back up to the bedroom if it was too overwhelming for him.

"No one expects you to stick around if you don't wanna," he said. Then he smiled. "I'll probably be up soon anyway, Carla and Esmeralda are on their way over and I'll be excused from babysitting."

Cas gave him a grateful look and disappeared up the stairs, Dean's not-unkind laughter following him.

About thirty minutes later, Vicky's parents showed up, and Dean did one last sweep of the party. He checked to make sure his mother didn't need his help and found Justin and John talking shop out on the porch, nodding at them as he passed. Then, making a decision, he wished Sam a happy birthday again and went upstairs to fetch Cas.

"Are we going somewhere?" Cas asked, from the bed. He'd been scrutinizing the inlays of the Enochian book when Dean walked in, and Dean had taken several seconds to appreciate the view of a splayed-out Castiel before searching for his car keys.

"Yeah," Dean said, smiling. "It's nice out, it's *spring*."

We have a very noisy house full of teenagers. I think we should get the hell out of here while we can.”

Cas snorted, but he shoved his book under their bed and stuffed his feet back into his Converse hi-tops. Those things drove Dean nuts, actually; they were neon-green and clashed with almost everything, but Castiel was inexplicably in love with them.

“Whenever we get to the real world,” Dean said, eyes narrowed. “You are getting some normal boots. None of this pansy Converse shit. Things wouldn’t last through a single hunt.”

Cas raised his eyebrow. “I would challenge you to take my shoes from me, Dean, but I know you’ll fail.”

“Watch me,” Dean challenged.

Cas crossed his arms, mockingly. “If you don’t drop the subject of my shoes, I will withhold sex for a week.”

Dean stared at him for several seconds before bursting into laughter. “Damn, man, and people say *I’m* the chick in our relationship.”

Castiel looked smug as they exited their room hand-in-hand.

Dean stuck his head into the kitchen to tell Mary that they were leaving. She told them to have a good time on their “date,” (which Dean winced at) and looked really frazzled as she did it (which Dean and Castiel

both sympathized with).

For shits and giggles, the two of them drove back to the strip mall where they'd gone shopping for Christmas, carefully avoiding the bookstore so Cas wouldn't get into trouble. The secondhand shop was still there, as was not-Bobby, and Dean delighted in showing Castiel the cupid doll. He didn't appear to find it as amusing as Dean did, which of course meant that Dean had to buy the doll for Castiel out of spite.

This led to Castiel storming out of the store in a huff, Dean's laughter following him.

"Caaaaas," Dean called out. "Come on, it's just a diaper!"

Not-Bobby snorted from his place at the register. "So that's Castiel, huh? Don't look very angelic."

"You have no idea, buddy," Dean said, turning back toward him with a smile on his face. The guy was eyeballing him, and his face softened slightly.

"It's like that, huh?" he said, his thick Middle Eastern accent doing nothing to make him *not* sound like Bobby Singer.

"Yeah, it's like that," Dean said, steady, almost daring the guy to say something about it. He didn't though, shrugging instead and sitting back down in his seat to read some book or another, and Dean went back

to browsing his wares.

The ring that Dean had considered buying Cas for Christmas was still there; what had initially attracted him to it was that while it was plain silver, it came engraved with several new-age symbols. If one knew what one was doing, it could be turned into a pretty nice protective charm.

His brain immediately supplied the image of Castiel wearing it. Dean had no real opinions on the subject of getting married, but the idea had appeal. He had exactly not a clue of whether or not that was something Castiel would want – hell, neither of them had mentioned the L-word except for the other day, when Cas had talked about the unrequited type – but the idea of binding Cas to him somehow made Dean feel happy in a very real way. He wondered if there was some way to bind Cas to him in a more permanent way, to keep him from going to hell or being dragged back to Heaven, but he suspected not. Still, it was a nice, if probably creepy, thought.

And this was officially the girliest internal conversation Dean had ever had with himself.

“I’d like to buy that ring,” Dean said, pointing it out.

“That old thing?” not-Bobby said, gruff. “’s been here for ages. Ten bucks.”

“Seriously?” Dean said, eyebrow raised.

Not-Bobby shrugged. "It's silver, not a platinum engagement ring. Dime a dozen. Ten bucks."

Letting out a huff of laughter, Dean forked over the cash for it and slipped the ring into his pocket. He had no idea if he'd ever decide to use it, but it was best to be prepared.

He found Cas standing near the Honda, the Cupid doll clutched in his hand. He was staring at it forlornly, and Dean realized something was up.

"What's wrong, man?" he asked. Cas sighed and leaned up against the car, crossing his arms. Dean joined him, right up in his personal space, which Cas didn't seem to object to.

"I miss being an angel," Cas muttered. "I've never been *this* powerless for this long. It's frustrating. I miss singing with my brothers and sisters. I miss receiving revelation. I miss having a *purpose*."

"Hey, now," Dean said, alarmed. He stood in front of Cas, taking him by the shoulders and forcing the other teen to look up into his eyes. "You're still an angel, Cas. And you've got a purpose. Remember? Big plans for you?"

"But *what* plans, Dean?" Cas said. He looked away from him. "I fought and died for free will. The idea of having it taken away from me is painful. The idea of

having *you* taken away from me is painful.”

“Where you go, I go,” Dean said. “*Hey*, look at me.” He waited to continue until Cas turned back toward him. “I know you’re like a bajillion years older than me and all-powerful and shit, but man, we Winchesters are stubborn. I meant it when I said that I’d shout down God for you. You’re worth it.” He let out a breath. “If I had to go all the way down to the Pit and back. You’re mine, not theirs.”

Cas swallowed and seemed unable to speak.

Dean closed his eyes and let out an unsteady breath. “Cas, man,” he said, opening his eyes again to look at his angel. “I had to die and go to *hell* to find someone like you. I’m not giving you up without a fight.” He ducked his head down to catch Castiel’s eyes again. “I love you, okay? I’m not losing that. I fucking *refuse*.”

At his words, Castiel’s eyes snapped up to his face. His face went slack. “*Dean*,” he began.

Dean shook his head, looking away. “Look, Cas,” he said, heart racing. “That’s not something I throw around lightly, but there’s no expectations, okay? I love you, and I probably always will. God, I think I probably always *have*. But I don’t need you to do anything different. No strings.”

He’d been holding it back for so long, and now that

the cat was out of the bag he wanted to just say it and *keep* saying it, like a dam had broken inside of him. Dean caught his breath, which was threatening to run away with him, and looked back at Castiel.

The angel was staring at him in awe. “Dean,” he said, his voice reverent. Dean flushed at the attention.

“Look, enough of the chick-flick stuff,” he said, but Cas interrupted him by reaching up in between his arms and touching his cheek.

“What do you think I *meant* when I said I fell from Heaven for you, Dean?” he said. He let his lips touch Dean’s, eyes sliding closed. “Of course I love you. It’s immutable fact, something that cannot be changed. The moment I touched your soul in Hell, I was yours.”

Dean let out a shaky breath and closed his eyes, pressing his lips into Castiel’s and kissing him chastely. *Christ*, it had taken them a long time to get there, but it was worth it.

It made him lightheaded with relief and regret, because he didn’t deserve this, but he had it all the same.

Riding high on his confession, Dean fumbled in his pocket for the ring. “Look,” he said, pulling away from Cas. “I was gonna wait, probably *years*, cuz I don’t know how angels deal with this kinda shit and gay

marriage isn't even *legal* for like three more years and that's in fucking *Vermont*, but still –" and he faltered, holding out the ring.

Cas blinked at it, taking it and holding it up. Dean felt stupid, because this was *Castiel*, a Chrysler-building sized wavelength of celestial intent, and asking for human marriage seemed dumb in the face of that, but this was something Dean could *understand*. He had no idea what angels did when they fell in love, since it had only ever happened twice.

Cas smiled at him, raising an eyebrow. "I've heard far better marriage proposals in my time, Dean," he said. Still, he took the ring and slid it down on his left ring finger, examining how it fit and looked there.

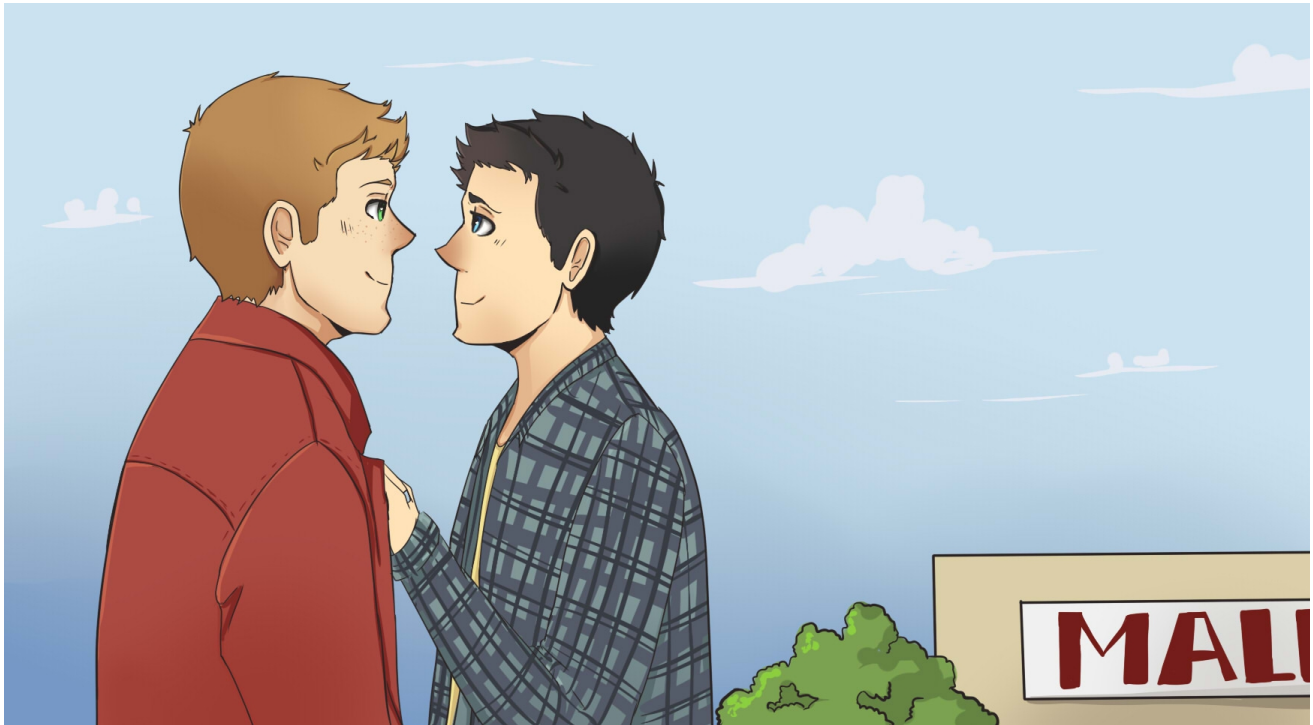
"Assuming we get out of here, you'll have to make me some sort of paperwork."

Dean grinned. "Sure," he said, agreeing. His blood was rushing in both relief and terror: he'd just *proposed* to someone. In the parking lot of a strip mall. And that person was a real, honest-to-God, bona-fide Angel of the Lord.

He was gripped by simultaneous urges to dance with joy and vomit everywhere.

Cas fumbled with Dean's hand, slipping the ring that Cas had bought him for Christmas off his right ring

finger and switching it to the left one. “Only fair,” he said.



“*Yeah*,” Dean replied, leaning down for a kiss. He got one, and then another, and then another, until they were borderline making out and had to stop themselves from getting inappropriate in a public area.

At that point they climbed into the car. It was getting dark, which meant that it was damn close to curfew because it was fucking *May* and the days were getting longer. Dean drove the two of them home, completely unable to wipe the smartass grin off his face.

Dinner had come and gone and the Winchester family was sitting in the living room, watching TV when the two of them walked in.

“*Please* tell me there are leftovers,” Dean said,

heading toward the kitchen.

“Leftover chicken from the party,” Sam said, standing up to join them in the kitchen. “And potato salad.”

“*Hell* yeah,” Dean replied, tugging Cas by the hand. Cas still seemed kind of stunned by everything that had just happened, but Dean knew he needed to eat. Mothering instincts were all he *had* in situations like this.

He was halfway through fishing sticky chicken breast halves out of a Tupperware container when Sam – waiting for his turn at the leftovers – inhaled sharply. He turned to find his brother staring at the ring on Castiel’s hand, and then sliding over to see that Dean’s was on the left too.

“Holy shit,” Sam said, eyes wide. He looked up at his brother. “Seriously?”

Dean shifted, flushing. “Seriously, Sammy,” he replied, his voice quiet. Then he turned back to the container. “So maybe you should hurry the hell up and get done with high school and become some big-shot lawyer so we can work on gay marriage as a legality, huh?”

“Wow, I just – *wow*,” Sam breathed out. When Dean turned to hand Cas a plate of food, it was to find that Cas had started playing with the ring, staring down at it

fondly. A sappy grin broke out across Dean's face, which he struggled to erase as he came into Sam's field of vision.

"*Eat,*" he told the angel, a hint of threat in his voice. Cas nodded obligingly and sat down at the kitchen table.

Dean started fixing Sam a plate as his brother came to stand next to him at the counter.

"Are you sure?" Sam asked. Dean nodded, carefully not looking in Sam's direction.

"Been in love with the guy for years," he said, voice rough as he spooned out a healthy portion of potato salad. He opened the silverware drawer and fished out a knife and fork before turning to Sam and handing him the plate. "If he'll have me, I'll take him."

"I just never – *wow,*" Sam said. Then, blinking, he looked at the plate. "Thanks."

Dean ruffled his hair before pointing him in the direction of the table. Finally, he made himself a plate and put the leftovers away.

Sitting next to Castiel was both the same as every other meal they'd had together, and completely different. It was new and kinda pink-tinged. Dean needed to stop having these thoughts or he might spontaneously grow a vagina, for fuck's sake.

He had an angel as a fiancée. And the screwed up thing is that out of everything that had happened in Dean's life, this wasn't the strangest thought he'd ever had.

Dean washed the last of the dishes after they finished eating, physically pushing Castiel out of the kitchen so he could do so without breaking any plates. "You'll just distract me," he murmured in his ear, and was rewarded with a flush that Dean was almost positive went all the way down Castiel's sternum. He smiled at Cas, giving him a light kiss before heading back toward the sink.

He'd just set the last dish in the drainer when Mary walked into the kitchen and leaned up against the counter next to him. He glanced over at her and noticed she was taking in the new placement of his ring.

He raised his eyebrow but didn't say anything, so finally she broke the silence.

"I noticed his new jewelry," Mary said, trying for casual and failing. "Your father did too. Hard *not* to notice, since he keeps the rest of it covered up all the time."

Dean shrugged. "If it were legal we'd be at the courthouse Monday morning," he said, his voice quiet. He played with the damp dish towel before folding it

neatly over the edge of the sink to dry. “As it is, we’ve probably got a pretty long engagement ahead of us.”

“You’re a little young to be making promises like that,” Mary said.

Dean let out a laugh. If only she knew. “Longest courtship ever,” he said, instead.

At this, Mary smiled. “That’s a fair point,” she replied. “I just want to make sure you both understand what this sort of thing means.”

Dean smiled in return, a faraway look coming to his eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I know, Mom.” He knew *exactly* what he was getting into here – well, one of two scenarios. Version one – they wait until 2000 and get some civil union in Vermont and have a long life of Cas snoring and fights and college and Cas discovering the tasty crack of Starbucks and probably bankrupting them and Dean being emotionally retarded and almost ruining things and fantastic makeup sex. Version two – they get out of here, somehow; they forge some paperwork for Cas and go get hitched wherever it was legal now, and spend the rest of their lives fighting Heaven and Hell and all of the monsters on earth. In both scenarios they would spend lots of time grossing Sam out and fighting millenias worth of homophobia. Either way, Cas would be a Winchester for *real*.

Mary searched his expression for several minutes before she seemed satisfied. “I can’t say I’m ecstatic about it,” she said. “But you two are smart and you’ll figure it out if it’s not going to work.”

“It’s going to work,” Dean said. The alternative – eternity without Cas – wasn’t even worth contemplating. Dean had been there; he didn’t want to go back.

Part Seven



hey didn't really talk about the Dean-Cas proposal development after that. It was established fact in the Winchester household (and Vicky had been delighted, as well), but for the most part the rest of the world spun on, ignoring it. It was kind of peaceful, lulling Dean into a sense of security that he was beginning to suspect wasn't false.

The Thursday before Memorial Day, Dean got an acceptance packet from MIT, along with Castiel's rejection letter.

Cas found Dean at the table about an after hour they'd got home from school; they'd been planning on hitting the library that day for one last sweep of their section on the occult, just in case there was a way to sneak out of here around Gabriel. Dean hadn't come upstairs to get him and he'd become worried.

Instead he found his fiancée at the table, staring down at his MIT packet in stunned amazement. It was an expression Dean had been wearing for almost an hour.

“I got into MIT,” Dean said. He turned to Cas. “Dude. MIT wants me. *What.*”

Cas sat beside him, placing a kiss on his cheek as he did so. “I feel no shame in saying ‘I told you so,’” he said, a bit smug. “I also predicted that I would not get in, which comes as no surprise.”

“Cas, you’re not getting it,” Dean said, shaking his head. “MIT is basically one of the best schools out there. If you want to build things or design things, MIT is *the* place to be. And they want *me*. They even offered me a *scholarship.*”

“As did Berkeley and Gonzaga,” Cas pointed out, smiling. “I’ve been trying to explain this to you the entire time we’ve been stuck here, Dean; you are not stupid, you are not worthless. You were dealt a bad hand and made the best out of it.”

Dean looked at him sharply. “Where’d you pick that one up?” he asked.

“You,” Cas said. Dean snorted and looked back at the packet before pushing it away. He’d spent so much time building MIT up into this big *thing*, this

unachievable goal that he shouldn't even attempt – and now he didn't *want* it. He had Cas. They had a place, together, at a pretty damn fine (and *considerably* cheaper) school. Sam was safe. His future was secure.

At the end of the day, he didn't need MIT; he had it good enough without them, and they weren't worth losing Cas for. He let out a sigh, his decision made.

"We already decided on Berkeley," Dean said, shaking his head. "And I don't know that I can handle that kind of course load right off the bat. We can do a year at Berkeley and see how I'm handling it, and then reconsider."

"That's a very well-thought-out decision," Cas said, surprise lighting his features.

Dean rolled his eyes and leaned in to give him a kiss. "And here you were, just telling me I'm not stupid," he said.

"Stupid and prone to rash decisions are two different things," Cas said, quirking an eyebrow. Dean laughed, because, yeah, *point*.

He stood up, then, and the two of them left for the library, fingers entwined as they walked out into the sunlight.



Justin's girlfriend was generally just as stoned as he was, but it was the day before Prom and she was, instead, prattling excitedly with the other girls at their table about dresses and hairdos. Dean wanted to wring her neck, and he told Justin so.

"Man, how do you think I feel?" Justin asked, leaning back in his chair. He was, for once, stone-cold sober; apparently the offer to put in a good word with John actually meant something to him. Dean found himself intensely gratified by it. "I'm the one who's gotta go and deal with this shit. You got any idea how much a tux rental costs?"

"Yeah, man, yeah, I do," Dean said, laughing.

"Sure you don't wanna go?" Justin asked. He leaned forward and began stacking the leftover french fries into some sort of starchy Jenga tower. "I'll be bored outta my damn skull, man."

"*Hell* no," Dean said. Cas made a face at Justin as well, which put his mind at ease. Thank *Christ*; if Cas wanted to go to Prom, Dean would go, but he'd be miserable.. "First, I'm not paying thirty dollars to go to a dance in our *gym*, and second, I'm not going to a dance, *period*. The one was enough."

Justin let out an exaggerated sigh. "Fiiine, but if Jeanette makes us take pictures I'm gonna *strongly*

suggest that you wanna see ‘em.”

Dean laughed. “Pictures of you in a penguin suit? Hell *yeah* I wanna see ‘em.”

Sam snorted. He was in a shitty mood today, because all of the seniors and the underclassmen who were dating them were waxing poetic about the goddamn Prom, and Sam and Vicky couldn’t go. Dean wanted to tell him that the Prom was a waste of money that you were better off spending on a motel room, but Sam was a romantic.

By the end of the day Dean was just about done with his crap; Sam had moaned and groaned in between every single one of his classes, usually to Dean and Cas, about this stupid dance.

“Dude!” Dean exclaimed as they walked out to the car. “You will get your goddamn Prom when you’re a senior. Probably sooner cuz Vicky’s older than you. For fuck’s sake, stop *whining* about it!”

Sam glared at him.

“Seriously, Sammy, are you on your man-period or something?” Dean said, slamming the trunk of his car shut once they’d stowed their school gear. “Need me to pick you up some tampons? Run out of Midol?”

“*Fuck off*, Dean,” Sam said, sliding into the back seat and crossing his arms. Vicky wasn’t in attendance

today, and Dean wondered if they were fighting or something.

Later that afternoon Vicky came over and spent about an hour being shunned by her boyfriend. Finally, Dean took pity on her and sat down on the couch nearby.

“Okay, what’s up?” he asked. Vicky sighed.

“Your brother’s a sentimental idiot, that’s what,” she said, rolling her eyes. “He wants to go to Prom, and even if we could I think it’s stupid as hell.”

“Huh,” Dean said. “That...was not what I was expecting.”

“Tell me about it,” Vicky muttered, propping her elbows on her knees and then cradling her head in her hands. “If I wanted to date a girl I’d date a girl, for fuck’s sake.”

“I could make a comment about traditional gender roles but I expect it wouldn’t be appreciated,” Cas said, sidling up to the couch and sitting next to Dean. Vicky shot him a dirty look and continued moping.

Dean sighed. “Look, Vicky, I’m not the poster child for successful relationships or anything, but if Cas wanted to go to Prom, we’d be picking out cheesy matching tuxes right now. Prom’s stupid, but it’s not end-game stupid and it’s not violating-personal-morals

stupid, you know?”

Cas shot him a look that Dean couldn't really interpret.

“What Dean is trying to say and failing at,” Cas said. “Is that if you plan on staying with Sam until your senior Prom, you'll have been together several years. At that point it would probably be worth it to humor him and let him have a good night, even if you don't enjoy it as much.” He cocked his head. “You seemed to be enjoying yourself at the winter dance. Why the sudden reticence toward Prom?”

Vicky sniffed. “It's just that it's Prom and it's kinda stupid. There's all these expectations built up about it, you know? Personally, relationship-wise, sexually, everything. I'd rather just hang out and watch a movie or something.”

“Assuming the two of you are together at that point,” Cas said. “There's nothing wrong with doing both. Whatever expectations you have would likely be set in stone well beforehand, and known to the two of you.”

“It's not that, it's what everyone *else* expects,” Vicky said, curling up into herself even more.

Dean snorted. “*Fuck* everyone else,” he said. “Seriously, man, you fought off half the football team. I don't think anyone expects shit of you that you don't

want.”

Vicky smiled. “And the white boy scores a point.”

“I am *wounded* that you think my pale skin isn’t sexy,” Dean informed her. She laughed, then sighed and stood up.

“I’ll go talk to him,” she said, grudgingly. “But I still think it’s stupid.”

“You don’t have to *not* think it’s stupid,” Dean pointed out. “You just gotta be willing to do the stupid thing anyway.”

She nodded and headed up the stairs.

Dean turned to Cas. “Did we seriously just like, *marriage-counsel* my brother’s girlfriend?”

Cas looked amused. “It would seem so,” he said. Dean shuddered.

“Never again,” he swore. “Sam is on his own in the future.”

Cas rolled his eyes and kissed him, which succeeded in distracting him until Vicky came downstairs to request a ride home some time later, because she’d walked the two miles over. Fucking *dedication* in that one.

The ride was quiet, but at least Vicky didn’t seem so upset about it. Dean counted it as a win and also his one good deed of the century.



The next night Vicky and Sam went out together for a not-Prom date, which Dean kept himself from poking fun at as the two prepared to leave the house. Sam still looked somewhat sullen, but they were on speaking terms and that was what counted.

About a half hour after they left, Dean made the executive decision to take Cas on a real date. "It's the night for it," he said, smirking, as he pulled Cas up from the bed.

Cas rolled his eyes. "So long as it's somewhere not full of teenagers in formal wear."

"You got it," Dean said. He winked as Cas put his horrible Converses on.

They waved goodbye to Dean's parents as they headed out the door. The two of them went and got burgers at the place they'd gone to after Bathazar got convicted, real casually, and then Dean found the one movie theater in town that wasn't playing *Titanic* over and over.

"*The Fifth Element*. Awesome," Dean said, studying the movies on show. "Bruce Willis kicking ass and

taking names, and you kinda get to see Milla Jovovich naked. *Ish*. And there's an apocalypse, so it's something we can relate to." He walked up to the box office and bought two tickets. Dean even scoped out some great seats at the back of the mostly-empty theater.

Cas *really* got into the movie, which almost never happened, so Dean counted it as a win even if they only made out once. And it had the added benefit of ensuring that Cas would get any and all "multipass" jokes Dean made in the future.

It was a great night, and when they walked out the warm summer air hit Dean's face and made him feel briefly nostalgic. He laughed to himself as they walked back to the Honda, and Cas shot him a questioning look in return.

"Something wrong?" he asked as they climbed into the car.

"No," Dean said, shaking his head. "I just cannot *believe* that I'm about to graduate high school in a week, man. I got accepted to freaking *MIT*. How weird is that?"

Cas smiled. "Not so weird to those who actually know you, Dean. Although I admit that wasn't where my thoughts went when I first met you."

Dean threw his head back and laughed, *really*

laughed. When he managed to regain control of his motor functions, he started the Honda up and drove her out of the parking lot, down the main drag, and out of town.

“Are we going anywhere in particular?” Cas asked, as they exited the Lawrence city limits. Dean shrugged. They hadn’t actually left the town in the entire nine months that they’d been stuck here, and Dean half-expected to get swallowed up into some void. But no, it was just miles and miles of road; Dean eventually turned off into a forest that surrounded a smallish pond, parking and taking in the scenery.

The moon was waning now, having been full two days ago, but it reflected on the still surface of the water beautifully anyway. The two of them just sat there for about thirty minutes, lost in thought, staring at the lake (really, it was more of a pond than anything, a big oversized pond). Finally, Cas spoke.

“How long do you think we’ll be staying here?” he asked.

Dean shrugged. “I dunno. I don’t really have a preference. It’s nice.”

“It is,” Cas agreed. “It would be more nice from the backseat.”

Dean raised his eyebrow and turned to his angel.

“Are you propositioning me, Cas?” He grinned.

Cas kept his gaze steady. “Yes,” he agreed. He unbuckled his seat belt and climbed into the backseat. Dean double-checked that the emergency brake was on and then joined him.

Dean had barely managed to seat himself before Cas was climbing into his lap, pressing his lips to Dean’s, urging him to open up with his tongue. While Dean had been pondering the meaning of life and how long Gabriel was likely to keep them here, Cas had *clearly* had his mind elsewhere.

That much was obvious as the other teen hitched his hips up and Dean felt the solid line of his erection pressing into his lower stomach.

Kissing Cas was almost always an exercise in tolerance; the angel was a quick learner and he’d gotten the hang of dirty making-out ages ago. *This* kiss, however, was absolutely *filthy*, Cas doing things with his lips and tongue that made Dean go from zero to sixty in about three seconds flat. Almost on instinct, Dean reached around and grabbed hold of Castiel’s ass, pulling the other teen further into his lap and grinding their cocks together. He groaned into the kiss before sliding his hands up Castiel’s backside and slipping them up under his shirt.

The back seat wasn't exactly well-made for this kind of thing; it was a Honda, and Hondas were notoriously small. If Dean and Cas had both managed to reach their adult height and bulk there would be absolutely no way they could manage it. As it was, Castiel's head was brushing the fabric of the roof, and Dean's feet were tucked under the front seats. Still, awkward contortions and all, they kept at it. Hormones were a force to be reckoned with.

Cas pulled back slightly, paying attention to Dean's hands and their insistent stroking along his sides, and tugged at the hem of his shirt. Soon enough his torso was bare and he was pulling urgently at Dean's T-shirt, forcing the other teen to lean forward to disrobe. When kissing resumed, the touch of skin-on-skin was almost electric, both of them hissing at the contact and arching into each other.

After fifteen minutes of dry-humping and frantic making out, Dean pulled back, gasping for air. He'd never been so turned on in his *life*; Castiel's writhing around on his lap was inexperienced at best, but so earnest and honestly-meant that Dean felt his heart rushing at probably double the normal rate. The windows of the Honda were fogged up and he resolutely pushed back the memory of the last time he was in a car's back seat

with an angel.

Instead, he brought his hands up along Castiel's sides, sliding them to the back of his shoulder blades and pulling him forward. He peppered the other teen's collarbone and neck with wet, sloppy kisses, leaving slick trails across his skin, before inching up and nibbling at the skin just under Castiel's ear. The angel hissed and ground down on Dean's erection, forcing him to let go with his teeth in order to let loose with a moan.

Cas slipped frantic hands between the two of them, popping loose the top button of his jeans and struggling with the zipper. Dean reached down to help unlace his shoes, pulling them off and tossing them somewhere currently unimportant. Cas planted his feet on the floorboard and stood awkwardly, bent somewhat in half along the roof while he pushed his pants and underwear down, whimpering a little as his cock was freed from the fabric.

When he was unclothed, he sat back down on Dean's knees and began to undo *his* fly, tugging at the fabric until Dean obligingly lifted up slightly to allow it to slide over and down his ass. Cas didn't bother with Dean's shoes, instead simply letting the jeans and underwear rest at his ankles. Only then did he climb back up properly into Dean's lap, their erections coming

into contact with each other and sending matching shudders down their spines.

“Cas,” Dean panted into the other teen’s mouth. Cas traced his tongue around Dean’s lips, slowly, teasingly, before darting in for another absolutely filthy, debauched kiss.

Dean let his hands rest on the small of Castiel’s back, tracing light, feathery patterns there as Cas rotated his hips slowly, his weight pressing down into the upholstery on either side of Dean as he increased the pressure and friction between the two of them.

Soon, Cas leaned downward and snagged his own jeans, reaching into the pocket to retrieve two single-use packets of lube of the type that they’d been getting from the local Planned Parenthood. Dean raised his eyebrow.

“*Someone* had plans for the evening,” he commented. Cas hummed happily as he placed one of the packets on the seat next to Dean, who hissed as it slid down and touched his bare leg, chilly against his skin. It warmed up soon enough.

Cas kept the other packet in-hand as he leaned back over Dean, pressing kisses against Dean’s neck and shoulders as he undulated over him, bringing him to a trembling and gasping mess in almost no time at all.

Dean grabbed at the globes of Castiel's ass, pressing him closer, harder.

"Dean," Cas said, nipping at his lower lip. He held up the now-warm plastic bubble of lube, twisting the top off with his teeth before holding it out to Dean. Dean stared back at it, taking it in his hand and looking up at Cas with an uncomprehending look on his face.

Rolling his eyes, Cas took Dean's left hand, the one not occupied with holding the lube in the first place, and guided it around toward his ass, toward the cleft there. Dean blinked and then looked back up at Cas.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Cuz that shit can hurt, Cas. I'm okay without it."

Cas huffed out laughter, leaning over to press a kiss to the corner of Dean's mouth. "I have a healthy respect for your penis, Dean, but I highly doubt it can hurt more than the torture of Heaven, nor attempting to contain the Leviathan."

Dean snorted. "Fair enough," he said. "Still, you sure?"

"Positive," Cas said, scooting up still closer to Dean, pressing their stomachs together in his attempt to give Dean room to work.

Dean put his arms around Cas and operated by feel and touch, drizzling half the lube in the plastic packet

over the three dominant fingers of his right hand. He set the bubble to the side, lifting Cas up slightly as he slowly slid one finger slowly toward his asshole.

He let his tongue play over Castiel's nipple (since it was there) before biting down gently. At the same time he slid – slowly – a single finger up into Castiel's hole, listening with pleasure as Cas moaned. The other teen's cock twitched against his stomach, and he thrust back onto the finger, engulfing it entirely.

Dean let Cas control the speed of the thrusting, mostly trying to wiggle his finger around in a way that might be pleasurable while he bit, licked, and sucked at the angel's nipples and listened to the gasping noises he was making.

After a few minutes he slid out and put two where one had been; Cas didn't seem to notice, or if he did he didn't indicate it. Two fingers meant that the lower knuckles weren't in the way anymore, and Dean began to search for Castiel's prostate in earnest.

He knew the moment he found it, cuz Cas sat upright, his head hitting the roof of the car as the muscles in his ass clenched down around Dean's fingers. Dean chuckled, letting his tongue play in a wet stripe between the other teen's pectorals before biting down at his collarbone while simultaneously stroking at

his prostate.

Several minutes of this turned Cas into a complete *mess*; he was writhing around in Dean's lap with such abandon that Dean had started to slide toward the edge of the seat, an uncomfortable gap forming between him and the seat back. Reaching around with his left hand, he grabbed Castiel's jeans and shoved them in the gap, relaxing against the extra fabric as Cas continued to ride his fingers.

Eventually Cas decided that he was ready; he reached down for the unopened lube packet and ripped it open, drizzling the entire contents on Dean's cock. Dean stiffened slightly at the cool touch, but Cas was *intent*, his hand sliding the gel around the hot skin, and it soon warmed up. Shortly after, Cas hovered, bent in half, over Dean, and Dean looked up at him.

"You're *sure*?" he insisted. It wasn't that he had a problem with the concept of fucking or being fucked; it's just that it was kind of a big deal, something they'd never done, and he wanted to make absolutely *certain* that Cas didn't just think it was something that Dean wanted.

Cas rolled his eyes. "I'm aware that I don't exactly have a stellar track record for doing things I want rather than what needs to be done, Dean, but trust me: I want

this.” He aligned himself properly and, with almost no warning whatsoever, began to sink down slowly on Dean’s cock.

Dean panted as the head of his cock breached the outer sphincter, stretching the muscle and skin there to make way for the rest of him. He hadn’t had sex like this in, *god*, over two years; he hadn’t had the time before Purgatory, nor right after, and then when he came here he’d been with Cas. It was *overwhelming*, the nerves running like lightning from his dick down to his toes. He flexed, slightly, trying not to thrust upward so much, just enjoying the tightness, the feeling of being inside someone else.

Castiel’s chest was heaving as he came to sit down fully, his ass resting across the tops of Dean’s thighs, and he sat there for several seconds.

“You okay?” Dean asked. His voice sounded strained even to his own ears.

“Yeah,” Cas said, nodding, letting out a shaky breath. “It’s – a lot of sensations to deal with at once. Give me a moment.”

Dean gripped tight on Castiel’s hips, holding on for dear life while he struggled not to thrust up into Cas, yearning for the friction and yet not wanting to hurt his lover. The bunched-up denim behind his back bit into

the soft flesh there, and the annoyance helped detract from the shit he was trying to cope with.

“Okay,” Cas said, interrupting Dean’s mental thought process. He lifted up, slowly, his hips flexing, and Dean gasped outright.

“Shit, shit, Cas,” he said. The angel’s slicked-up entrance slid along the length of Dean’s cock; Cas almost came off him entirely before throwing his weight back down, moaning.

“*Dean*,” Cas whimpered.

Slowly, the two of them found a rhythm that worked for them; it was awkward and cramped but it felt so *good*, and they lost themselves in it while working themselves into a frenzy.

“*Fuck*,” Dean muttered, leaning back into the car’s upholstery and closing his eyes. “Cas, dude, I’m gonna —”

Cas fumbled along the seat blindly, searching for the last half a packet of lube, which he dumped onto his own dick. Dean reached out and entangled his fingers with Castiel’s, the two of them stroking the angel to completion.

“Dean, *Dean*,” Castiel panted, chanting his name in time to the rolling of his hips. Very suddenly he stiffened; his cock twitched and suddenly he was writhing,

muscles clenching around Dean and splashing come on Dean's stomach.

"Cas," Dean moaned, stroking him through his orgasm. Cas leaned forward, capturing Dean's lips with his own as he contorted into a position Dean hadn't even realized was *possible* to continue thrusting downward onto Dean's cock. Suddenly he swore into Cas's mouth, biting down, his legs stiffening as he came. His eyes were closed so tightly that everything seemed white, and he could feel the pleasure slam into him out of nowhere. He spilled into Cas, grunting, his toes curling up beneath the front seats, heels pushing down so much that he lifted both of them off the back seat.

He felt himself come down slowly, his heart beating fast in his chest, gulping air down his throat. Finally he relaxed, bringing Cas down with him. It wasn't comfortable by any means – there was still a wad of clothing behind him, holding him up and pressing designs into the skin of his back – but he took a second to just lay sit there, neck awkwardly pressed up against the back upholstery, jizz crusting up on his stomach, and his angel curled up against him, face in the crook of his neck.

Eventually he shifted; his dick was starting to go

limp, and was slowly sliding out of Cas; it was uncomfortable as hell, and once again: *crusted in jizz*. Cas seemed to get the point, and he moved, sliding down Dean's thighs. Dean winced slightly as they came apart, but eventually they got their shit together enough to start searching for something to clean off with.

A bundle of fast-food napkins in the glove compartment took care of the mess that was Castiel's ass and the gummy fluid on Dean's stomach, and then they got dressed, slowly because of space constraints. Dean rolled all of the windows of the car down to let it air out, and the two of them sat in the backseat in fairly stunned amazement.

"That was *awesome*," Dean said. He caught sight of himself in the rear-view mirror and chuckled; he looked *wrecked*, his clothing askew and his hair going in every direction.

"Yes," Cas agreed. He didn't look much better, although a small smile was alight on his face. He leaned toward Dean, pressing their lips together, and the two of them exchanged slow kisses for several minutes until Dean started to get tired.

Cas produced a paperback that he was reading from somewhere and sat on the driver's side of the back seat, pulling Dean down until he was using the other

teen's lap as a pillow. They sat there for probably an hour, Cas reading by moonlight and Dean dozing in his lap, until there was a tap on the side of the car.

Dean blinked, rubbing sleep out of his eyes as he sat up. Cas was sitting stiffly upright, and Dean realized why when he caught sight of who was standing outside of the car.

A cop. *Shit.*

"Uh," Dean said.

The cop shined a flashlight in the car, taking in Dean's sleepy face and then Cas, holding a copy of some Anne Rice novel and staring back at him like he was from another planet.

"Hey, you're John Winchester's boy," the cop said.

Dean blinked, slow, before answering. "Yeah?" he said.

The officer smirked. "You know you boys are on private property right now?"

"*Shit,*" Dean swore, sitting up further in his seat.

"Sorry, man, sorry, I fell asleep and –"

"No, it's okay," the cop said. "You aren't hurting anyone, but you gotta leave."

Dean and Cas struggled out of the car; Dean was surprised to find that he was a solid six inches taller than the police officer, who was looking at the two of

them in contemplation.

“I’m *really* sorry,” Dean said, again.

The cop grinned. “It’s alright. I’ll give you a pass this once; no one called it in, I just spotted you guys on my pass-through.” He was looking at Dean again, but then he nodded, clapping Dean on the shoulder and making him jump in alarm.

“Saw you boys at the school board meeting,” he said, his voice gruff now. Dean peered down at him and recognized him as one of the parents who’d spoken out in favor of letting gay kids be gay kids. He blinked; what kind of luck did he have that *this* cop, out of all of them, was the one to find him?

Cas stared at the officer, head cocked. “You’re Jason Daniel’s father,” he said. Dean wondered what the fuck kind of life he led, when Castiel was the one who remembered people before he did.

The cop nodded. “Yeah,” he said, his voice soft. “Jason’s my son. He’s gay.”

Cas nodded back, like this all somehow made sense.

“Anyway,” the cop said, straightening up. “You boys should know better than to be hanging around on private property this late at night, especially on Prom night. There’ll be officers down here throughout the

evening.”

“Right,” Dean said. “Uh, so, can we go?”

Officer Daniels nodded, stepping back from the car. “Be careful driving into town; lots of crazies out tonight.” With that, he turned back toward his squad car, climbing in and driving off before they had a chance to thank him.

“*Jesus*, that was lucky,” Dean said, scratching the back of his head.

Cas headed toward the passenger side of the car. “Luck had very little to do with it, I’m sure,” Cas said, rolling his eyes, before he opened his door and climbed in. “Gabriel doesn’t want us getting arrested for public indecency, even in a universe of his creation.”

Dean snorted and crawled into the drivers’ side. He stepped on the clutch and the brake before releasing the handbrake and starting the car. “I’m almost *positive* that Gabriel would pay good money to see me arrested for having gay sex in a public location, Cas.”

Cas smirked. “Perhaps,” he allowed. “But I’m his brother, and I doubt he’d want to turn me against him if he has plans for me.”

Dean nodded acceptance of that fact as he turned back onto the highway. After all, Cas had a soul now. That meant he had free will.

Which meant that if Gabriel wanted Castiel’s help,

he had to stay on his good side.

That thought put him into a cheerful mood, and it was with a light heart that he began the long drive home.



The last week of school held almost no academic use whatsoever. The seniors were all finished, their grades submitted by their teachers and their colleges notified of their aggregate GPAs. The underclassmen were all restless for summer vacation and the seniors were all restless to be finished with their high school careers. The result was an entire student population that the teachers had a hard time reining in.

The Monday after Prom, yearbooks were handed out; the seniors also got their caps, gowns, and assorted graduation paraphernalia. The rest of the week was spent in the halls; teachers, mostly out of resignation, took attendance and then dismissed their students to get signatures in their books and take photographs with their friends.

Dean and Castiel spent the majority of that week with a group comprised partially of their burnout buddies

and partially of Sam and Sam's friends. Vicky insisted on signing both Dean and Castiel's yearbooks, which led to the majority of the group doing so. Because the group had chosen to locate themselves near the doors of the school, a lot of random passers-by also signed them.

Dean was surprised to find a relative lack of homophobic comments within the signatures; Cas was not. "We fought our battle," Cas said, shrugging. He was flipping through the book, reading the assorted signatures and messages with detached interest. "They may not like us or our lifestyle, but they've accepted that we refuse to change on their account."

Justin, who was sitting on the floor of Dean's bedroom filling out an application to work at John's garage, snorted. "Yeah, well, Sam may have had something to do with it," he said. "He's pretty popular, you know, and he and his friends may have let word slip that if anyone fucked with you guys in the last week of school, they'd have to answer to him next year."

Dean grinned. "My little brother's looking out for me. Isn't that cute?"

"Absolutely adorable," Justin said, rolling his eyes. He turned back toward his application. "God, what does he mean by *previous experience*? I've never had a job

before, man.”

“Put down auto shop,” Dean advised. “And the rebuilt Chevelle. He’ll probably wanna take a look at that, by the way.”

“I still gotta register and insure it,” Justin sniped. “He’ll have to come by my place if he wants to see it.”

“I’m sure he will,” Cas reassured him.

The week flew by, and before Dean really knew what was happening, it was the morning of graduation, and he was shit-ass *terrified*.

“Holy fuck, am I supposed to wear a suit or something?” Dean asked. He’d woken up late after a very pleasurable Friday night spent having his brains sucked out through his cock; the end result was that he and Castiel were running around like complete idiots trying to get their things together for the ceremony.

“I have no idea, Dean,” Cas said, his voice strained. “I have never been to a graduation ceremony in my life.”

“Oh God, I *have*,” Dean said, spine straightening as he tried to remember Sam’s graduation all those years ago. “Uhhhh okay, yeah, Sam wore slacks and a nice shirt, so, maybe?”

The two of them defaulted to the clothes they’d worn to court months ago, which were slightly too warm but otherwise rather nice. They ran downstairs only to

be turned back by Mary, who insisted that they change into short-sleeved button-downs instead. Once Dean located a few of them they flew back down the stairs and wolfed down breakfast before piling into Dean's car.

"Hey!" Mary called out, running through the front door. She had two travel mugs of coffee for them; they hadn't had an opportunity to drink any yet today. Dean accepted them gratefully.

"We'll meet you after the ceremony at your car," Mary said, ruffling his hair and giving him a kiss on the cheek. She smiled. "I'm proud of you, honey."

"Thanks, Mom," Dean muttered, his face flushing.

"You too, Cas," she called out as Dean backed away. Cas waved acknowledgment of her comment, and then they were speeding down the road to the school.

Dean parked the car at the high school and sat there for several seconds, listening to the engine tick as it settled. Then he glanced over at Cas.

"Are you alright?" Cas asked. "You seem pensive."

Dean let out a long breath before speaking. "I never graduated," he said. "I mean, back then it didn't seem that important. I was bored and I hated the social shit and I was missing more school than I was going because of hunts. And I had to take care of Sammy. So I

dropped out right after my birthday.”

Cas cocked his head, thinking this logic through before he offered, “But that doesn’t mean you wouldn’t have been able to graduate?”

Dean shrugged. “Yeah, I know that *now*, but for so long that’s just, you know. What I *was*. A high school dropout and a hunter and Sammy’s brother. And that was it.”

Cas smiled. “Graduating high school doesn’t make you more worthy, Dean.”

“I know, man, it’s just that I never thought it was something I’d do, let alone be *good* at,” Dean said. He sighed and unbuckled his seat belt. “I guess it’s just hard to think about myself like that.”

“Graduating high school doesn’t make you better or more intelligent than you were before, Dean,” Cas said. He unbuckled his seat belt as well, clicking the door open and stepping out with one foot. “It just proves how intelligent you are to *yourself*.”

Dean cracked a smile. “Yeah, I guess,” he said. He followed Cas out of the car and into the auditorium at the school, where everyone was meeting.

There, they shrugged into their caps and gowns and got a lecture about how to wear their tassels (which was stupid). Cas was going to graduate well ahead of him,

being an N name instead of a W name, and Dean resigned himself to a long-ass wait for the two hundred or so students in line to receive their diplomas first.

The graduation took place outside, in the bright morning sunlight of downtown Lawrence. Both Dean and Castiel had had a relative shot at valedictorian and salutatorian, and both had turned it down, so their replacements stood and gave speeches about their lives being ahead of them and other trite shit that Dean had *totally* heard before at Sammy's graduation in 2001. The principal and superintendent both gave speeches as well, and by the time they actually got to the point of handing out diplomas Dean was barely restraining the urge to shoot something.

Cas walked across the stage; Mrs. Tansy gave him his diploma with a gross look on her face, and Cas smirked at her as he took it. Dean wanted to watch the interaction more closely, because it looked like Cas said something to her (and it made her face turn beet red), but he was distracted by the fact that black graduation robes looked pretty damn hot on the angel.

Finally, it was just Dean and Jennifer Zapata left to graduate. He shot his parents – sitting at the very front of the crowd of relatives and friends – a cocky grin that he in no way could back up with actual confidence, and

strode onto the stage to retrieve his diploma.

Mrs. Tansy handed it over with ill grace, and he smirked at her. He leaned over and said, quietly, just loud enough that she could hear, “We *won*.”

Her face flushed and she looked ready to throw him off the stage, so he just leaned back and enjoyed walking back to his seat with a smile on his face.

While the principal made some closing remarks, Dean took the time to look down and read his diploma. There it was, “DEAN WINCHESTER,” spelled out in clear black letters with the month, day and year that he got them. There was a seal in gold foil, too, and the school’s logo, but mostly he cared about his name.

He’d done it.

He’d graduated high school.

It had taken him two times, but he’d done it. Not only that, but he’d got into four separate colleges, one of them freaking *MIT*.

Dean blinked back tears, suddenly feeling like this life, this alternate life where he didn’t kill things for a living and constantly have the forces of Heaven and Hell on the lookout for him, was *his*. It wasn’t some stranger’s, it belonged to *him*. He’d worked for it. He’d *earned* it.

Three rows in front of him, Cas turned around and

spotted him, grinning outright once he caught the expression on Dean's face. Dean rolled his eyes, but then the principal was telling the graduates to stand up so they could be presented as the class of 1997, which naturally led to everyone throwing their caps in the air. Dean reluctantly participated, keeping his eyes on the hat so he could snag it back. He'd never had a graduation cap before, he wanted to keep this one.

Almost immediately after he'd caught his cap, Dean made his way to Cas. The angel grinned at him widely, the smile almost out of place on his face, and tugged Dean in for a kiss.

Dean smiled into it, listening to the excitement around them fade out as it very slowly became just them, something just for the two of them.

"Alright, you two," a voice said to their right. Both boys jerked away and found John standing there, barely containing his amusement. "Come on, we parked next to the Honda and your mother's *salivating* for a chance to see your diplomas."

Mary was crying when Dean finally walked up to her, and she grabbed both him and Cas and pulled them into a dual embrace. He huffed laughter into her hair as he hugged her back, letting her hold onto them for several minutes until she gained control of herself.

“I am going to tease you about this for the rest of your natural life,” Dean informed her, grinning.

“You wouldn’t be *you* if you didn’t,” Mary said, smiling at him. She glanced at Cas. “Cas’ll protect me.”

“You have my word,” Cas said, solemn, before smirking.

Dean sighed, trying and failing not to sound like a put-upon housewife.

“Alright,” Mary said. “Your dad is making steaks and chicken on the grill and we’ve got a ridiculous amount of junk food ready, so lets get home.”

Right. The graduation party. Most of the burnouts who’d actually graduated weren’t having parties; it was unfortunate, but most of them didn’t get along with their families. So naturally, Mary Winchester being who she was, they were sharing Dean and Castiel’s graduation party. Additionally, all of Sam’s friends were planning on coming.

It was going to be a long day.



The party was in full swing for the majority of the afternoon; around five Dean made his escape into the

front yard. He was starting to understand why Castiel felt overwhelmed by humanity sometimes. Who knew thirty assorted teenagers could make *that much* noise?

Catching his breath, he leaned up against the garage door for a few seconds, closing his eyes and taking in the muted sounds of the party, filtering in from the back yard and within the house. Even the graduation gifts he and Cas had received (money from the majority of Dean and Sam's extended relatives, cards from most of their friends) didn't make it worth it to go right back to the party.

"Hey, son," came a voice. Dean opened his eyes and saw John standing there, smiling at him with a little bit of pride. Dean gulped; it was an expression he'd always hoped to see on his father's face, and it took traveling to an alternate reality to do it. Still, it was worth more than the entire graduation process entirely.

"Hey, Dad," he said, smiling crookedly.

"Loud in there," John commented, coming up to lean against the hood of the Impala.

Dean snorted. "Yeah, no shit."

John offered him one of the two bottles of beer he was carrying; Dean accepted with no small amount of surprise, but he didn't say anything.

The two of them, father and son, sat there drinking

their beers together in silence for a good long while before John spoke.

“Dean,” he said, looking over at his eldest. “I really *am* proud of you, son.”

“Thanks,” Dean said. He looked his father in the eyes. “Really, thank you. It means a lot.”

John smiled and ruffled his hair. Dean glared at him from under his bangs, and his father laughed. They sat there for several more minutes, taking in the sun (just starting to sink toward the horizon because it was summer now, *summer*, and God, but Dean had never realized how much he loved summer until just now) and sky together.

After a while, John let out an exhale and then reached into his pocket. “You probably noticed your mom and I haven’t given you or Cas a graduation gift yet,” he said.

Dean shrugged, easy. “Not really a big deal, Dad. You guys *raised* us. You don’t owe us anything.”

John chuckled. “No, we don’t owe you anything, but we *wanted* to do something for you. So...” and he trailed off.

Dean looked over and realized that his father was dangling a set of keys from his thumb and forefinger. A very, very familiar set of keys. He stared at them, unable

to really complete his thought process.

“What?”

John gestured toward the Impala with his other hand. “She’s yours, son. She was always *gonna* be yours, but now she’s got a reason. You and Cas gotta have something reliable to get to California in, and so long as you take care of her she’ll always get you where you’re goin’.”

“Yeah,” Dean croaked out, reaching to take the keys. “Yeah, I know, Dad. She’s awesome like that.”

John smiled, letting go of the keyring. “I know you can appreciate her for what she is, even if Cas just thinks she’s something to get from point A to point B in,” he said. “But I just wanted to start you guys out right.”

Dean stared down at the keys clasped in his hand, feeling shaky. It hadn’t meant nearly this much when John had given him the Impala back in the real world; actually, it had been something of an afterthought on his part, because John had wanted a truck and Dean had wanted his home. Now it was a gift, something to cherish, something that *meant* something. He closed his eyes and swallowed around the lump in his throat.

“I dunno,” Dean said, quiet. “I think Cas understands the idea of coming home.”

John looked a little startled, but he smiled anyway

and clapped Dean on the shoulder. Then he headed inside, leaving Dean alone.

Dean walked around her, letting a finger trail along the trim the entire perimeter before squatting back in front of her. "Hey, baby," he said, voice quiet, putting his hand on the hood. "Not gonna lie, I *did* miss you."

"Dean?" a gruff voice said from behind him. "Why are you talking to a car?"

Dean turned to see Cas walking toward him. He smiled and dangled the keys.

"Dad gave her to us," he said. "She's ours again."

Castiel's face smoothed out and he smiled. "She was always yours, Dean."

Dean stood up, going to stand by Cas. For several moments the two of them took in the sight of the Impala before Dean turned toward Cas and buried his face in the angel's neck. Cas surrounded him with his arms and Dean let his own hands trail around Castiel's hips.

Dean wasn't crying, not really, but he was overwhelmed. Once he'd calmed down, he pulled back a bit from Cas and kissed him, soft and full, before smiling. "I love you."

Cas smiled, still a little bit awed at the words himself, as he replied that yes, he loved Dean as well. They exchanged another kiss before pulling apart

entirely, hands tangling together as they turned to go back to the party that was, ostensibly, in their honor.



That night was almost anticlimactic in comparison. Everything they'd struggled with this entire school year was over and done with, and they were going to be leaving soon. They hadn't talked about it too much, but by mutual agreement they had decided to leave shortly after the fourth of July and begin heading out toward California, and the whole of June stretched out ahead of them, glorious and warm with no expectations.

Dean stretched out on the bed, warm and lax in the afterglow of graduating – and the congratulatory sex they'd quietly indulged in after everyone else had gone to bed. Cas was wandering around the room in his pajama pants and nothing else, cleaning up some of the mess that they'd made and digging around for the missing Pink Floyd shirt (which Dean had finally surrendered as Castiel's possession). Dean allowed himself the pleasure of watching him wander around topless for several minutes before retrieving the shirt from under Castiel's pillow, which is where it had gotten

shoved in their haste to undress.

He let it hang from his fingertips, a shit-eating grin on his face, and when Cas turned and saw it he scowled and snatched it from him, struggling into it. Finally, he'd set the room to rights and turned off the overhead light, letting the dim glow of the bedside lamp guide him to his spot in bed.

Neither of them moved to turn off the light, instead staring contemplatively at the bottom of the top bunk that had never been used. Finally, Dean spoke.

"How long do you think Gabriel is going to keep us here?" he asked, probably for the thousandth time.

Cas sighed. "I have no idea," he admitted. He turned toward Dean, propping himself up on one arm. "I'd hoped that he'd remove us from here before now, but we may have to resign ourselves to the possibility of being here for several more years yet."

Dean turned thoughtful for a good long while, ignoring the fact that Cas was gazing down at him fondly.

"I guess that wouldn't be so bad," he admitted. "I mean, I'm not gonna say I'm not anxious to get back to hunting, but this world isn't like, *terrible*. And either way, we can stick together."

Cas frowned. "I'd much rather you go to school," he

said. “But if you want to hunt, we could –”

Dean shook his head. “No. We don’t have any of the tools we’d need and I have a clean record, for the first time in, like, two decades. I’m not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth. No hunting unless we have to.”

Cas looked pleased. “I think you’re right. It’s not so bad here,” he said. “Not that the real world is bad in comparison.”

Dean snorted. “It outright sucks half the time, but at least it’s *real*. No, I’d still rather be back there than here, but if I’m here, I’m okay as long as I’ve got you. Now, can we please can the chick-flick stuff and go to sleep?”

Cas rolled his eyes, but he obligingly reached out to flick off the bedside lamp. Snuggling into Dean, he let his eyes close, and before long both of them were asleep.



Dean opened his eyes. Everything was inordinately warm and golden and he could barely feel his own body.

In fact, he *couldn't* feel his body.

That made him shoot upright. He was on the ground, as was Cas (slowly waking up himself and

taking in his surroundings with calm interest. Cas was very literally unfazeable). They were both wearing their pajamas from the night before, which fit perfectly despite the fact that they were both in their adult bodies again.

“What the *fuck*?” Dean asked. There was no real end to the room they were in, although it was obviously *not* outdoors, but everything was suffused with a gently golden light, warmth permeating down to the very cells of their skin.

“Surprise!” a voice said. Dean whirled around to find Gabriel standing exactly where Dean had been looking not even five seconds previous.

Dean and Castiel both struggled to their feet to greet the archangel head-on.

“What the *hell*, Gabe?” Dean asked, twisting around.

“Aw, that’s so sweet, you gave me a nickname,” Gabriel said, smirking. “By the way, lookin’ *good*, Winchester.” He winked. “Considering your body’s been on ice for nine months, you’re holding up pretty well.”

“Gee, thanks. That means so much coming from you,” Dean deadpanned. Gabriel chortled at that for a few seconds before continuing.

“It’s time to go home!” he said, clapping his hands

together. “Well, I mean, *technically* I could have sent you home like two months ago, but by then I figured I should just let it play out. I get bored, what can I say?”

“You’re an asshole,” Castiel informed him. Gabriel turned and goggled at Cas for several seconds before turning back to Dean.

“You’ve corrupted him,” he said. He looked *entirely* too delighted with the situation for either Dean or Cas to be comfortable.

“Yeah, it’s the Winchester way,” Dean said, rolling his eyes. He crossed his arms defensively. “So we’re going home?”

“Yep!” Gabriel said. “Everyone’s going back to their respective meatsuits, this universe is getting dissolved. You’ll only lose like a day cuz time works differently in Heaven, so *you’re welcome*.”

“I hate you *so much*,” Dean said.

“Naw, you love me,” Gabriel said, wiggling his eyebrows. “If it weren’t for me you wouldn’t have your little angel-husband and a brand-new measure of self-worth. It works out for everyone! I mean, when I stuck you guys here I never thought you’d run with it like this, but hot *damn*.”

“Gabriel,” Cas rumbled, and Dean shivered. He’d forgotten how deep Castiel’s voice was when he was in

an adult body. “What about Jimmy?”

“Huh?” Gabriel swiveled around to regard his little brother. “Oh, your vessel? I sent him home. This is a copy.” He grinned. “Where do you think Anna got *her* replacement bod? It’s kind of a specialty of mine, creating things. You may have noticed.” He dusted off his fingernails, like it was a job well done.

Cas looked alternately conflicted and thrilled with the news; Dean had never really talked to him about it, but he got the feeling Cas had been fond of Jimmy. Probably the closest thing to a friend that an angel could have, other than a Winchester. Hadn’t really done the guy a damn bit of good in the end, although Dean supposed it worked out for the best; if Cas hadn’t liked the guy, he probably wouldn’t have bothered trying to send him home from Purgatory. Which had, in turn, released Gabriel.

“So no one’s gonna remember this?” Dean asked.

Gabe shrugged. “You two will. Like I said, I’m a romantic at heart. But none of the others should. There *might* be some psychic bleedthrough but I really doubt it. I’m very good at this sort of thing.”

Dean exhaled. “Alright, so what do you need Cas for?”

Gabriel smirked. “Winchesters, always looking for

the catch. Smart. Castiel is gonna have some new duties in Heaven with me, kinda like my lieutenant or I dunno, comedic relief. Sidekick? Something like that. Anyway. I worked it out with the old man before he decided to take an extended vacation.” He smiled beatifically at this. “But you know, I can hold down the fort for a while. Your average human life ain’t so long in the face of angelic immortality.”

Cas stared at him. “So I can stay with Dean?”

“‘til he dies,” Gabriel said. Then he shrugged again. “After that, well, he’ll be in Heaven anyway so it’s not like you won’t get to see him all the damn time. Hell, you’ll probably get sick of each other after a while; things are changing back home, kid. You might wanna pop in and check them out every now and then. But you’ve earned a vacation after the shit you’ve been through. Even Dad agrees with that.”

Naturally an archangel would think a lifetime with the person he’d fallen in love with was a vacation. Dean sighed. “There’s always a catch,” he said.

Gabe smirked. “No catch, Dean-o. Sometimes good stuff just *happens*.” He paused. “Well, I can’t let you close the gates of Hell, which I guess could be considered a catch.”

“*What?*” Dean exclaimed.

Gabriel shrugged. "You guys already had this talk. You close the gates of Hell, you close the gates of Heaven. Dad doesn't want that quite yet. I mean, it's gonna happen *eventually*, but well after you're dead. I confiscated all of the tablets crazy-ass Enoch left scattered around; they're up in Heaven where they belong, for now. That's the best I can give you."

Dean eyed Castiel. Like there was something they could actually do about this.

"What? You can't *honestly* believe I was gonna let you get away with that crap? Screws with the natural order of things," Gabriel said, frowning. Then he straightened up and shooed them off with his hands. "Now go on, you crazy kids. Live the dream or some crap. I got shit to do."

Dean and Cas looked at each other, blinking, as the archangel disappeared from in front of them, and then everything went black.

Part Eight



It was warm and there was a banging noise. The door. There was someone knocking at the door.

“G’way,” Dean mumbled. He curled up around the warmth at his side and snuggled into it. “M’tired.”

He heard the sound of a door opening and light flooded the room. “Dean, *wake up*. We’re missing a – holy shit, is that *Cas*?”

Dean pried his eyes open, the *memories* flooding back to him – he wasn’t in Lawrence, he was in *Texarkana*, and he was staring at his gigantic full-sized baby brother with his ridiculous hippy hair and a shocked look on his face.

Gabriel. *Gabriel* had done this and Dean might miss the chance he’d had, but holy *fuck* was he happy to be back.

Next to him, Cas stirred and made an unhappy

noise, which was *hilarious* considering he was still rockin' the Pink Floyd shirt and grey pajama pants. And, *yeah*, he was an angel again and didn't need to sleep.

Sam was gaping at them.

"Cas, *wake up*," Dean said. His voice was deep and husky, the kind of voice he hadn't had for nine solid months, and that did more to make Castiel's eyes shoot open than anything else.

"Dean," he said. He sat up and boy, was it *ever* apparent that he had his mojo back, because he sat straight up with no help from his arms. "We're back."

"Yeah," Dean agreed.

"Uh, hello?" Sam said. "Not that I'm not happy you're out of Purgatory, Cas, but *what the hell?*"

Cas turned toward him and smiled. "Hello, Sam," he said. "It's good to see you again."

Sam gaped at him some more.

Next to Cas, Dean sat up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "Sammy," he said. "You might wanna go get some coffee, cuz this is a long story."

Cas was nodding even as he stood and searched the room for his clothing. Finally he found them, the now-clean hospital scrubs and trench coat draped over the back of one of the chairs in the corner of the room. Cas wrinkled his nose at it and Dean laughed. He

reached down and fumbled for his duffel, tossing it to Cas, who caught it easily.

“Keep the trenchcoat,” Dean advised. “But you can *burn* that hospital shit for all I care.”

“Dude. What the *fuck*?” Sam sounded *really* freaked out, like their easy familiarity was the worst thing of all.

Dean turned toward his brother. “Seriously. *Coffee*.”

“Dean, I’m not a *waiter*. Get your own damn coffee and *maybe* explain how the shit Castiel is standing here and wearing *pajamas*? And – Jesus *Christ* – are you guys wearing *rings*?”

Dean glanced down; sure as shit, he was still wearing the ring Cas had given him at Christmas, and a quick glance across the room showed that, yes, Cas was wearing the ring he’d given him in that strip mall. His smile morphed into a smirk.

“Sammy. Coffee will unlock all of the puzzles, I promise,” he said, before climbing out of bed himself and going to dig through the duffel with Cas for suitable clothing.

“Ugh, *fine*,” Sam said, throwing his hands up like he was completely done with Dean’s shit. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

The door closed behind Sam; Dean automatically turned to look at Cas, who had already done the same.

“We’re back,” Dean said.

“We are,” Cas agreed. He looked conflicted and a bit reserved.

Dean felt his stomach drop in fear. “You, uh, remember everything, right?”

Cas nodded. “Yes,” he said. He looked up into Dean’s eyes. “I would never hold you to anything, Dean; any of the promises you made there.”

Dean stared at him. “What, you’re breaking up with me over a return to *reality*?”

“N-no,” and Dean had never seen full-angel Cas stutter before. “You generally avoid romantic relationships, but. I’m happy to be your friend.”

“Oh *Christ*,” Dean said, rolling his eyes. He grabbed Cas by the neck and tugged him close; the angel allowed it, melting into the touch when Dean pressed his lips to the other man’s. “No fucking way,” he said, pulling back. “I went through all of that crap, even applying to *colleges* and shit, and I am *not* losing the one really awesome thing that came out of it, okay?”

Cas looked gratified at his statement and turned back toward the duffel, eventually unearthing a pair of jeans and a black shirt that looked like they might fit him.

“Hey,” Dean said, grabbing Castiel’s attention again.

He swallowed and his voice, when he spoke next, was even deeper. “I really *do* love you. I wasn’t making that up. Okay?”

Cas smiled then. It wasn’t as wide as the smiles he’d worn while he was human, but it was a real smile nonetheless. He stopped in front of Dean; back there, they’d been roughly the same height, but here Cas was a solid inch or two shorter than he was and it was kinda nice.

“I didn’t lie either,” he said. He leaned forward and kissed Dean, soft and gentle. “I love you too.” He pulled back, a thought occurring to him as he narrowed his eyes. “No more prostitution.”

“How the *hell* do you know about that?” Dean demanded, face going bright red. Not that he was *ashamed* of what he’d done to support Sammy growing up, but it wasn’t something he talked about. *Ever*.

Castiel clearly thought this was the dumbest question in existence. “I rebuilt you from the ground up and you don’t think I would’ve noticed *that*?”

Dean closed his eyes. “It’s not like I was into that sort of thing recently anyway,” he said, rolling his shoulders in an approximation of a shrug. He couldn’t even look at Cas in the face right now.

He felt Cas step closer into his personal space

again, and he would have shoved him away except that the other man's hands enclosed the sides of his face, gently.

"*Dean*," Cas said. He was close; Dean could feel his breath on his lips. "I knew this *well* before you knew who I was. Do you think I would judge you for doing what you had to?"

"I dunno, Cas," Dean said, shrugging again. He forced his eyes open. "There's some pretty intense Biblical shit about why you don't whore yourself out for cash."

Castiel rolled his eyes. "Even if any of the prophets had managed to get that right, intent *matters*. You were not selling your favors to feed a drug habit, or gain personal glory of some sort. You were providing a home for your brother. There's a distinct difference."

Dean stared at him.

"I knew about this five minutes ago," Cas said. "And I *still* loved you. Nothing has changed except that you know that I know."

"Yeah, I know," Dean said, uncomfortable with the attention; Castiel's focus was razor-sharp at the worst of times. "I'm just not liking how this gets me cast as the hooker with a heart of gold, here."

Cas laughed outright; the sound was soothing and

made Dean feel lighter than he had in...*forever*. “Dean, I’m sure there are several archetypes you fit, but I *don’t* think that’s one of them.”

Dean grinned back at him, his heart feeling impossibly bright; he’d just been granted official *divine forgiveness* for the one thing he really hated about himself. It felt...amazing. Like the future all of his old teachers had always been talking about had suddenly *arrived*. “Great. Think we can squeeze in shower sex before Sammy gets back, or...?”

Cas snorted, but obligingly headed toward the bathroom. *Despite* the fact that as an angel, he no longer needed to bathe.



“So you’re saying,” Sam said, eyes wide. “That we spent an entire school year in an *alternate universe*?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m saying, Sammy,” Dean said. His mouth was full of McGriddle, which holy *fuck* had he missed back there because they didn’t *exist* yet in 1997. He grinned. “It’s really too bad Gabe didn’t give you your memories from there, cuz Cas makes an *adorable* teenager.”

Castiel rolled his eyes from where he sat, between Dean and the window, and turned his gaze toward the outside. His hand, which was laying on the table, twitched slightly, and Dean obligingly caught it up in his own.

Sam stared down at it, his jaw working, before he looked up at Dean. Dean looked back, challenging, and Sam wisely didn't say what he'd been about to.

Dean finished his breakfast in silence, gulping down Starbucks and pressed sausage like it was going out of style. He offered the last half of his coffee to Cas, who took it with thanks.

Sam was now alternating his stunned amazement between the two of them, and eventually Dean took pity on him and started at the beginning, working his way through the less-private moments of the school year. Sam winced and laughed at all the right parts, because Sam really *was* a good brother, but he looked somewhat disturbed to hear about the girlfriend he never had.

"That's just weird," he interjected.

"Dude, Vicky was *awesome*," Dean said. Cas nodded agreement. He'd been silent through the majority of Dean's story, contemplating their hands – still interlocked with each other – and the ring that shined on his finger from within their grasp.

“So, uh,” Sam said, gesturing to the two of them and turning bright red. “When did *this* happen?”

Dean shrugged. “Christmas,” he said, snagging the last gulp of coffee from Castiel’s cup. Cas glowered at him.

“You owe me another,” he informed Dean. Dean snorted.

“That reminds me, Sam, you are *not* allowed to introduce Cas to Frappucinos. Or any of your *other* girly coffee-based drinks,” he said, swinging his finger around to aim it at his brother.

Sam looked almost offended.

“What’s a Frappucino?” Cas asked, intrigued. Dean groaned and buried his face in his free hand.

The rest of the morning went pretty much the same way: Sam asking questions and Dean answering them with the occasional piece of input from Cas. Out of the ease of habit, Dean and Castiel navigated around each other, cleaning up after themselves and seeking out shoes – Cas only had the old hospital slippers but Dean said they’d take him to Wal-Mart later and get him a proper pair of boots, silently grateful that Wal-Mart didn’t sell neon Converse – while they explained. That, more than anything, seemed to freak Sam out; like before, their easy familiarity with each other was unusual and

terrifying to the younger Winchester.

Dean bent over to tie his shoes and Cas launched into the story of how Dean had managed a 3.6 cumulative GPA and got into MIT, which Sam didn't even seem fazed by ("Come on, Dean, I've been your brother forever. I *know* you're not stupid. Asshole, yes. Stupid, no.") and then an in-detail description of the school board meeting where John had spoke up for them, which *floored* Sam.

"And it was *actually* Dad?" he asked.

Dean nodded, settling back into his chair. "Yeah, it was Dad," he confirmed. "Gabe pulled him and Mom out of Heaven and gave them altered memories, but it was really them." He smiled.

They were silent for several minutes then, each contemplating whatever and Cas just staring at the wall. Suddenly, Sam spoke up again.

"So you seem, uh. Pretty happy," he said.

To his surprise, Castiel was the one who answered.

"*Not* to discount the formative years," he said. "But much of the ego, a person's self-image, is formed within the high school years. Dean had a rare opportunity to relive them. It's not shocking to find that he's reformed how he views himself now that he had a chance to go back and do it correctly."

Dean flushed and looked away from both of them, staring intently at a water stain on the wall near the bathroom.

They were quiet while they packed up, having decided to head out in a random direction so as not to be stuck in fucking *Texarkana* any longer than they needed to be. Before they left, Sam turned to look at them.

“So, the rings,” he began.

“Oh, *right*,” Dean said, stopping and slapping his hand against his thigh. He reached into his pocket for his phone. “Do you think Garth can make paperwork for Cas? Bobby would have been able to - I dunno, I’m not as good at forgery as Bobby was.”

Sam stared at Dean. “*What?*”

Dean rolled his eyes as he flipped through the contacts in his phone.

“We can worry about it later,” Cas told Dean, touching him on the shoulder.

“Nuh uh, nope, *no way*,” Dean said, shaking his head and turning to look at Cas, who was looking back with a raised eyebrow.

“There’s no rush, Dean,” the angel said.

“There sure as hell *is*,” Dean ground out. “I could die tomorrow on a hunt.”

Cas rolled his eyes. "And that would be well before your time, so I would go to Heaven and bring you back. *There's no rush*, Dean. We have plenty of time."

"Maybe I don't wanna wait around," Dean said. Then he squinted at his angel. "Unless *you* –"

"That's not the issue," Cas said, serene. "We're on our way out the door. We can deal with it when we get to wherever we're going."

Dean eyed him for several minutes until shrugging acceptance of that. "Okay, fine. I'll call Garth on the way. Sammy, you're driving," he said, tossing the keys in Sam's direction.

"What the hell is going on?" Sam demanded.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Can't get married without an identity," he said, grabbing his duffel and brushing past his brother. "Speaking of which, I should probably make sure mine's clear enough that I won't get arrested."

"I'm sure I can take care of that, Dean," Cas said, sighing as he followed Dean out of the room.

Sam stared after them for several seconds before chasing after, his bellows of, "WHAT, NOW YOU'RE GETTING *MARRIED*?" following them the entire way down to the Impala.



Somehow, even though it happened almost a solid six months after they got back, Dean was *completely* unsurprised when they wound up tracing a case to Lawrence, Kansas. It was the *one* normal case they'd managed to pick up; lately it was all dodging Crowley's goons and looking for Meg (and if Dean had to console Cas every few nights, whenever they hit a roadblock or once again didn't find her, well, he didn't mention it aloud).

Anything to keep Cas from trying to storm Hell (*again*) for his friend; Dean couldn't bear the idea of him going where he himself couldn't follow.

Cas sniffed as he climbed out of the back seat of the Impala, the sun glinting off of the gold ring on his finger as he closed the door behind him. "Somehow it looks nothing like it, and exactly the same," he observed.

"No shit," Dean said, looking around them. The hospital where Castiel had recovered from his stab wound was less modern now, more falling-apart-at-the-seams, but it was *there*. If Dean looked closely he could *almost* spot the exact place Mary had crushed out her

cigarette.

Sam snorted. He'd mostly come to terms with the fact that they'd lived an entire life separate from what he remembered (after all, they were Winchesters, all three of them now, and Winchesters *never* did things the normal way). But every now and then he was brought face-to-face with some bit of knowledge they had that he didn't, and each time it threw him for a loop.

The three of them wore their suits, which hilariously enough Castiel *hated*, and flashed their fake FBI badges (Agents Crosby, Stills, and Nash, and Dean had *seriously* been waiting the entire six months the three of them had been hunting together to make that joke) to interview the victim.

"Psychics," Dean said as they walked back out of the hospital a half hour later. "At least it isn't *witches*."

"Small mercies," Cas said, glowering. Their last job had been witches, working with Crowley and protected by fucking *hellhounds*, and Dean was pretty sure Cas was halfway to hating them as much as he did.

"Hey, we know at least one psychic in Lawrence," Sam pointed out. "I mean, it's been a while, but Missouri might be willing to talk."

Dean made a sort of, "Good point," face as the three of them climbed back into the Impala, Cas

snagging the front seat from under Sam's nose. It had become something of a game between the two of them, although occasionally Sam just called shotgun outright.

Missouri's house looked near-identical, the intervening seven or eight years since they'd last seen her having passed by unremarked-upon. She was waiting for them at the door, her arms crossed.

"You boys," she said, shaking her head. "You stop in once and never come by again. If I didn't know better I'd think you didn't like me."

There was a glint in her eye that told them that she knew *exactly* how much her abilities freaked them out.

"Oh, but *this* is a surprise," Missouri said, standing up straight and taking in Castiel. He raised his eyebrow at her before extending his hand.

"Castiel," he offered. She took his hand in return, a calculating eye roaming all over him. Dean bristled in response.

"What *are* you, then?" she said, crossing her arms. "*Other* than Dean's husband, which he's thinking *very* loudly right now. Congratulations, by the way."

Cas rolled his eyes and turned toward the hunter. "*Dean*," he said. Dean forced his arms to uncross and relax, but he glowered nonetheless.

Castiel turned back to Missouri, eyebrow raised,

and clearly some sort of psychic communication passed between the two of them because her eyes widened.

“*Really,*” she said. “I guess that explains why I can’t get a read on you. Well, come in then, boys, though I gotta warn you, I wasn’t exactly prepared to host angels today.”

Cas huffed laughter as he followed her in. “I live with the *Winchesters*. I’m fine if you haven’t dusted.”

Dean laughed outright, slapping Cas on the back. Almost of its own accord, his hand trailed from there up the angel’s shoulder blade and down his arm, eventually snagging his fingers within his own. It wasn’t often that they showed affection publicly like this, but Missouri already knew and anyway, she was a friend.

Cas squeezed his hand briefly before turning to take the room in. It was the same sitting room Missouri had always had, the one where she took clients, and Dean and Cas sat together on the couch. Sam threw them the most *epic* of bitchfaces before settling down on the tiny chair to their left. Dean smirked back at him as Missouri came in with coffee.

Castiel thanked her politely as she handed the cups around; she accepted the thanks with grace and then shot back that she was unlikely to get it from any of the *other* *Winchesters*.

“Hey, I’m grateful,” Dean interjected, running right over Castiel’s much-put-upon rejoinder of, “You’re probably right.”

Missouri shared a look with Sam that clearly told everyone in the room that even if she *weren’t* psychic, she could tell that the two of them were married. Sam’s return expression shared the sentiment, with an added, “At least you don’t have to live with them,” tacked onto the end.

“So, boys, you had a case,” Missouri said, smiling.

“*Had?*” Sam replied, giving her a weird look.

“The rogue psychic you were hunting died last night. Another hunter picked up her case about a week ago.” Missouri shook her head, a bit sadly, but didn’t give any further explanation.

“Huh,” Dean said. “So we used Crosby, Stills, and Nash for no reason.” He absolutely did *not* pout.

“*Ugh,*” Sam replied from over the rim of his coffee mug.

“Next time we can be Page, Jones, and Plant,” Castiel said, smirking over at him. This brightened Dean up considerably; Sam, on the other hand, snorted half his coffee up his nose.

Missouri already had a napkin held out for him.

“Since *when* do you know about Led Zeppelin?”

Sam demanded, as he mopped up the mess he'd just created. Dean took a moment to be grateful that they'd changed into normal clothes before heading over; suits were fucking *expensive* and nothing ruined something marked Dry Clean Only like coffee. Or blood.

Good *lord*, he was turning into his mom.

"Since I married your brother," Castiel replied, his expression deadpan. Dean chuckled and nudged him with his shoulder.

Since they were there already and Missouri was interested in Cas, they stayed for a while despite the fact that they didn't need to. It was downright *pleasant* and Dean started getting antsy right around the half-hour mark. If there wasn't a hunt here, he wanted to go back to his motel room with his angel and spend the evening watching Dr. Sexy reruns together.

There was a thudding noise from upstairs. "Oh," Missouri said, eyes rolling upward. "'Scuze me just a moment. My apprentice has some strange sort of *sickness*. Can't get a pin on it. I'll be right back." She stood and began heading toward the stairs, but she was met in the foyer by the source of her troubles.

A very, very familiar source.

"Holy shit," Dean whispered. "Cas, *look*."

Cas craned his neck over and froze in place.

“She was a psychic,” Cas said. “I never realized.”

The figure brushed past Missouri in her entrance hall, walking directly into the parlor. “Dean Winchester,” she said. She turned toward Cas. “Castiel Novak. I *know* you.” She turned again and her face softened. “Sam Winchester.”

“Was this what Gabe meant?” Dean wondered aloud. “About psychic bleedthrough?”

Missouri’s voice, when she spoke, was sharp. “You know what’s wrong with her? She disappeared for a day about six months ago and ever since then she’s been having psychic visions that make her *sick as hell*.”

Cas stood up and grabbed the figure by the shoulders. “Victoria,” he said, quietly. “I didn’t realize you were psychic. I *am* sorry, or I would have come sooner.”

Vicky, aged about twenty years or so but still essentially *Vicky*, stared back at him. “You can help?” she asked. “I keep having them, and you’re in them, all of you. They *hurt*.”

“I can’t,” Cas said. He turned toward Dean. “I’ll have to go get Gabriel. *He* can fix this.”

Dean nodded. “It’s about time for your weekly check-in anyway so this is as good a time as any. We’ll hold the fort down here.”

“Gabriel?” Vicky asked, clueless. She was staring at them like they’d all grown separate heads, her fingers plucking at the hem of the camisole she was wearing.

“*Really* long story,” Dean said. “We’ll explain when Cas takes off.”

Cas brushed a kiss to his cheek. “I should be back momentarily. A few minutes at most.”

“Take your time,” Dean said. With that, Cas disappeared.

Vicky gasped and wobbled on her feet; Sam stood and reached out to grab her automatically, saving her from an undignified collapse on the floor. He surrendered his chair to the greater good, opting from then on to lurk in the corner while Missouri worked at bringing her apprentice (*what the fuck*) back around to the land of the living.

When she came to, Dean did the best that he could to explain that the four of them had been trapped in an alternate universe together for nine months, and a general breakdown of *why*. She kept darting glances over at Sam, and finally Dean broke down.

“He doesn’t remember,” he said. “Gabriel’s kind of an asshole like that.”

“Well, *that’s* no way to talk about the person you’re about to ask to solve a problem,” said a cool voice from

behind them.

Dean whirled around in his seat, facing the entrance of the parlor. Gabriel stood there, Cas in tow. The latter looked to be ruffled to some extent, but he still came to sit next to Dean.

Missouri crossed her arms. "Who the hell is this? And don't tell me he's an angel, I know that already."

Dean laughed. "Oh man. You have no *freakin'* idea."

Gabriel took in Missouri for a few seconds before grinning and bounding over to her, grabbing her hand, and shaking it furiously. "Missouri Moseley. *Big* fan, just so you know. Love the way you keep hitting Dean upside the head. *Also* a big fan of the thing you did with those crazy Twilight fans last year. Holy *shit*, that was awesome." Dean raised his eyebrow at that, but kept quiet. It didn't do to unnecessarily irritate an archangel, especially when that archangel was his brother-in-law. Over the last six months, he'd learned his lesson; when he wanted to be, Gabriel was *scary*.

"Watch your mouth," Missouri said on automatic. Then she stiffened; Gabriel, however, found that *hilarious*.

"Sure thing," he said, letting her hand drop. "Anyway, kids, let's get this show on the road." He rubbed his hands together while turning back toward

Dean. “Cas didn’t say what you needed; what kind of problem needs an archangelic Energizer bunny? I don’t see any demon-kings.”

Behind him Missouri gasped as she realized *exactly* who she was dealing with; Dean could see from the look on her face that she was frantically looking around the room, probably wondering if maybe she should have vacuumed today. He couldn’t help it; he started to laugh.

“Trust me, Gabriel don’t give a crap if you’ve cleaned recently, either.”

“Nope, not a care in the world,” Gabriel said, waving her concern off. Then he swiveled and focused on Vicky. “Oh, *damn*.”

Dean turned to Cas. “Did you give him Pixy Stix before bringing him?” he demanded.

Cas sighed.

Gabriel was squatting in front of Vicky now; she gazed back at him impassively. “Oh, man, I really screwed the pooch with your psychic receptors, didn’t I?” he asked, squinting. “Jeez. Okay, hang on. This might hurt a little bit.”

“Are you going to erase the memories?” Dean asked.

Gabriel shook his head. “Not if I want her to stay sane, no. She’ll remember everything, so you guys

might have to do some damage control.” He paused and reconsidered. “Of course, if you’re okay with an insane psychic on your hands I could wipe everything.”

“No!” Sam said, frowning. “God, what’s *wrong* with you?”

Gabriel started, like he’d only just noticed the six and a half feet of Sam crammed into the corner. “Hey, Sammy boy! Oh, man, Dean, *best idea*,” and at this Gabriel turned back to Dean. “Should I give him his memories back? She’s like maybe five two, *tops*. The sex would be *incredibly* awkward.”

“Oh my *God*,” Dean said, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Please never, *ever* talk about my brother and sex again.”

“That’s rich, considering the running soundtrack I have on *your* sex life,” Sam shot back, annoyed. Gabriel always brought out the worst in him; Dean figured it was probably the hundreds of times he’d watched Dean die because of Gabriel that did it. “Yeah, I *want* the memories back. Nine months of my life, of *course* I want them back. You *ass*.”

“It’s like you’re all *tryin’* to test my patience today,” Missouri muttered.

Gabriel sauntered up to Sam, which looked hilariously like a chihuahua approaching a Great Dane.

“Boop,” he said, reaching out and prodding Sam directly between the eyes with his pointer finger.

Sam collapsed, eyes rolling back into his head before fluttering closed. Gabriel, with angel-fueled strength, manhandled him into a sitting position on the floor.

“What the hell did you do to him?” Dean demanded, shooting up from his seat.

“Calm down, Fido, I just gave him his memories back,” Gabriel said, rolling his eyes. “He’ll wake up in a few.” Then he focused entirely on Vicky, taking her head between his hands.

There was a tearing sound and Vicky screamed; Gabriel winced. “Sorry, *sorry*,” he said. He concentrated some more and Vicky moaned in pain before slumping over.

The rest of them kept quiet while Gabriel worked his magic; it actually took several minutes, which surprised Dean considerably and didn’t seem to faze Castiel even a little bit.

“Alright, I think that’s it,” Gabriel said, his voice uncertain. “Shove over, boys, it’ll be less disorienting if she wakes up flat.”

Dean and Cas both obediently stood up from where they’d been sitting on the couch, and Gabriel slung

Vicky into his arms, bridal-style. He set her down gently and did something with his hands that Dean *really* hoped was just him double-checking his work.

“Yeah, that should fix it,” he said. “Your two Sleeping Beauties should wake up in about twenty minutes, memories intact.” He wiggled his eyebrows at Dean.

“*Ugh*,” Dean said, rolling his eyes upward.

Missouri insisted on making Gabriel feel at home after that.

“I wouldn’t,” Dean cautioned her. “You’ll never get rid of him. He’s like a crazy fangirl; once he shows interest in you he *never freakin’ leaves*.”

“I’m *hurt*, kid,” Gabriel said. He fell back into Sam’s abandoned chair, clutching at his chest in a performance worthy of any thespian. “Seriously, if it weren’t for me you wouldn’t be all disgustingly in *luuuuurve* with my little brother; also, probably *dead*. You should be *grateful*.”

“I *am* grateful,” Dean shot back. “That doesn’t mean you’re not an asshole.”

“*Watch your damn mouth, Dean Winchester*,” Missouri said, walking back into the room with a cup of hot cocoa, which she handed to Gabriel.

“Takes one to know one,” Gabriel said, winking at Dean and accepting the cup. He took a sip and his eyes

rolled back into his head. “*Oh my God*, you’re my new best friend.”

“I warned you,” Dean told her.

Cas sighed again.

What passed for idle chit-chat broke out in random intervals after that; between Gabriel explaining away Sam and Dean being in high school together despite *normally* being four years apart (“If you don’t think Azazel made sure Sam got born when he *needed* him to be, you’re on crack, bucko. Ma and Pa Winchester were going at it like *bunnies*, it’s amazing they only popped out two of you, let alone managing to wait three years *sans*-demons,”) and Missouri telling the (hilarious) tale of a bunch of Twilight fans who found an *actual* book on witchcraft lore, they managed to – uncomfortably – pass the time.

Gabriel and Cas had just gotten into a really interesting argument about genetic manipulation (that Dean was *totally* not listening to, no way), when they were interrupted by a thumping noise as Sam began to come to. Dean and Cas were almost instantly at his side, bickering with Gabriel forgotten in the face of ensuring their brother was alright.

“Hey, Sammy,” Dean said, nudging him. Sam’s eyes shot open and he took in Dean and Cas staring down at

him.

He blinked a few times and then started laughing hysterically.

Dean narrowed his eyes. Shortly after, Castiel did as well.

“Oh my God, you two were *adorable*,” he said, doubling over and clutching at his stomach as he cackled at his newly-revived memories.

“I know, right?” Gabriel said, from the chair. He was still gulping at the hot cocoa, which mysteriously didn’t seem to be running out any time soon. “You should’ve seen the bits you *weren’t* around for, Sammy-boy. Romance of the ages, lemme tell ya. Did you know Dean proposed in the parking lot of a *strip mall*?”

Sam froze for a second and then burst into laughter again.

“I hate all of you,” Dean said, addressing the room at large.

“A strip mall? *Really*?” Missouri asked. Dean glared at her.

“*Ugh*,” came a voice from across the room. Very suddenly everyone’s attention was focused on Vicky, who was pulling herself upward with effort.

Cas and Gabriel both crowded into her personal space so fast that Dean was pretty sure some angelic

mojo was involved. They peered down at her with interest, Gabriel going so far as to take her head in his hands and crane it around like he was looking for something.

Vicky looked outright terrified, but she held up pretty well under the pressure. In a pretty...Vicky-like way.

“Get the *fuck* away from me,” she hissed, shoving Gabriel’s hands off of her and standing up, edging around the couch and backing toward the wall.

“Whoa, I *like* her!” Gabriel said, smirking.

Vicky let off with a stream of colloquial Spanish that Gabriel and Castiel both seemed to understand perfectly well. Dean, for his part, only understood about one word in ten, but she sounded *pissed*. In the furor he could pick up the Spanish for “whoremonger,” “life,” and what he was almost *positive* meant, “gigantic douchebag,” which he didn’t even know was a *thing* in Spanish.

Gabriel whistled. “*Daaaamn*,” he said, once Vicky had quieted down a bit. “Sammy, I think this one might be a little too much woman for you.”

Dean glanced back at his brother; Sam had stood up and was still lurking against the wall, but he was staring at Vicky in a sort of awed silence.

Vicky’s jaw slammed shut as she spotted Sam,

looming up from his spot near the doorway.

“Hey, Vicky,” he said, giving a half-hearted sort of wave. “Glad you’re, uh, feeling better.”

She turned back to Gabriel and poked him in the chest, eyes narrowed. “Archangel or not, *pendejo*, you fuck with my life like that again and I’ll have your *balls on a platter*.”

Gabriel turned toward Dean in astonishment. “How the hell did your brother score someone so *awesome*?”

Dean spread his hands out in front of him. “I got nothin’.”

Gabriel grinned. “Reminds me of —” then he trailed off, his expression going sort of vacant. Cas craned his head over to look at his brother, eyes keen. He raised his eyebrow and Gabriel shrugged in response.

“Well, *you* met her. Doesn’t she? I mean, Spanish instead of Aramaic, but —”

“Who the *fuck* are you talking about?” Vicky demanded, stomping her foot. Dean made a mental note to never leave her out of a conversation before turning to his brother.

“You have *totally* bit off more than you can chew,” he muttered.

“Yeah, I think so,” Sam replied. He still looked awed and slightly lovestruck, however. It was *remarkably*

similar to the expression he'd worn when he first met her, after Cas got stabbed, and Dean had to shake his head and force himself to focus on the present.

Gabriel grinned and winked at Castiel. "Well, I'm out of here, kids," he said, deliberately not answering Vicky's question. He turned to Missouri and made an exaggerated little bow. "Fabulous to meet you. I'm willing to barter miracles for the recipe to that hot cocoa, by the way." Missouri crossed her arms and looked completely unimpressed with his antics, which only served to amuse the archangel even *more*.

Gabriel then turned his attention to Sam and Dean. "Nice to see you again, boys. Good luck on the whole, uh, underwear modeling career or whatever it is you guys get up to when I'm not around to ruin your day." Then he nodded his head toward Cas. "Next week, bro. Peace out!"

With that, he disappeared.

"You're an angel," Vicky said, accusingly, pointing a finger at Castiel.

"...Yes?" Cas said. He sounded like he didn't know what answer was the correct one.

"Why didn't you *fix it*?"

Dean was about to interject on his husband's behalf when Sam came to stand next to her. He looked at

Dean, eyes suspiciously soft. Dean groaned, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I'll explain everything," Sam said. "You guys go back to the motel, this might take a while."

"Right," Dean said, wincing a little as he forced his eyes open. "Okay." He glanced at Cas, who nodded as well. He actually looked pretty freaked out, which meant Dean had some damage control on his hands, too. He sighed.

Dean reached into his jacket and retrieved Ruby's knife, flipping it over in his hand and gesturing it toward Sam. "Just in case," he said. He grinned as Sam took it from him, clapping Cas on the shoulder once his hand was free. "Got my own personal demon-smiter, don't wanna leave you without protection."

Cas just sighed.



Dean should have *known* that leaving the knife with Sam was a mistake. In retrospect, it was kind of a rookie move to leave himself unprotected. Especially since, as far as Crowley knew, they were still on a

mission to close the gates of Hell. Nothing they'd done over the last six months could possibly have dissuaded him, since they were looking for the only demon who had ever thrown in with them for something resembling altruistic reasons.

They'd only just closed Missouri's front door when suddenly there were demons *everywhere*. Of course, Dean wasn't a hundred percent on that, because they didn't just appear out of nowhere: they rushed them and he couldn't really get a good look at their eyes to confirm.

"Demons," Castiel said.

Well then.

"*Shit*," Dean replied, bolting forward. He reached toward his breast pocket for his flask of holy water, only to have his hand knocked away by a pretty redheaded demon. She threw him to the side, tossing him an easy six feet before crawling after him.

Castiel waded into the fray; he hadn't worn the trench coat to Missouri's, which was probably just as well because demons fight fucking *dirty*. Still, it didn't seem right to fight off Hell's hordes with Castiel wearing a pair of cargo pants and an old t-shirt. He began smiting with extreme prejudice, light flashing from the palms of his hands several times before he finally

seemed to get fed up with that option and materialized his sword.

Dean was pinned down by the redhead, who punched him alongside his head before he got with the program and twisted at his waist, throwing her off of him. He rolled himself into it, struggling to his feet as she did the same. Quicker than he could think, he dropped to a crouch, kicking a leg out and spinning on one heel to knock her own legs out from underneath her.

“Dean!” Cas called. Dean turned in time to see the angel launch something silvery at him: his sword. Unthinking, he shot his right hand out and snagged it from mid-air, turning and plunging the blade into the demon’s chest. Almost instantly she was dead, and Dean turned back toward the crowd of demons that was now gathered around Castiel.

Dean reached for his holy water again, grabbing it successfully and unscrewing the top one-handed, his right hand still occupied with the angel sword. He splashed the water in the face of a tall, dark-skinned demon in a business suit, bald and exactly the sort of guy that Dean would normally lose a bar fight to. The demon hissed and clawed at his face, and Dean reared back, avoiding the demon’s stumble toward him with a

(very manly and *not at all* graceful) spin.

“Cover your ears,” Castiel ordered.

“Yeah, *that’s* a great idea,” Dean grouched as he slid to the side, throwing the bald demon down and shoving the angel sword into his back. “Not happenin’, Cas, unless you’ve come up with hands-free demon extermination.”

Castiel sighed. “I’ll have to heal you after, then,” he said, and he began chanting the words to an obscure exorcism that Dean was pretty sure would bind these demons to the third circle of Hell for a hundred years.

Sucks to be them.

As Cas chanted, his voice started to get louder, ethereal, whining, *booming*. He was working his way up to his true voice, Dean realized.

This was gonna *hurt*.

“Dean? What the *fu* —“

“*Get back inside, Sammy!*” Dean shouted, turning around in time to see Sam, Vicky, and Missouri standing at the door, their eyes wide. “Protect them, *we’ll take care of this.*”

He had to scream that last bit, because Castiel’s voice was getting louder and louder, harder to hear over. There was an alarming ringing in his ears, and Dean fell to the ground along with all of the demons

around him, clutching at his ears and fighting off a headache.

Distantly, he could hear the sound of Missouri's windows shattering. She was never, *ever* going to forgive them for that.

Castiel's voice reached a fever pitch, the words bleeding from Latin into Enochian before a final burst of power exploded in a wave; Dean just barely had the time to slam his eyelids shut before the shockwave of it hit him, bright bits of Grace flowing out and binding the demons, pushing them back to Hell where they belonged.

Around him Dean heard thudding noises that heralded human bodies collapsing, and after several seconds of waiting, he opened his eyes. Cas was standing, half-crouched and arms raised to either side, glowing terrible and glorious; his wings were unsheathed, shining black things that spread out at *least* twelve feet across and dipped down so far they were nearly brushing the ground.

Cas seemed to be trying to collect himself; his eyes were closed, although the blue shine leaking out from underneath the lids told Dean that he was having a hard time re-vessel-fying his true form.

Finally, the glowing stopped, although the wings

stayed spread out in what Dean could only describe as a battle stance. Cas opened his eyes and immediately searched out Dean.

“Oh good, you’re alright,” he said.

“Uh huh,” Dean said, absently. He was *pretty* sure he had a dopey grin on his face, but he couldn’t bring himself to give a fuck. He’d only ever seen Castiel’s wings as shadows before, never as physical manifestations; it was *amazing*.

“Holy *shit*.” Sam’s voice drifted over from what Dean’s hunter instincts informed him was several yards behind him. His brother was likely seeing exactly the same thing that he was, but he didn’t bother turning around to confirm this suspicion. He didn’t want to miss a second of this.

“Huh,” Castiel said, craning his neck to regard his wings with some surprise. “That’s a side-effect that I didn’t expect.” With a shrug of his shoulders, the wings disappeared, drifting from vision hazily like water vapor.

Dean opened his mouth to say something, but he spied movement behind Castiel and froze.

“Do you know how long it’s going to take me to reorganize the Third Circle?” came an aggrieved voice. Castiel turned, slowly, to see that Crowley was standing on the street behind them.

Dean scrambled to his feet and came to stand next to Cas, clutching Castiel's sword fiercely.

"Look, you give me the psychic, this whole thing is over," the demon said. He looked *extremely* disgruntled to be running an errand on his own.

"Over my dead body," Dean said, with far more confidence than he actually felt. He juggled the angel sword, wondering if it was really wise to make threats about dead bodies to the King of Hell.

Crowley's eyes flashed red (literally) and he took a step toward Dean. "That can be arranged," he said, voice soft, *dangerous*.

Castiel stepped in between the two of them. His face was completely expressionless, but there was no mistaking the animosity in his voice when he spoke.

"If you so much as *think* about harming my mate, I will *personally ensure* that Meg becomes the new Queen of Hell," he said.

"*Mate?*" Crowley actually looked surprised, which alarmed the shit out of Dean. Crowley was the former King of the Crossroads, the current King of Hell, and *strong as fuck*. Between that strength, his reach and influence, and the fact that he knew *exactly* whose palms to grease to get whatever the fuck he wanted, there wasn't a whole lot that Crowley *didn't* know.

Which meant that this wasn't even *about* them. Crowley'd mentioned a psychic, but –

“Cas,” Dean interjected. He turned just in time to spot a pair of demons darting through the yard and toward the front door.

Before Dean could even consider running toward them, Sam appeared, crowding up the doorway and slashing through one demon's throat with Ruby's knife before spinning and attempting to get the other demon. He failed miserably, stumbling to the side as the demon pushed past him into Missouri's house.

Dean began to bolt up the front path.

“Ah ah ah, I wouldn't, Squirrel,” Crowley said. Dean whipped his head around and saw that in the five seconds he hadn't been looking, Crowley had managed to get hold of Castiel by his hair and shove him to his knees.

Cas, for his part, looked infuriated at the injustice of it all.

“All you have to do is give me the psychic,” Crowley said. His voice was pleasant. “You barely know her, and / need a powerful psychic to lock the Gates open. It works out for *everyone*.”

Castiel growled at the back of his throat; Dean spared a second to wonder why Cas was being so

submissive before he spotted it: the blackened pike in Crowley's hand. An actual angel's sword, rusty and black from disuse, but fully capable of killing Castiel.

His heart thudded in his chest.

"Well, probably not for the girl," Crowley continued. "*Her* soul will power the lock. Still, everyone *else* is happy."

Dean could hear Missouri cry out in alarm from inside the house. There was a series of loud thumping noises and some assorted crashing sounds.

"Dean, go help Victoria," Cas said, through gritted teeth.

"I don't think so," Crowley said. His voice shifted from smarmy to low and dangerous. "No, I think you should stay right here, where you can make sure I'm not eviscerating your *mate*." He snorted. "Congratulations. Should I have sent flowers?" He pressed the tip of the sword to Castiel's throat; a slight blue glow started to escape from beneath his skin.

"Nemamiah's sword," Castiel said. He winced; a bit more Grace leaked out and Crowley backed off. "Where did you come by it?"

Crowley grinned. "Oh, what, this old thing? I've had it for *years*. Ever since she fell when she followed Lucifer."

Castiel froze.

“Oh, you didn’t know? I suppose you probably thought she was dead, since it happened so long after your family’s little kerfluffle. No, Nemamiah fell with the best of them, and I’ve a knack for collecting interesting artifacts.”

Crowley seemed to find this highly amusing.

“I just need the psychic. You two stay put, and everything’s fine, you can go back to playing house.” He paused, considering, and then swore. “I *do* owe Gabriel a soul, which is unfortunate. Ah, well, he never specified *which* soul. He can have George W. I’d rather that idiot not be stupid-ing up Hell anyway.”

Dean blinked. “You *bet* on us?”

“What *don’t* I bet on?” Crowley asked, shrugging.

There was a cry from behind him, and a high-pitched screaming. Dean whirled in place in time to see the demon come out, dragging Vicky by her hair.

“No!” Sam cried, trying to follow.

Dean turned back around. “Just, stop!” he insisted. “Stop this crap.”

Crowley’s face took on an amused countenance at Dean’s begging. “I’m not in the deal-making business anymore, Squirrel, but even if I were, you’re mated to an *angel*. I can’t lay claim on your soul anymore; no demon

can. We're done here."

"Not really," said a familiar voice.

Crowley looked infuriated, which quickly melted into pained panic as a silver-tipped angel sword slid through the flesh of his torso.

"You've got to be *kidding* me," Crowley said. He began a slow fall toward the ground, revealing the two figures behind him.

Samandriel, the angel Dean had seen forever ago at a really bizarre auction; commander of Cupids and heaven's most adorable angel.

And *Meg*.

Meg smirked, jerking the sword out of Crowley's back; there was a golden flash and, nice and quiet, the King of Hell was dead. She handed the sword back to Samandriel. "Thanks for the loaner, Alfie, but I've got my own back," she said, patting him almost affectionately on the cheek as she leaned down and tugged the rusted sword out of Crowley's hand.

Instantly the sword was new and shiny, flicking to life in her hand in a way that Dean was pretty sure wasn't actually possible.

"Jesus *Christ*," Dean said, sinking to his knees beside Castiel. Cas was thunderstruck, staring at Meg like he'd never seen her before.

Meg kicked Crowley's corpse off to the side. "You couldn't be farther from the truth, Dean-o," she said, sauntering up to the demon that was hanging on to Vicky. She pointed the sword at him, lazily drifting it until the tip was up against his throat. "You can swear your allegiance to me or you can die. Choose now."

The demon swallowed hard, eyes darting around, before slowly lowering himself to his knees and bowing.

"Awesome," Meg said. She flicked her hand and the sword disappeared.

"*Fuck*," Dean swore. Meg turned around and regarded him.

"Better the devil you know, right kids?" she said, sauntering up next to them and squatting. "I killed him, and that makes *me* the Queen of Hell." She winked and dragged her fingers down the side of Dean's face.

Cas yanked him away from Meg, forceful hands on his shoulders. "Do *not* touch him," he said, his voice low with threat. Meg threw her head back and laughed.

"I *love* it when you get possessive, Clarence," she said.

Castiel's breathing (what the *fuck*) was ragged. He'd swung an arm around Dean's sternum, and Dean got the unsettling feeling that he was some sort of toy caught in a tug-of-war.

“I’m not a fucking princess, Cas, lemme up,” he muttered. Castiel clutched onto him tighter; a glance out of the corner of his eye told Dean that he was staring at Meg with something resembling rage.

“Oh come *on*, Castiel,” Meg said, standing and rolling her eyes. She held out a hand. “I just saved your asses and you’re gonna go all smitey on me? A little thanks might go a long way.”

Castiel stared at her hand in distrust.

“I’m not *claiming* him,” Meg continued, voice dismissive. “Even if the old rules still applied to me, which they *don’t* because I’m a *demon*, I have my *own* consort these days.” She shot a winning smile over toward Samandriel, which made all of Dean’s hackles raise.

“You’re screwing *Meg*?” Dean said, struggling to stand and attack the other angel. Samandriel looked back at him, a quizzical expression on his face. Castiel, on the other hand, kept Dean plastered to his front, which did nothing but piss Dean right the hell off.

“Hey, fuck *you*,” Meg said, looking angry. “I didn’t see any of *you* assholes storming in and saving the day when we got captured and tortured by *Crowley*,” and this was said with a kick to the dead meatsuit’s side so explosive that bits flew off of it. Dean closed his eyes

just in time to avoid getting viscera in his eyes.

“Nemamiah,” Castiel said, his voice turned pleading. “We tried to find you, for months, and nothing. We were looking in the wrong places, because we didn’t *know*. Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

Meg turned back toward him, rage written on her face. “Shut *up*,” she said.

“I do not have enough patience for this level of mental fuckery,” Dean informed everyone. Everyone promptly ignored him.

“Sister,” Castiel said. He sounded like his heart was breaking.

“*I am not your sister*,” Meg screamed, leaning close to them. Dean could smell sulfur, rolling off of her in waves; her voice had deepened, become almost brassy and ringing. “I’m *not an angel*, Castiel.”

“You *were*,” Cas said. He sounded...defeated. *Broken*.

Meg stood again, heading toward Samandriel. “Not anymore, Clarence. Call this your one favor; I saved your asses and your pretty little psychic and now I’m going to reign over all of Hell from Tahiti. Do me a solid and don’t seal the gates; I think we’re parting on pretty good terms, so I’d hate to have to put a hit out on your little band of merry idiots.” She turned back and winked

at them, like the previous conversation had never happened.

With that, Samandriel clamped his hand down on her shoulder and the two of them disappeared.

Dean blinked as the demon who had been kneeling suddenly poured out of its host's mouth, cloudy sulfuric smoke flooding into the slowly-darkening sky above. With that, the human bodies scattered around Missouri's front yard began to stir. Those that were alive, anyway.

"Sammy," Dean said, shrugging loose from Castiel's hold. "Take Missouri and Vicky inside." He turned to Castiel. "Can you put wards up around Missouri's house?"

Castiel nodded, slowly. "You don't trust Nem – Meg?"

Dean shook his head. "Fallen angel or not, Cas, she's a demon and the Queen of Hell. We'd be idiots not to protect 'em."

Cas seemed to agree, because he winked out to do...whatever it was he needed to do.

There *had* to be some sort of demonic mojo in play, because not a single one of Missouri's neighbors came outside to see what the ruckus was about, and the cops hadn't been called. He'd ask Castiel about it later; for now, he had some newly-free humans to deal with and

a few dead bodies to dispose of.



Several hours of consoling the formerly possessed took its toll on Dean; by the time they'd decided that Sam would stay at Missouri's to look over her and Vicky (just in case), and he'd handed out hastily printed-out copies of the anti-possession tattoo design to those who wanted it, he was *exhausted*.

Castiel showed up just after he'd sent off the last person, appearing beside him like he'd never left. Automatically, Dean turned toward him and slumped, letting the angel catch his weight in a sort of half-assed hug.

"Missouri's house is as protected as I can make it," Cas said. "I've layered it in protections against demons as well as angels."

"Gabriel's going to murder you," Dean said into his neck. Behind Cas, he could see that Missouri's front lawn was mysteriously pristine, the bodies and damage from the fight having disappeared the moment Cas showed back up, blood gone and windows repaired. Having an angelic husband had its perks, and not

having to dispose of bodies was apparently one of them.

“Gabriel is an archangel and can get past those wards,” Cas replied. He brought a hand up to cup the back of Dean’s neck, massaging gently. Dean moaned as his stiff muscles relaxed; he even felt a bit more energetic, and he suspected that Cas was using his mojo.

Somehow, it didn’t bother him.

“What about you?” Dean asked. He brought his arms up around Castiel’s waist. “I think Missouri might be disappointed if you couldn’t come visit.”

Cas snorted. “There’s an exception for me. Specifically, the wards are drawn in my own blood and cannot exclude me.” They were silent for several moments while Dean digested that knowledge. Then he spoke, changing the subject.

“Sam’s gonna stay behind, try to answer all of Vicky’s questions,” he said, straightening up to regard Castiel. The protection aspect of it didn’t even need to be said; Cas could read it in Dean’s expression. “He’ll meet us back at the motel tomorrow morning.”

Cas nodded understanding. It was late, but they still made the effort to check in on Sam, Vicky, and Missouri before heading out; everything was fine, and Vicky had

gone to sleep already.

“She’s had a long day,” Missouri said.

Dean snorted. “We’ve *all* had a long day.” Castiel hummed his agreement from next to him, although he was making it obvious that he’d like to leave *now*, please. Missouri chuckled at his impatience and nudged Dean toward the door.

“Don’t keep your *husband* waiting, boy,” she said. Behind her, Sam was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of some sort of herbal tea crap, and he rolled his eyes expressively before smirking.

“Right,” Dean said, resisting the urge to flip his little brother off. They said their goodbyes; it wasn’t long before the Impala was rumbling down the street, toward the motel.



Cas had one detour he wanted to make.

“You *do* realize that someone else lives there now, right, Cas?” Dean asked, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel as they waited at a red light. “We know her, actually, saved her and her kid from a poltergeist back when we first met Missouri.”

“I’m fully aware that someone else must live there,” Castiel replied. “That doesn’t preclude me wanting to see it.”

They pulled up in front of the house the Winchesters used to live in; to Dean’s surprise, there was a huge, decrepit FOR SALE sign in front of it. In fact, the house looked utterly abandoned, like it hadn’t been inhabited for years.

“Huh,” Dean said, squinting at it. “I guess she moved.”

Cas got out of the car, rolling his shoulders as he walked toward the fence gate. “The house isn’t haunted; I assume the bad memories that lingered are why your friend decided to get rid of it.”

“Yeah, that, or the shitty economy,” Dean said, looking around him. Half the houses on the block had for sale signs in front of them, too.

Castiel, Dean had learned, had very few compunctions about breaking and entering, and this case was no different; once they’d traversed the length of the front yard, Cas mojo’d the front door open and the two of them stepped into a room that was strange, empty, and heart-achingly familiar.

“Heh, home sweet home,” Dean said. His voice sounded flat as it fell against bare floorboards;

floorboards that he'd sat on with Cas doing their homework after school. There in the corner was where Mary had set up the Christmas tree; if he went around the support wall he knew he'd find the kitchen, where he'd stood for probably hundreds of hours doing dishes and helping his mom with dinner.

Cas shrugged as he swung his gaze about the room; Dean could tell he was remembering, clearly, the alternate life he'd had in a house just like this one. When he'd had a family that gave a shit about him for the first time in billions of years.

"This is *weird*," Dean said. There was a wadded-up piece of newspaper (probably left from whenever the last owners had packed their things up) near him, and he nudged it with his foot.

"No kidding," Cas said. He shrugged again and turned toward the stairs, clearly intending on heading up.

Dean followed him as he led the two of them to what, in that other universe, had been their bedroom. The door was wide open; the walls, which in their tenure had been a calming shade of blue, were an alarming yellow now. Several squares were brighter than the rest, indicating that their previous owner had hung posters.

There were divots in the flooring where heavy

furniture had been moved quickly, and a gouge in one wall; Dean was busy inspecting the gouge when suddenly he was pinned from behind.

His first instinct was to struggle and fight back, but then he realized it was Cas pinning him and he relaxed. Slightly.

“Cas, what the *hell*?” he asked, his face smushed into the plaster. Without any real warning he was spun around to face his husband, who was staring at him intently.

Dean raised his eyebrow and opened his mouth to make a comment, but he was interrupted by Castiel’s lips crashing against his.

The angel had his head cupped from behind, firm but not so firm that Dean couldn’t escape if he wanted to. Which, of course, he *didn’t* because hey, making out with his angel.

Dean didn’t question Castiel’s sudden amorousness, because in his experience, Cas had a habit of finding the *weirdest* situations arousing; he just let the angel push him into the wall and molest his mouth, and then pull him away and start backing him toward the other wall. Things would have gone a lot farther if one of the floorboards hadn’t been completely rotted through.

Dean's foot went through it and suddenly he was down; there was a sick snapping noise that Dean was pretty sure was his left tibia snapping in half, but just as suddenly as he'd fallen Castiel was *there*, and there was no pain.

"Dean," Cas said, concern on his face. Dean's leg had snapped, he'd *felt* it, but Cas had gotten to it before he could even really suss out the situation, so here he was, a leg that should be shattered, whole, sitting on his ass with his ankle halfway through the flooring of his not-a-bedroom.

"Man, if there is *one* thing I really dig about being married to an angel," Dean muttered, reaching down to tug at the rotted wood so he could pull his leg out. After a few seconds, Castiel helped, a little overenthusiastically, which meant that within a few seconds of *that* there was a kind of huge hole in the floor.

"Huh," Dean said, frowning. He caught sight of something wedged between support beams at the very edge of the hole. "Hey, Cas, there's...*something* down here. Looks like leather?"

Cas leaned over him. "Be careful, there is a rather large nest of brown recluse spiders making its home in between the floors."

With a hastily-stifled exclamation, Dean yanked his leg out of the hole, shaking it to discharge any illusory spiders. *Not* that Dean was afraid of spiders or anything.

With a complete disregard for the spiders, Cas reached into the hole and unerringly plucked the thing out of its hidey-hole. It was covered in dust and spider webs, but thankfully *no* spiders.

Dean stared at it as Cas dusted it off. It was familiar. *Definitely* familiar, considering how many times he'd pried it out of Castiel's hands so they could have sex.

"You have got to be fucking *kidding* me," he said.



Dean wanted to hide the book – for that's what it was, Gabriel's book – in the trunk of the Impala, because it was one of the safest mobile places on the planet (thanks in part to Castiel), but the angel was having none of that.

"I will return momentarily," he said, instead, and fluttered off, leaving Dean angry and alone in the car.

He drove the rest of the way to the motel they were staying at, barely managing to keep from executing any minor property damage along the way. It was the first

time Cas had fluttered off like that since they'd come back, and there was a small part of him panicking, because what if Cas didn't come back?

But Cas *always* came back. Dean forced himself to retain some semblance of calm until he'd at least closed the motel room door behind him.

If he broke a few things after that, well, it was just gonna be him and Cas who knew about it.

It was coming up on midnight when Castiel – finally – showed back up, looking annoyed and worse for wear, but not, thankfully, injured. Dean was working himself up into a shouting match of epic proportions when Cas finally spoke.

"The book is where it's supposed to be," he said, shortly. "Gabriel, however, I could find nowhere."

That brought Dean up short, momentarily derailing him. "You *looked* for him?"

Cas inclined his head. "Naturally. I want to know why he left the book there, in that house. He had to know we were going to come there at some point. I also want to know what he's playing at, leaving *that* much knowledge on the Earthly plane when he confiscated Enoch's tablets."

Which, he had a point, but –

Dean barely refrained from crossing his arms. "So

where's the book?"

"In Heaven," Cas said. He pointedly did *not* act like he thought Dean was stupid, but it was fairly obvious that he didn't understand why he was being asked this question.

"So you went to Heaven. For several hours. When just a few hours ago there were demons trying to kill us and a rogue angel took over Hell."

"Yes?" Cas wasn't stupid – he'd figured out that he'd done something wrong, but he didn't quite understand what it was.

"You didn't think maybe I'd have liked to know that?" Dean said, and fuck it, he gave in and crossed his arms.

That gave Cas pause. Then it clicked. "You were worried."

"Fuck yes, I was worried!" Dean exclaimed. His arms came back down to his sides, fists clenched.

"Remember what happened last time you just disappeared on me?" He tried, and failed, to *not* think about those first few minutes in Purgatory. They flashed across his mind for probably the thousandth time that night, and if Castiel's expression was anything to go by, he wasn't the only one reliving the moment.

Cas closed his eyes before opening them again.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think," he said, voice quiet. "It was of

the utmost importance that Meg not be aware that the book was on Earth.”

“I thought she was your friend,” Dean pointed out, but Cas had put his hands on Dean’s upper arms and just that, the simple contact between the two of them, was doing *wonders* for Dean’s frayed nerves.

“She is,” Cas agreed. “I care for her a great deal, but that doesn’t mean I will *ever* underestimate her.”

Dean snorted his agreement. Then he let out a breath, explosively, and with it the stress he’d been carrying around since Cas had gone poof.

The angel relaxed incrementally - it was barely-noticeable to most people, but Dean could recognize it. He let his head drop, touching his forehead to Castiel’s.

“Scared the hell out of me, man,” he said.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Cas said. He brought his hands up, cupping Dean’s jaw on either side. “I should have mentioned where I was going.”

“Just don’t do it again, jeez,” Dean said. Cas smirked, small in the dimness of the room, and then backed Dean into the wall.

“We were interrupted, if I recall correctly,” Cas pointed out, and Dean let out a bark of laughter.

His mumbling about angelic diversions and stamina was interrupted by a borderline-harsh kiss; Cas very

rarely pulled out all the stops like this, but he was being almost domineering now, and yeah, that was *definitely* a turn-on.

Before he could give the idea a lot of thought, Dean was responding enthusiastically, opening his lips and snaking his own hands up Cas' arms as he was pressed back into the wall and very nearly lifted off his feet. Cas let up with the pressure, instead running one of his hands through Dean's hair, tugging lightly and guiding his neck forward.

This was remarkably similar to how Cas had kissed Meg that one time, and Dean had just had the idea when it was stolen from him by Cas very literally ripping his shirt off him.

"Seriously?" he asked. Cas smirked back, but there was a question in his eyes, and Dean answered it by leaning forward and continuing their kiss.

It wouldn't be exact, of course, but if Cas wanted to earn Dean's forgiveness by acting out his Christmas fantasies with him, well – Dean wasn't going to complain.



The next morning came way the hell too early, considering how late Cas had kept Dean up the night before. He almost felt hung over, except the ache in his ass had nothing to do with *alcohol*.

“I can fix that,” Cas mumbled from next to him. The angel didn’t specifically sleep, but most nights he sort of meditated next to Dean in their bed, so it sort of worked out to the same thing in the end – including a rumpled Cas waiting for him every morning, which he couldn’t complain about.

It took a few moments, but eventually Dean realized the reason he was having problems hearing Cas was because Sam was knocking at the door to the motel room, not because he was half-buried in his blankets.

“Come on, guys, it’s almost noon. Time to check out,” he was saying. “*Please* tell me you’re decent.”

A second later and Dean found himself laying, fully clothed, on top of the now-made bed. Like magic.

Miraculous, even.

He grinned, stretching back on the bed and putting his hands behind his head. He even crossed his legs, ignoring the slight, stretchy pain that came with that.

“The fringe benefits of being married to an angel,” he said.

There was a gentle touch to his forehead, and the

pain disappeared.

“Indeed,” Cas said, leaning over to give him a kiss. That was another bonus about Cas being all angelified again: no morning breath.

“I’m coming in,” Sam warned them. The door opened and hey, maybe Dean and Cas weren’t done with their good morning kiss yet, but it was a sight better than if Sam - and wow, Vicky too, if Dean could judge the footsteps right – had come in about four minutes earlier.

“*Jesus*, you two,” Sam complained.

There was an undignified, feminine snort. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before,” Vicky pointed out. She sat at the foot of the bed anyway, her arms crossed, until the two of them separated.

Dean grinned at Cas, fully aware that he looked like a complete dope, before turning toward Vicky and Sam.

Sam was wearing an expression that trod the line between bitchface and content, and whoa, *that* was a weird look. Dean raised his eyebrow.

“So what’s with the welcoming committee?”

“Ah,” Sam said, nodding at Vicky.

“So, here’s the thing,” she said, a slightly evil glint in her eye. “Right before your buddy Gabriel poofed us out to Never-Neverland, I was set to sort of graduate in

Missouri's training program."

"Missouri has a training program?" This was news to Dean. Also, unless he missed his mark, Sam's sort-of girlfriend had just made a Metallica reference, which was fine by him.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Most psychics do, when they agree to take apprentices on," he answered.

Castiel sat up in bed, which forced Dean to do the same. "I take it," the angel said, "that this portion involves journeys of some sort."

"That's why they call the next level journeyman," Vicky said, agreeably. "Obviously, it's not entirely safe for psychics to wander around on their own, which is why she was holding back on the promotion, so to speak."

Dean got with the program. "So you're asking us to – what, be your bodyguards? That's not really in the job description."

Vicky shook her head. "Man, you were there with me in dreamworld. It's not like I don't know how to protect myself. It's just, some of the lore is beyond me. I can protect myself from other humans - hell, even other hunters. It's just, demons and vampires? That wasn't the sort of shit I signed up for." She eyed Dean. "Word is, you wanna learn the lore, you contact the Winchester

brothers.”

“You want to learn how to *hunt*?” Dean said, incredulous.

“I want to learn how to *protect myself*,” Vicky corrected. Her eyes darted over toward Sam. “If I can do it with people I know and trust, even better.”

“She wants to come with us,” Sam said, like Dean hadn’t figured that part out already. “Missouri thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Oh, Missouri *does*, does she?” Dean said, scowling.

Vicky looked very much like she was going to say something, but Cas interrupted.

“I think,” he said, maybe a bit louder than he had to, and yeah, he had Dean’s attention now, “that we should consider this honestly. We owe Victoria quite a debt, Dean.”

Like Dean could ever forget that. He closed his eyes briefly, remembering those fear-soaked moments, when he thought Cas was dying behind him; surrounded by football players, and the moment of hope Vicky joining the fray had brought.

He exhaled, realizing that everyone in the room was waiting for *him*. His verdict. Because they’d already decided. Because Vicky, in those nine months, had

become *family*.

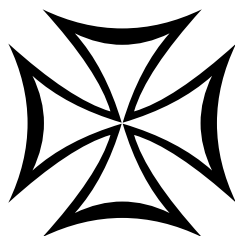
“Alright,” he breathed. “Alright, yeah, we can try it out for a few weeks, at least.” He schooled his expression into something stern. “But you gotta pull your own weight; we deal with some pretty heavy hitters, these days.”

“I’ve heard,” Vicky said, her voice sardonic. “You know, considering you guys just took on the *King of Hell* on my front lawn.”

Dean laughed; Vicky, as usual, struck exactly the right tone with him, and he could feel the weight in his chest easing. “That’s *nothing*,” he said, sliding to the edge of the bed and slapping his hands together. He grinned and looked over at Vicky. “Did Sam tell you about the Apocalypse?”

By the look on her face, Sam had *not*.

His grin grew wider as he stood up and began packing. “Let’s get our shit on the road, guys, because we *definitely* don’t have enough time for this story before check-out.”



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's absolutely ridiculous that I'm doing this, because this is fanfiction and not a book, but there's a *lot* that needs to be said. While I was the writer, an *awful* lot of people helped me get this done. This is pure indulgence on my part, so feel free to skip this; I just...*desperately* needed to get it out.

So. The story is this:

For National Novel Writing Month 2012, I decided to write a Dean/Cas fanfic. I began shortly before the first (cheater Tasha is a cheater), and I wrote over 100k – *twice* the required amount to “win” NaNoWriMo. Almost the entirety of this fic – save the first and last 5k words – were written in November of 2012.

Flash forward eight months, and it's crunch time for the Dean/Cas Big Bang, which I'd signed up for against my better judgment (y'all have no idea how *terrified* I am that you're reading this. I like my relative anonymity within the SPN fandom, and the DCBB gets an awful lot

of attention every year). I'd been trying to tinker with writing out my NASCAR!Verse AU for the DCBB but the words wouldn't come, and a few days before my drafts were due I realized I had a perfectly fine longfic I could use instead – I just needed to *finish* it.

So I did. I sat down and I pounded out the last 5k that was needed to finish it and it was *done*, and it was *decent*, and I *liked* it.

It's been a year since I began writing this fic, and I've only finally come to acknowledge that I kind of like it? I'm my own worst critic, which many artists and writers can say about themselves as well, but the journey from start to finish sort of reaffirmed my own place as a writer. As Dean went on his journey of self-worth, so did I. It was *awesome*.

I'm grateful for the SPN fandom, for NaNoWriMo, for the DCBB, because it made me realize I'm not half-bad and that I do decent work. You guys have been amazing to me, and because of that, I give this to you – a fic that I hope you'll enjoy



DEAN

and some really awesome art to go with it.

There are some specific people I need to thank, some of whom may never read this, but still – they deserve acknowledgment for the help they gave me along the way. This isn't a novel, but for me it may as well be, and a novel is never written exclusively by one person.

First, my best friend Keri, who allowed me to bounce ideas off of her and who let me read sections aloud to her at Costco or when we went out for coffee, and who kept telling me it was good, *keep going*, she wanted to know how it ended. It meant so freaking much to have a cheerleader during the writing process, and this wouldn't exist without her.

Second, Lore, the most amazing beta-reader anyone could ever ask for. I met Lore *because* of Best Years, and he's been on the journey with me for almost as long as Keri has. He's told me when something is crap, and he's stayed online to all hours of the night helping me fix a single turn of phrase that sucked. When I was losing it on DCBB artist claims day, because no one had claimed me yet, Lore (who's an amazing artist himself) told me that if no one claimed me he'd draw art regardless because there were scenes *he* wanted to see come to life. That's probably the biggest compliment

I've ever received, and it made me decide not to withdraw from DCBB.

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Fourth, Lis, who did a great job of thread-gathering, beta-reading, and alpha-reading for me. Honey, you gave me so much confidence about this story, when I used to *hate* it. You have absolutely no idea what a difference you made, but oh man, you *did*.



Fifth, Kieran, who stepped in with Lis and helped do a final beta-read so that this could be all pretty for you guys, and who pronounced himself in love with my writing throughout the entire process. Kier's

been a huge boost to my self-esteem too, and there's

no way I'd have had the confidence to even sign up if it weren't for him.

Sixth, my online group of friends, Team Peen Please (don't ask) – Kieran, Alison, Lis, Lore, Jess, Kari, Keri, Chris, Arty, Mik, Sarah, and Amber. Collectively, you guys have pulled me out of some rough spots and I don't think I'd be here today to post this. You guys are amazing and I am blessed to know you. This story is for you guys.

Lastly, my husband, Kenny, who willingly let me babble about this story even though he doesn't actually care about Dean and Castiel at all; who let me marathon SPN for days on end to look up stupid little facts that didn't actually make much of a difference in the long run; who patiently sat with me while I analyzed scenes and questioned male anatomy for gay sex even though he's about as straight as they come. He will probably never, *ever* see this, but his refusal to mock me for my fandom activities gave me the confidence to start publishing the shit, so it's...essentially his fault that this even exists. You should all thank him. Or curse him, whichever inclination you have.

I'm nervous about putting this out, because I put a lot into this story without realizing it, but I hope you guys enjoy it.

CREDITS

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