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Law of Occam's Razor

by [deans1911](#)

Summary

Dean and Cas have been best friends for longer than Sam can really remember, and they've always been weird. This is a whole new level of 'freak', though--even for them.

Notes

This is weird 'verse. Just saying. It skips around chronologically, because I'm writing bits and pieces of it as I get ideas. It's meant to be read out of order, though--scout's honor. The chapter titles are the dates of their contents.

Thanks once again to Chrissy for soldiering through this whole creative process (read, 'me whining and brooding over plot from inside a fortress of blankets'). You're the greatest.

The Law of Occam's razor, simply put, states that the least complicated solution is usually the right one.

August 2012

In a manner of speaking, he should have seen this coming a mile away. Then again, Sam's never really been the best at stopping his own forward momentum long enough to analyze his surroundings for their most logical conclusions. In a way, he supposes that his lack of foresight in some instances is just an annoying biproduct of his own intelligence.

But Missouri'd slap him upside the head for his lack of modesty, so Sam decides that maybe he just needs to be more observant.

At any rate, his brother is definitely acting weird. Now, Dean's not exactly normal by any stretch of the imagination on any given day, but sometimes he manages to surpass even Dean Winchester standards and swan dive spectacularly into the realm of 'what the fuck is wrong with you?'

Sam decides that approaching this situation with tact and discretion is not the best course of action. So he walks into Dean's appallingly unclean dorm room and finds his brother wrapped around his best friend like an octopus and both of them apparently equally stark naked under Dean's questionably stained sheets. At first Sam is trying to reconcile the Castiel he knows—neurotically organized, honest to the point of awkwardness, terminally nerdy—with the unconscious guy trapped unresisting in the cage of Dean's limbs. When he fails at that, Sam then mulls over his idiot brother—notorious womanizer, general creep, inventor of brilliantly awful plans and loyal to a fault that rivals the San Andreas. Dean's wrapped so far around his friend that Sam can't figure out whose slightly-tanned limbs belong to whom, or how the older Winchester is even breathing correctly with his face mashed into the side of Castiel's throat like that.

Now, for the record, Dean and Castiel have always been fucking freaks. Joined at the hip since grade school and completely inseparable for the last fourteen years, Sam almost sees them as two halves of the same person. For all intents and purposes he grew up with two older brothers looking out for him. Castiel was the responsible one, the morally upright and soft-spoken kid who supported Sam's love of all things academic. Dean was the brash, loud-mouthed one, the guy you went to when you needed to learn to pitch or fix your car. Castiel had taught Sam to value his education and embrace his natural intelligence. Dean had taught Sam to stand up for himself every time—and the other kids, too—and that sometimes you had to throw caution to the wind and take risks. They had both taught him to be fiercely and doggedly loyal, to stand by your family no matter what.

Sam likes to think that they did a damned good job of compensating for a dead mother, an absent father, and Uncle Bobby, who drinks enough to fill a bathtub every day but loves them like his own sons. But that's beside the point.

Dean and Cas—Dean'n'Cas, in Sam's head—have always been fucking freaks. Sam's lost count of the number of almost-arrests, school suspensions, and fistfights in which those two have been active participants and sometimes instigators over the last decade and a half. If one of them was sitting outside the principal's office waiting to be chewed out, the other one was in the chair right beside him. If one of them was getting hauled down to the local sheriff's office, the other was handcuffed in the car right behind him. Around their fifteenth birthday, John Winchester had finally had enough and stopped showing up to retrieve them from the station, or even bother responding to angry letters from teachers and school administrators. Bobby had rolled his eyes and set them to work fixing his junkers in the salvage yard. Dean was a natural mechanic. Castiel accidentally set the shop on fire one sweltering July afternoon and was banished to serve his time organizing Bobby's library.

Really, it was a miracle that either one of them got into college.

Castiel's brilliant. Anyone who manages a conversation with him for longer than five minutes can agree on that. He's just so damned awkward that not many people try. Dean is sharp, too, but he plays it down in order to charm his way into and out of things, like it's a personal challenge to him to get through life with a smile and a well-timed one liner. Sam thinks that's because Dean doesn't really like himself, but Castiel likes Dean enough for the both of them, so that's utter bullshit. No, really. Sam is positive that Castiel Novak thinks the sun shines out of Dean's ass, and nothing will convince him otherwise. It's not that Dean's perfect to anyone, because he's really not, but Castiel has the sort of unwavering faith in Sam's older brother normally only observed in men of the cloth and suicide bombers. It's a little scary sometimes, but Dean seems to take it in stride.

Anyway, that's not the point. Or hell, maybe it is.

See, Dean and Cas have been best friends for a very long time, and in all those years they've never had a disagreement or argument that they couldn't work through. Sometimes it involved violent shouting matches—the first time Sam heard Castiel raise his voice he'd been nine years old and it felt like the skies had opened up and rained down the wrath of God. Sometimes it culminated in a period of strange silence between both boys that could stretch for days—those had always been uncomfortable for Sam because regardless of their differences of opinions, Castiel practically lived with them so he and Dean would just ignore each other until Bobby yelled at them to quit acting like five year old girls. Sometimes their disagreements reached epic proportions and ended in punches being thrown—Sam could count the number of times that had happened on one hand, and every time it had ended with both boys nearly in tears, hugging onto each other shakily and muttering 'I'm sorry' until Sam couldn't watch anymore and left the room. Sam thinks those may have been the most disturbing fights.

Dean and Cas have a system. Nothing's managed to glitch it yet. At least, nothing had been able to throw a wrench in the works until Castiel got his acceptance letter from Stanford last week.

Castiel's really friggin' smart. Sam's covered this. But he's also been around for so long now that none of them can really picture him being halfway across the country, away from family. Apparently Dean can't really fathom the idea either, so when he'd come across the opened acceptance package shoved into the bottom of a stack of magazines and beaten-to-hell paperbacks in the corner of their shared dorm room, shit had hit the fan in a pretty serious way. That Dean came across the damned thing on the one day he'd gotten a bug up his ass and decided to clean the place wasn't lost on Sam, but the situation had gotten so out of hand so quickly that Sam doesn't find any of this very funny.

There had been a shouting match. Sam knew this because everyone on their hall had heard Castiel tell his roommate that he was being completely unreasonable, and had subsequently heard Dean put his fist through the wall. Sam's brother isn't prone to random acts of violence often, but they all know Dean well enough to guess that it was either the poor sheet rock or Castiel's jaw. The next afternoon one of Sam's classmates—who happened to live two doors down from Dean and Cas—had asked him why his brother was fighting with his boyfriend. That should have been the first clue. Thing is, Sam's been fielding and deflecting so many questions about the odd nature of Dean and Cas's friendship that he's begun dismissing any implications of homosexuality by rote.

The display his family members are making now, hopelessly tangled together and oblivious, is making Sam rethink that decision. What he can't figure out—and possibly needs to bleach his brain for even considering—is whether they hashed things out and passed out like overfed puppies, the way they did when they were teenagers, or if they got angry and fucked.

Sam needs to pinch the bridge of his nose and breathe slowly through the nausea that overwhelms him. Awesome. Sam Winchester is neither ignorant nor homophobic, but there are some things about his disgustingly unkempt, man whore brother to which he doesn't need to be privy.

Screwing his surrogate brother is at the top of that list.

More important than the pathetic sex lives of Dean and Cas though, Sam is still wondering whether or not Castiel will leave for California. Before coming to KU, Sam had entertained similar thoughts of prestigious Ivy League schools and getting the hell out of Kansas. He'd even mentioned it casually at dinner one night. Eating had ground to a trainwreck halt, Bobby had swiftly excused himself from his own dinner table, and Dean had dropped his glass. The shattering noise had haunted Sam's thoughts for days afterwards. He'd applied to KU, quickly received an acceptance, and had run the half mile from Bobby's mailbox to the front porch to show Dean. Things had gone back to normal after that.

Sam thinks part of the reason Dean had lashed out so violently to Castiel's stunt with Stanford is that he had hidden it. Honesty was a big thing with the Winchesters, and any kind of duplicity was never taken well, especially not with Dean. Sam's pretty sure that Castiel's complete and utter inability to lie convincingly is one of the reasons he and Dean are such great friends. That Castiel felt the need to squirrel that acceptance letter away in the first place spoke volumes to the idea that he knew Dean would flip his shit.

But why would Cas want to leave in the first place? That's the part that Sam couldn't—can't—wrap his head around. Castiel's never seemed to care much for flashy titles or name recognition. From what Sam knew, he and Dean had been planning to graduate with joint degrees in Engineering and Physics and apply to KU's grad program together. It was their last year as undergraduates. They'd been working towards the same goal since high school. So what the hell had changed?

And that was the crux of the problem, wasn't it? Sam realizes that he doesn't know his brothers quite as well as he thought he did, not if something this monumental can blindside him. Sam's not really sure if he's referring to the Stanford fiasco or the pathetic sight currently playing out on Dean's bed, but he thinks the two may be part and parcel of the bigger picture. See, Sam's pretty smart too, and he can solve problems by working backwards when moving forward through the equations doesn't work the first time.

Assuming that Dean and Cas engaged in some really unmanly cuddling is the solution, then Sam needs to set up an equation. Dean plus Cas times some unknown quantity x is equal to gay cuddling. Great. Time to sort out the rainbow-colored variables.

Castiel is a known. He's also relatively unchanged from when Sam first met him, though larger now and with a more extensive vocabulary, but Sam is comfortable labeling him a constant. Fine.

Dean is a little more difficult. He's dependable and oftentimes predictable, but he's not a constant, not like Cas. Sam's going with dependent variable, here. The next logical conclusion is that because Dean is the game-changer on the board, then whatever this phantom quantity x may be is directly related to him. So what the hell could have prompted Dean to instigate either completely chick-flick snuggling or athletic enough gay sex that it knocked them both out to the point of sleeping through all of their morning classes on a Thursday?

Ugh. The things he does for these two.

Sam devotes every available cell in his ridiculous brain to mulling over that particular question. If he can define x then he can solve the equation, and then the world will right itself, Dean and Cas will revert back to their ridiculous, co-dependent selves, and Bobby will stop calling him every hour for updates on the situation. Sam's life should be a sitcom. But not one of those cheesy family shows with a laugh track. Those are stupid, and no one's life is ever that funny. He's trying to decide if Bobby would be better depicted on screen as Sean Connery or Sting when he notices it.

Dean shifts in his sleep and the sheet rides down around his thighs. Sam's never been so grateful to see the elastic band of his brother's briefs in his life, but that's not what catches his attention. It's the possessive way Dean's clutching onto the sharp ridge of Castiel's hipbone. Sam frowns in thought, and then his keen hazel eyes are mapping out his brother like he's superimposed a Cartesian coordinate grid on them in his mind.

One of Castiel's hands is threaded through Dean's short hair at the base of his skull. Odd.

Dean's got his legs threaded through Cas's like he's trying to pin him and keep him there. Creepy.

Castiel's entire body is curved subtly towards and into Dean's. Weird.

So what's it all mean? It has to mean something. Sam's world is too well structured and logical for this to not mean anything. He starts with the basics. Dean and Cas are best friends. Dean and Cas are obviously comfortable sleeping sprawled across each other like a married couple. Dean freaked the fuck out when he thought Cas was leaving. Okay, larger picture stuff? Besides Sam and a handful of other people, Dean is Cas's only real friend. He's generally a loner and probably wouldn't know what to do with himself in Palo Alto, California. As friendly and charming as Dean can be, he's never been in a committed relationship in his life. In fact, completely overlooking his rampant promiscuity since puberty struck, Cas is his longest relationship to date.

Cas is his longest relationship to date.

Jesus Christ, Sam's brother is gay for his other brother. Sam drops into Dean's desk chair incredulously. He has identified the unknown variable. Sam now can't unsee the unknown variable. And knowing these two idiots, they probably haven't even figured it out yet! Castiel's the single most conversationally inept person Sam's ever met, and Dean's got the emotional reasoning capacity of a tablespoon.

Dear God, they're perfect for each other. Sam should have seen this years ago. Now he's wasted the last twenty minutes of his life puzzling through his brothers' big gay crisis for them, and they have no idea. They aren't even awake to see the fruits of his mental labors, the ungrateful bastards. Well, Sam's just going to have to inform them. He'll be damned if he's going to watch Dean sulk or Cas brood over this crap anymore. He imagines it's what it would have been like to watch his parents fight—traumatic and uncomfortable. No more. Not on Sam's watch. He's the greatest little brother in the history of Kansas, and he's going to fix this shit before it gets any more out of hand, before Castiel can leave and Dean can lose his mind over it.

With purpose, Sam stands up, crosses the distance to the bed, and yanks the sheet from over both men. He then pivots and opens the blinds forcefully. Cas's blue eyes pop open almost comically before he lifts a hand to shield them from the vengeful afternoon sunlight pouring through the window. Dean grunts unhappily and attempts to bury his face more completely in Cas's neck.

Fucking pathetic.

"Hello, Sam." Castiel's rough and dejected baritone is directed at the ceiling.

Dean makes an unseemly and surprised yelping noise before wrenching around on the bed to face his brother. "Sammy, what the fuck?"

Sam scowls at him. It's a bitchface, but whatever. He's on a mission, here. "You two are my brothers, and I love you, but you're both retarded." They both sit up abruptly at that, Dean hastily scrubbing drool from the corner of his mouth with a fist, Cas's messy hair sticking up defiantly in random places. Dean looks like he's about to go the hell off, but Cas could be taking notes for how intently he's watching Sam right now. "Cas, you can't go to Stanford unless you take Dean

with you. Seriously. He'll cry like a fucking girl and drown himself in whiskey, I'd stake the Impala on it." Cas blinks owlishly but deigns not to comment. "Dean, you need to pull your head out of your ass and come to grips with reality. You sleep around to compensate for some ridiculous perceived threat to your masculinity because you're closer to Cas than you think you should be. You don't stay with any of these girls because they aren't Cas. You're in love with him, Dean. Probably have been for years. Own it."

Dean's face is an interesting shade of fire engine red. Cas looks shell-shocked, but he's throwing nervous glances at Dean to gauge his reaction. Sam's work here is done. "It's two in the afternoon," he says exasperatedly as he heads for the door. "Put some damned pants on." Sam lets the door slam behind him and stalks off down the hallway. He'll call Bobby in a bit and give the all-clear. Poor guy's been burning up all of Sam's minutes all because Dean and Cas are idiots. Story of Sam's life. He wouldn't trade it for anything in the world, though.

Sam huffs a laugh as he shoulders through the dorm building's main entrance and into the oppressive Kansas summer heat. He should have seen this coming. It should have been obvious for years. Every girl Dean's ever slept with has had dark hair or blue eyes.

September 2005

Chapter Summary

They drive you up the walls and fight over stupid shit and break your fuckin' heart, but they're still family.

At first, Dean thinks Cas has a Constantine fetish. It was a shitty movie, even if the comic books were okay, but he makes a few references over the next few days and Cas just gives him that 'I'm an adopted orphan from a third world shithole and don't understand your ridiculous American culture' look. Dean hates that look.

The second week after they bury Cas's dad dawns with a conspicuous lack of tears and more of that damned trenchcoat. Sam had found it in a box in Mr. Novak's room after the funeral, and Cas had snagged it before it ended up on the curb with the rest of his dad's discarded possessions: boxes of religious pamphlets, hundreds of books written in Latin and other languages Dean can't identify, an entire room filled with rosaries and crucifixes. Cas just shrugs at their incredulous expressions and soldiers on sorting through piles of stolen motel bibles.

Dean doesn't think he'll ever understand the Novak family dynamic—let alone what would possess a man to name his only son James Ulysses Grant Castiel Novak—but now there's really nothing left to understand. Cas's mom died when he was three; he doesn't remember her. Mr. Novak worked as a clerical secretary for the town law firm, but he hoarded bits and pieces of religious lore like he was preparing for the motherfucking apocalypse.

Bobby smacks Dean in the head and says they have no right to judge Cas's father, mostly due to John Winchester's questionably decent parenting skills. Dean's dad loves his sons fiercely, but he's spent the last eleven years away from Kansas and on the trail of the guy that murdered their mom. If anything, Bobby's raised them. Looks like he'll be raising Cas now, too. Dean thinks they can all get behind that whole-heartedly. Bobby just gets in his beat up old Ford truck and drives down to the courthouse to file the paperwork. Cas has no surviving relatives. No one's going to contest Bobby's claim, and Dean thinks that's just fucking sad.

It isn't until three weeks after the funeral, the day before Cas's fifteenth birthday, that Dean works up the nerve to ask about the trenchcoat. His best friend looks uncharacteristically small and slight under the heavy beige canvas of the damned thing, and that makes Dean uncomfortable for some crazy reason. He's not gonna think too hard on that, though. Never ends well. "Hey, Constantine," he offers a weak smile and sits down on the stairs next to Cas, who's staring at the faded wallpaper of Bobby's den like it holds the coordinates to the Ark of the Covenant. "What's with the coat?"

Cas's brilliant blue eyes drift reluctantly away from the wall and fix on Dean with the sort of intensity he normally reserves for over-enthusiastic episodes of Jeopardy and... well, staring freakishly at Dean. "It was my father's," he says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world, and Dean gets that. He's been wearing John's old leather jacket for years now, even when it was too big and his hands barely reached through the sleeves. It's like a less girly security blanket. Fine. But even Dean doesn't wear his every day, regardless of weather or occasion or time of day. He knows damned well that Cas even sleeps in that trenchcoat, has since they brought him back to Bobby's and cleared out half of Dean's room for him.

Dean slides an arm across Cas's thin shoulders and sighs. Sam's always been the one to give the inspirational pep talks, knows what to say in any situation. Dean doesn't use words nearly as much as he uses his hands, so pulling Cas roughly against his side and holding him there seems like it might be enough. Cas doesn't protest; he never does. He just lets his head fall against the side of Dean's, makes a sad little noise in the back of his throat. They sit there for what feels like hours, not speaking, not thinking, just breathing and being.

When Cas does finally say something, his voice is low and hoarse and painful. "I think I might mourn the concept of him more than I'll ever really miss him as a parent." Dean grunts an acknowledgement but doesn't reply because what the hell do you even say to something like that? Mr. Novak wasn't around enough for his own kid to get attached to him. From what little Dean knows, when the man was home he spent all of his spare time talking to God and ignoring the quiet, brilliant young man upstairs. Dean certainly won't miss Mr. Novak.

Cas won't really miss him, either, and that breaks something in Dean's chest, because Cas deserves better like Sammy deserves better from their dads. Dean doesn't need a dad; he's got Bobby and his own common sense. Dean practically is Sammy's dad. But they shouldn't all have to grow up before their times, as Missouri puts it, or lose out on their childhoods because of their parents' mistakes.

Dean loves his dad, loves him with a reckless loyalty that makes Bobby shake his head sometimes, but he knows damned well that John isn't cut out to be a parent. Not without Mary. He thinks maybe losing his wife was what broke Mr. Novak, too.

"Family don't end with blood," Dean mutters quietly into Cas's dark hair. It's something Bobby's said for years, as a sort of band-aid and catchall remedy to years of John's truancy, a lifetime of Mary's absence. Cas nods silently and leans harder into Dean's side.

They burn the trenchcoat the next day, along with Dean's dad's leather jacket, in a rusted out oil drum behind the car crusher in Bobby's salvage yard. Cas recites a Latin prayer he memorized during mandatory Sunday school classes as a child. Sammy reads a poem by some guy named Frost that Dean thinks is maybe okay for poetry. Dean brings Zeppelin II and a boombox he rebuilt because that's about as poetic as he can get. Bobby drains half a bottle of hooch into the fire before taking a pained swallow and passing it around their motley group.

When the sun recedes on the Dakota horizon and the flames in the barrel have choked themselves out, Sammy hugs Cas and Dean like the girl he is and goes inside. Bobby retreats indoors from the cool night air eventually, and Dean watches Cas watch the ashes at the bottom of the barrel until he feels compelled to speak. "It's okay to be mad," Dean admits grudgingly. "I'm mad at my dad a lot. Every time he misses a baseball game or Sam's birthday or an awards ceremony. Sometimes I think I might hate him." Dean smiles and it's all sharp edges and no humor. "Sometimes I think we'd be better off without him. But he's still my dad, Cas. I'm always gonna love him."

Cas nods like he always does. He butts his shoulder into Dean's and stays there. "But you don't have to like him," he murmurs, so quietly Dean almost doesn't catch it.

Green eyes survey Cas in the dim of the yard, and Dean nods, too. "No, you don't have to like 'em, Cas. But you'll always love 'em. They drive you up the walls and fight over stupid shit and break your fuckin' heart, but they're still family. You can't pick what you're born into, but..." Dean trails off and tilts his head back to stare up at the night sky. He wonders if John ever takes the time out in his obsessive search for Mary's killer to enjoy things like stars and sunsets anymore. Dean decides that he never wants to end up like that, and he'll keep Sammy and Cas from ending up like that, too. "Friends are the family you make."

June 2003

Chapter Summary

Bobby loves the kid like his own, but sometimes he's convinced that the older Winchester boy is a few fries short of a combo meal.

Dean is bow-legged. Bobby knows this is a fact like he knows that fire is hot and Earth is a planet. The boy's thighs are bent and he walks a little funny. He's been self-conscious about it since he reached an age where other kids noticed it, but it's not something that's open to debate or postulating. It just is.

Castiel is not a fighter. He's a quiet, polite, unassuming kid who's a little too damned smart for his own good some of the time and stubborn as a bull all of the time. He's calm and dependable and kind, and he's not the violent type. That's also a fact.

Bobby finds himself rapidly reevaluating his facts of life one Saturday afternoon around dusk, when Dean and Cas come shuffling up the driveway covered in red dust and grass stains, and not all of it's from baseball. There's blood down the front of Cas's white uniform shirt, smears of it in the form of handprints fisted into the blue 'Angels' logo sewn into the material, and he's favoring his right leg. Bobby abandons his beer, steps over the hound on the porch, and walks out to meet them.

At first glance Bobby thinks that Cas got his ass kicked, again. Much as he hates it, that sort of thing happens from time to time. It's a small town full of small-minded people, and the boy has a staring problem. Bobby doesn't mind it, and neither do Sam or Dean, but middle school is a harrowing place and Cas doesn't really fit in anywhere but Singer Salvage. Normally Dean intimidates the few idjit kids that even bother picking on his best friend, but they aren't conjoined and sometimes Cas gets caught alone.

This time is different, and Bobby gets that as soon as he sees Cas's hands shaking, his knuckles bruised and bloodied up, and if the kid looks this worked-over then Bobby'd hate to see what the other poor bastard looks like. "What the hell happened?" He addresses Dean, because Cas don't look like he's real keen on speaking at the moment. He won't even look Bobby in the eye, and ain't that something?

"Fight," Dean shrugs off-handedly.

Bobby loves the kid like his own, but sometimes he's convinced that the older Winchester boy is a few fries short of a combo meal. "Thanks. I figured that part out myself, genius." Dean makes a bitch face that would put Sam to shame. "Those kids picking on him, again?"

Cas snorts rudely. Dean glances at Cas and chews his lower lip for a minute before answering. "No. They were fuckin' with me."

"Watch your damned mouth," Bobby says it automatically, but Dean's been cussing—and teaching his brother to cuss—since he could wield a shotgun. Still, though. "Why were they screwin' with you?"

Dean's bottle-green eyes drop to the dirt. Cas rolls his eyes and ducks out from under Dean's arm,

moving towards the house. "They were making fun of Dean's legs." He offers it up like it's a perfectly valid and logical reason to come home covered in blood—his and someone else's, apparently—and disappears into the house. The back of his uniform is a riot of clay, grass, and dirt stains. He'd better scrub that damned shirt. Bobby's not made of money, and it's not like he's getting child support for raising the Winchester boys, let alone a Novak. Cas ain't his, not technically, but the kid avoids his own house like Lucifer himself lives there, so Bobby claims him anyway. Ain't seen Cas's old man in years, and from what little he knows of the guy that's probably a good thing.

The mechanic stands outside of his house with his oldest stray and watches him shift his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot, still staring at the ground. "Did he throw the first punch?" Bobby asks. He's still having a hard time accepting that Castiel—quiet, zen, polite Castiel—started a full on brawl.

"Yeah. Brent threw a ball at me, said he heard only catchers had legs like mine. David asked why, and Jeff started laughing and said it's so they can take it up the ass easier." Bobby's eyebrows disappear under the brim of his trucker cap. Middle schoolers are goddamned vicious. He doesn't even bother correcting Dean's language. "Cas heard him, threw his glove down, and socked Jeff right in the mouth. Then he kicked Brent in the jewels. They started fighting, coach broke it up, and he sent us home." He chuckles mirthlessly and shakes his head. "Tell you what, man. Don't piss off the nerd Angel."

Dean shoves his hands into his pockets and tips his baseball cap back on his head, fidgeting. He's waiting for Bobby to pass a verdict on the situation, approve or disapprove of Cas's behavior, and Bobby isn't really sure what to think. On the one hand, he's taught these boys not to provoke fights with their peers. Violence ain't the way to solve petty arguments. On the other hand, he's pretty sure that if he'd heard that little bastard insult Dean like that he'd have hit him, too.

Bobby doesn't have to make decisions like this often. He thinks that situations like this should come up more frequently than they do, what with practically three boys living under his roof, but they're relatively well-behaved. Relatively. Dean and Cas watch out for Sam and each other, and while Dean's idjit ass gets up to all sorts of hijinx and stupid trouble in town, Cas is always there to act as accomplice or alibi or lookout. They never get into serious trouble, anyway. Castiel Novak may not be a criminal mastermind, but he's a sneaky little shit when he wants to be, and he's got the same kind of misleading charm that Dean does. Difference is that Dean knows how to use it.

Anyway, Bobby doesn't have to do this sort of thing too often, so he needs to handle it right. Problem is that Cas ain't technically Bobby's kid, which means he can't exactly ground him.

Sighing, Bobby claps Dean on the shoulder reassuringly and makes his way into the house. Sam's at the kitchen table doing his math homework, and he gives Bobby a gap-toothed grin as he passes. Kid's too damned cute, and Bobby's silently grateful that Sam's little. The small ones just want to watch cartoons and make macaroni pictures. The outdated old fridge in the corner of the kitchen is plastered with them. Dean and Cas are at that awkward age now where they're too old to color, too young to get anyone pregnant, but just the right age to get arrested. Bobby thinks that Dean might end up being the poster child for criminal mischief. He's a good kid, but he gets himself into the most ridiculous situations sometimes. Getting sent home from practice because his best friend feels the need to violently defend his honor is a drop in the bucket. He takes after his dad.

Bobby finds Cas in the mudroom. He's hunched over the sink, scrubbing his shirt with what smells like baking soda, and the foam in the basin is pink. "Dean can fight his own battles, y'know," Bobby says quietly. "You don't have to fight 'em for him. Last time I checked, you

ain't the scrapper of the lot." The line of the boy's shoulders is tense under his sweat-stained tee shirt. He doesn't stop scrubbing, though. Bobby admires his resolve. Stubborn as an ox, that one.

"Maybe I'm not," Cas replies, "But Dean fights enough of my battles." It's quiet, muttered at the sink, and Bobby can't argue. That's true enough. Dean's the first one to break ranks and commence to going postal on anyone who approaches Sam or Cas the wrong way. Bobby's lost track of the number of times Dean's been suspended over the years. He honestly can't fault the kid; Sam and Cas are his family. Dean's always had a protective streak in him.

Seems Cas does, too. His is just showing a little later than Dean's. And if Bobby can't fault Dean for protecting his family, then he sure as hell can't hold that against Cas. Besides, Dean's been fighting to preserve what little family he has left for most of his life. Maybe it's time someone stood up for Dean. It's one hell of a role to fill, but Cas is pig-headed and fiercely loyal and he seems convinced that Dean's the best damned thing since Wonderbread. He's perfect for the job.

Bobby wraps an arm around Cas's wiry shoulders and squeezes. He ignores the way the boy freezes up against him, like he's just not used to anyone showing him affection, because they're working on training that outta him. Between Sam's impulsive need to tug Cas around to ask him about things and Dean's easy, tactile nature they're chipping away at Cas. Eventually he'll be as close to normal as Bobby can hope for. Eventually.

In the meantime, though. "Finish up in here and then get your scrawny ass on the couch," he says gruffly, but the corner of Cas's split lip quirks up at the corner. "You need to put a bag of frozen peas on your eye. School's gonna send Child Protective Services over here, again. I swear you damned boys are gonna be the death of me." Bobby leaves Cas to his uniform and drops into a chair at the kitchen table across from Sam's multiplication tables. Dean pushes away from observing his little brother's homework progress, gives Bobby a grateful smile, and goes to find Cas.

Twenty minutes later Bobby's breaking up a soapy, childish wrestling match in the mudroom in between cooking chili for dinner and quizzing Sam on his weekly spelling words, and these kids might be giving him premature grey hairs, but they're his boys. Bobby'll take the good with the bad.

October 2012

Chapter Summary

There's something stupid hot about the way Cas is staring at Dean's mouth like this whole thing is a fucking religious experience.

It's a simplified resistance circuit diagram, it's done in black and blue ink, and it's situated just to the inside of the subtle vee of Cas's right hipbone, directly above the waist of his briefs. Dean's seen it before, sure, but never like this.

Cas and Sam disappeared for an entire afternoon on Sam's eighteenth birthday, and when they finally deemed it pertinent to carry their sorry asses back home they were both walking funny. Now, Sammy's always walked funny—that's what happens when you're a six and a half foot freakin' giant with girly hair. Cas, though. Cas is a klutz when he first wakes up in the mornings and when he's drunk, but otherwise he's frighteningly aware of himself and his surroundings.

That's one of the reasons that his issues with Dean's personal space are so damned ironic.

Anyway, when they both came traipsing through the front door, Sam made up some stupid excuse about having to finish some homework—On a Saturday, seriously? And who studies on their birthday?—and waddled upstairs. Cas was being quieter than usual, and that immediately got Dean's attention. Shifty Cas was never good. Dean followed him into the kitchen and frowned suspiciously when his best friend visibly winced as he levered himself down into a chair at the table.

That little tell prompted an impromptu check of Cas's person for injuries and several minutes of anxious questioning on Dean's part. After being threatened with forcible stripping right in the middle of Bobby's kitchen, Cas finally relented and lifted the hem of his tee shirt to show Dean the tattoo. The skin around it was red, swollen and irritated, and Dean dragged him into the bathroom to clean it. Sam got startled awake later by his brother, a washcloth, and an angry diatribe on contagious diseases and bloodborne illnesses. It wasn't a good night.

The point here is that yeah, Dean knows Cas has a tattoo, knows what it is and where, but he's never seen it up close. Now, though. Man. Now Dean's looking up the length of Cas's torso to where his friend's propped himself up on his elbows and is watching him with his head tipped to one side in fascination. Now he's wedged between the solid sprawl of Cas's thighs, palms warm against Cas's sides, and Dean can't seem to stop staring at the lines of ink on skin directly beneath him.

They're physics majors. Dean knows what a circuit diagram is, in theory and in application, and he's never really bothered to ask Cas why he chose this of all things to permanently mark onto his body. He supposes it doesn't really matter; Cas is fucking strange on any given day. Dean's still curious, though. But he'll save the third degree for later, when Cas's hands aren't carding through Dean's hair and his ridiculous blue eyes aren't fixed on the point where Dean's lips are mapping the lines of ink down his hip.

Cas smells like cheap bar soap and clean, warm cotton. He shifts slightly under Dean's weight, opening his legs wider and grunting in appreciation when Dean slides his arms under Cas's thighs and pulls him closer by his sharp hips. Fuck, those hips do things to Dean's brain. Dean shoots

Cas a lazy grin and lowers his mouth to the tattoo, again. Sharp, even teeth pull at the skin there, Dean's tongue following in their wake to trace the lines of the diagram, the smooth plane of Cas's stomach. Dean's pulse picks up when Cas's breath hitches and he bumps the underside of Dean's chin with the straining crotch of his jeans.

Hell yeah, Dean can get behind that. There's something stupid hot about the way Cas is staring at Dean's mouth like this whole thing is a fucking religious experience. Dean isn't normally nervous or shy in the bedroom by any stretch of the imagination—he's been screwing around with girls since middle school. This, though. This is different. This is Cas, and they've never done anything like this before. It's all been casual touches and skimming hands, there and gone again before Dean can really get into it, because this is new and different and Dean's terrified of screwing it up.

It's dumb because Cas isn't gonna leave. Dean knows that. He's sure as hell not gonna up and split 'cause Dean can't figure out who's supposed to be on top or how to breathe through his nose long enough to give a decent blowjob. Cas isn't a blushing virgin on his wedding night, here—there were a few girls in high school and the early years of college who tried, and failed, to get the poor guy laid. But Cas isn't a sex expert, either.

Point is, they're both new to this whole 'gay sex' thing, and if Dean's honest with himself it's pretty damned daunting. He's clocked what has to be hours of make out time with Cas by now, slow and warm and lazy in bed, and it's great. It's fucking fantastic. He's even managed to get both their shirts off a few times. But every time things get too heated or too desperate Dean finds himself backing off, slowing down and retreating from Cas's intense focus and roaming hands. Cas hasn't asked about it yet, but he's gonna because patience isn't a virtue that Cas learned as a kid, and Dean's not sure what he's gonna say to justify his own skittish behavior.

Dean loves Cas. There's no doubt in his mind about it. Has for years, now. But Cas didn't realize that he was falling for his best friend until Sammy decided to barge into their room and confess for his older brother, so Cas is still sorting some things out. He's not hesitant or standoffish about the physical nature of their relationship, which quite frankly shocks the living shit outta Dean. If anything Cas seems to be getting a little frustrated that Dean can't seem to get with the program and seal the deal.

The way he's looking at Dean now, like he's the best fucking thing that ever happened to him, makes Dean hesitate. He lifts his head, swallowing hard enough that his throat clicks audibly, and freezes up at the blatant arousal on Cas's face. Dean's natural drive to see this thing through to its logical conclusion falters right along with his grip on Cas's hips, and it's all the impetus Cas seems to need to sigh out in frustration and let his head fall back against the bed.

Dean can't think of anything to say, but it turns out he doesn't really need to, not when Cas is pushing himself up, sliding his arms under Dean's and shoving him down onto the bed. Cas pushes Dean's thighs apart to slot between them and braces his hands on either side of his friend's head, his short, shaggy hair falling forward to frame his face as he arches an eyebrow at Dean. "I'm not a girl," Cas says quietly.

Dean frowns. "Uh, yeah. I got that."

Cas leans down onto his elbows, chest pressed to Dean's and warm through his tee shirt. His blue eyes look like tiny galaxies this close up. "I'm a guy," he murmurs.

Dean blinks up at him stupidly. Cas is a genius, but sometimes he makes absolutely no damned sense. Now is one of those times. "Yep." Dean can feel the solid line of Cas's dick against his. "Definitely a dude."

Cas sighs like Dean is one of those retarded puppies that won't stop pissing on the new berber

carpet in the living room. Dean hates that sigh. "The mechanics of sexual intercourse with a guy are almost the same as those of heterosexual intercourse," Cas breathes into Dean's ear, and Dean's not sure if the full-body shudder that wracks him is from Cas's rough baritone on the sensitive shell of his ear or the way he grinds his dick down into Dean's to punctuate his statement. Either way, Dean's hands are grasping for leverage on the other man's waist. Dean's convinced Cas could read the fucking phone book and turn him on. "You're overcomplicating this, Dean. Stop thinking and just move." He highlights this latest piece of advice with another push of his hips into Dean's, leaving sloppy, open-mouthed kisses down the arch of Dean's throat.

"You aren't going to break me," Cas says from the vicinity of Dean's collarbones. "You can't ruin our friendship. You won't scare me off." Shaking his head in exasperation, Cas worms his arms under Dean's back and around his waist before letting his forehead fall to rest on the other man's sternum. When Cas speaks again his voice is low and muffled against the faded Icarus logo of his friend's Zeppelin tee shirt. "Dean, when did you realize that you were in love with me?"

Dean doesn't even have to consider this. "Kansas State Science Fair, November of '07." It was during their junior year of high school and Cas had been going through a quantum mechanics phase. They've never talked about this.

Cas huffs a laugh against Dean's chest. "Six years?" He sounds impressed. "Six years you've been considering this a possibility, and now that it's a reality you're questioning the situation?"

Rationalized in Cas's sensible tone it does seem pretty ridiculous. But so is the way that being this close to him is making Dean's heart rate double to a staccato beat that leaves him dizzy. Cas seems perfectly damned comfortable, the fucker. Dean eyes him warily when Cas sits up between his legs and considers his own belt thoughtfully for a moment before sliding the tongue through the buckle and opening the line of buttons on his fly. "I'm going to tell you something Dean, and this is very important." Dean nods and waits, eyes fixed on the way Cas is still idly playing with the heavy brass of his belt buckle.

Cas reaches down and takes Dean's chin in one hand to get his attention. "I'm twenty two. I'm a hopeless nerd. I spend more time in the lab than I do interacting with other people." This is all very true. Pathetic, but true. "You are the single most attractive man I've ever met. I can't even be in the same room with you anymore without wanting to touch you.

"You have two options here, Dean. Two. Either cease this ridiculous, passive-aggressive initiation of sexual encounters, or man the fuck up and follow through. You screwed half our high school field hockey team before we graduated. One glasses-wearing dork really shouldn't be an issue."

Well, damn.

Dean opens his mouth to respond and realizes that he can't form words. How the hell do you argue with that? Cas watches him gape like a bass for a moment before rolling his gorgeous blue eyes and fisting a hand in the front of Dean's shirt. He hauls his friend upright and closer until he's got Dean straddling his lap, then makes short work of Dean's belt, too. The sudden pressure of hands on his groin prompts Dean to remember the English language. "Cas, I'm not sure if—"

The rest of his half-hearted protest is cut off by a possessive, insistent kiss that has Dean panting into Cas's mouth. Dean practically jumps when those determined hands hook into the waistband of both his boxers and jeans and yank downward. "Fuck, Cas," he yelps.

Cas licks a path from his shoulder to behind his left ear. "That's the idea, yes," he growls.

There's a palm dragging firm and sure down Dean's stomach, another grabbing his ass, and Dean can't decide whether to push back or thrust up or just moan. "C-Cas, wait—"

His friend's voice is a deep rumble against his jaw. "Dean, I swear to God I will tie you down."
Fuck, that's hot. Cas sucks a bruise into the side of his throat under his jawline, slides one hand up the inside of Dean's thigh to fist around his dick. Dean groans loud and low and stops arguing. It's probably smarter to just let Cas do this. Path of least resistance or whatever.

March 2008

Chapter Summary

Parker Daniels had described them as ‘cocksucking lips’ in the tenth grade, malicious and smug, and Castiel hadn’t regretted breaking his nose.

It’s very difficult to focus on AutoCAD programming when your best friend insists on doing the most inappropriately pornographic things with his mouth. Of course, Dean isn’t doing these things on purpose. He’s completely ignorant to the distraction he’s providing, and that just inspires within Castiel the urge to reach across the table and slap him.

Dean is attractive in the very textbook definition of the word. He’s handsome, certainly, and of a noticeably athletic build. Physically, he’s everything Castiel would hypothetically be drawn to in a male. The difference here is that Dean is Castiel’s childhood friend, not homosexual masturbatory material, and Dean needs to get that damned pen out of his mouth before Castiel has either a coronary or the need to visit a confessional booth.

If one were to seek the definition of ‘oral fixation’ in a dictionary, Castiel is positive that Dean Winchester’s picture would appear directly beneath the entry. Pens, pencils, gum, lab tools, his thumb until he was twelve—the list is practically inexhaustible. Dean just seems to be fascinated with experiencing the world through his mouth. It’s frustrating to watch.

Castiel frowns over the open lid of his laptop and catches a flash of one white canine as Dean chews the end of the ballpoint while he types on the keypad of his cellphone one-handed. Perhaps if Castiel wills it with enough mental fervor the damned writing implement will explode and Dean will be forced to desist. How in heaven do Dean’s girlfriends accomplish any manner of work around him? Castiel isn’t sure if he’s gay or just gay for Dean’s mouth.

They’re eighteen. Castiel’s interest in anything sexual has been tamped down under the weight of academic rigor and his own social ineptitude, and when a guy sits around in a lab full of fellow physics nerds for weeks on end his sexual proclivities suffer for it. The problem with Dean is that he’s a known, he’s familiar, and he’s safe, so Castiel understands why he’s finding gold-flecked green eyes and a strong jawline making cameo appearances in his less than virtuous thoughts. But Dean doesn’t need to know that. Ever.

Castiel shifts slightly in his seat, leaning back so that his laptop’s screen obscures his view of the teenager across the table from him, and he glares at the schematics glowing apathetically back at him. There’s only one part of this assignment left to complete and then he can retreat back to the library halfway across town. Problem solved.

“Hey, Cas. You okay?” Dean reaches over and tips down the lid of his friend’s computer, brows drawn in concern, pen still dangling from between those full, gorgeous lips. Parker Daniels had described them as ‘cocksucking lips’ in the tenth grade, malicious and smug, and Castiel hadn’t regretted breaking his nose. “You’re squirming around and huffing over there.”

It’s embarrassing but Castiel is rapt with attention as he watches Dean’s mouth form words around the pen. The way his lower lip presses and gives against the black plastic is especially interesting. Castiel wonders briefly if it would feel firm against his own or if it would give, warm and plush and wet.

“Cas?”

With a mouth like that, Dean’s probably very skilled at kissing. Castiel’s kissed a grand total of two girls in his entire life—Anna, who had turned him down with a very polite and kind smile, and Meg, who had grabbed him by the hair and made him dizzy. Dean’s been with all of the second-string cheerleaders and most of the attractive girls in their science classes. Castiel thinks that maybe Dean wouldn’t mind his lack of experience if he made up for it with enthusiasm.

“Earth to Cas. C’mon, snap outta it, space cadet.” Dean’s snapping fingers in front of Castiel’s face impatiently, and the other teenager startles. Arching an eyebrow, Dean sprawls back into his chair and taps the pen against his pursed lips. “What’s goin’ on with you, man?”

Castiel takes in Dean’s relaxed posture, the lazy stretch of his arm folded behind his head and the way his shirt rides up past the waistband of his jeans. And then there’s Dean’s denim-covered thighs. God above, the things Castiel could do to those thighs.

Right. So it’s not just Dean’s sinfully gorgeous mouth that’s got Castiel shifting around in his seat. Wonderful.

“I believe that I may have food poisoning,” Castiel outright lies, puts a hand to his stomach, and makes sure to hunch over slightly as he stands. The bathroom is a welcomed respite. Castiel locks the door behind him and recites calculus formulas under his breath for the next ten minutes. And if he happens to file away the memory of that cursed pen between Dean’s lips for later consideration, that’s Castiel’s business.

July 2007

Chapter Summary

Sam can feel Dean crying hot tears into his scalp and muttering, “Can’t lose him, too—not like this,” and it makes Sam’s eyes sting more.

Sam has always believed in God, angels, and miracles. He doesn’t remember his mom—Mary died when he was a few months old—but Dean says that she used to tell him that angels were watching over them. So Sam communes with his spirituality regularly, talks to the big guy in the sky when he’s nervous or worried or really, really grateful. Sam thinks he spends the most time praying when Castiel is driving. He loves Cas like a brother, trusts him like he trusts Dean, but not when the guy’s got all three of their lives in his hands, shaky and clammy and glued to the steering wheel’s four and eight o’ clock.

Cas has been driving for exactly six days. He’s seventeen, well past the age when most respectable Midwestern boys have licenses and their first speeding tickets. Sam’s not sure why Cas has been so against the idea of getting behind the wheel up until now—or what changed his mind—but Dean’s been coaxing him out of their shared bedroom and into the driver’s seat every day, lately. At first it was for impromptu lessons on what all of the buttons and knobs and levers and lights did on the dash and steering column. Then it was what everything in the instrument cluster did. Now they’ve gone from ‘Jesus Christ, Cas, ease onto the gas, would ya?’ to ‘No, wait, stop! The car’s still in fucking reverse, Cas!’ and Sam would like to get the heck out of this car now, please.

Unfortunately, he’s just sort of along for the ride. Dean secured him into the backseat—the middle of the backseat—like Sam was a damned toddler and legitimately made him strap on his bicycle helmet. Now Sam is thirteen, sure, but he’s not a baby, and if Cas really crashes the Impala then one of two things is going to happen—they’ll either die in a fiery explosion of death like the ones in Star Wars or the Impala will soak the impact like the unibody tank she is. Either way, the helmet’s not really going to help.

“There you go, man. Just turn her nice and smooth. Don’t jerk the wheel, she’ll take you where you tell her but you gotta be easy with her.” There’s also the narrative from the front seat to think about. Dean’s talking Cas through this like he’s a spooked horse or something. It’s sort of cute, except that those are his brothers so it’s also pretty gay. But Dean’n’Cas have always been really, really gay so what else is new? Sam wonders how Dean manages to get dates all the time when he’s so obviously in love with Cas.

Heh. Okay, fine, so Dean’s not really in love with Cas. That’s stupid. They’re both boys and Cas could do better. Dean’s gross, anyway. He burps at the dinner table and throws his dirty clothes on the floor in the bathroom and he smells like a locker room. Sam thinks Cas might be a saint for sharing a room with him, because Dean’s disgusting.

Anyway, they’re halfway through town, and Dean’s apparently feeling safe enough in the front seat because he’s got one of Dad’s old Creedence tapes going on the stereo, quiet and calm. He’s even singing along under his breath, which Sam sort of hates and Cas mostly ignores, and Sam’s just about to ask him to put on some Journey when he sees a pickup truck come speeding through the intersection, run the red light, and plow full speed into the driver’s side of the Impala.

Sam thinks that everything gets really, really damned loud—screeching tires, twisting metal, shattering glass. The Impala lurches to the side, Dean screams, and then everything gets freaky quiet. There's shards of glass strewn across the backseat and all the windows on the driver's side of the car are gone. The doors are crumpled inward, the frame is bent, and Cas is slumped back in his seat, head rolled onto one of his shoulders, and he's not moving.

"Jesus, fuck. Sammy?" Dean's wrenches himself around in the passenger seat, green eyes wide and scared, but Sam's fine. Shaken up, yeah, but he's okay. Dean seems to get that, because he rakes his gaze over his little brother before he yanks his seat belt off and slides through the busted glass on the front bench seat to check Cas. Problem is, Dean doesn't seem to know what to do, and that scares Sam more than the accident. Dean always knows what to do, and the few times he hasn't known, Cas is always there to help.

Cas can't help anyone, right now. Dean, on the other hand, seems hell-bent on trying. He's sliding his hand up under Cas's chin, checking for a pulse, and then he's turning around and scrambling out of the car. Sam watches his big brother open the back door on the passenger side and then Dean's large, capable hands are tugging him out of the Impala. "Stay right here, Sammy," he says, and he's fumbling around in his pocket for his cell phone, shoving it at Sam's chest with a shaky order to call Bobby, but Sam can't focus on anything but the way Dean's hands are trembling and he looks like his world is ending.

Sam wonders if that's the way Dean looked the night their mom died.

There are other people crowding around the two wrecked cars now, bystanders and pedestrians and other drivers. The guy who hit them hasn't so much as twitched from behind his wheel. There's a big spiderweb crack in his windshield and Sam's pretty sure the guy's dead. Dean's back in the front seat of the Impala, yelling at Cas, and that's a stupid thing to do when someone's hurt, but Dean does really stupid things when his brothers get hurt.

Soon there're ambulances and cop cars and all sorts of loud, bright things flooding the street around the accident. Someone must have called Bobby because he shows up as the EMTs are cutting the other guy's door off with a giant pair of boltcutters, and there's a police officer pulling Dean's arms behind his back and keeping him from going after the stretcher they've got Cas on. Bobby slings one arm around Dean's chest and pulls him backwards, away from the red and white strobe lights and the wreck and over to where Sam is still sitting on the curb and trying really hard not to cry. He's too old for that, and Dean'll just call him a girl, and Cas isn't there to tell Dean not to make fun of Sam.

Sam doesn't think that Dean will grow up to be a nice person without Cas around. They have to go to the hospital and make sure the doctors know that he's allergic to aspirin and he doesn't like Jello and he can't sleep in the dark; Sam needs Cas to get better. Sam looks over when Dean slumps down on the curb beside him and leans against his brother's shoulder, because that's what Cas does when Dean's upset and doesn't want to talk about it. Dean looks like if he tried to talk right now he'd just cuss and yell. It gets a little harder to keep the tears in check when Dean pulls him close and buries his face in Sam's shaggy hair because Sam can feel Dean crying hot tears onto his scalp and muttering, "Can't lose him, too—not like this," and it makes Sam's eyes sting more.

So Sam prays, because he may not understand why God thought it was okay to take his mom away before he could ever really meet her but he knows that Mary was right and angels are looking out for them and they'll save Cas. They'll save him because Sam needs him, and Dean would lose his whole mind without him, and Cas is a good person, real good. He goes to church on Sundays and everything. Cas has more faith in God than anyone Sam knows, so God has to answer Sam's prayers and fix Cas. Right?

August 2012

Chapter Summary

Two grown men with their heads under a worn cotton comforter, hiding from traffic tickets and failed exams should seem ridiculous to Dean, but it doesn't.

Dean's having a really shitty day. By 'really shitty' he means 'why the fuck is this happening to me?' and by 'day' he means 'the last six hours of my life.' There's the speeding ticket, the thirty percent score on their last Fluid Mechanics exam, the other traffic ticket, and Dean's sure he managed to mix up his English Lit and Linear Algebra papers and hand them in to the wrong professors. He's gonna have to pick squirrel out of the Impala's front left tire after that little roadkill incident on the way back to the dorm. In his mad dash from his room this morning—twenty minutes late to his Stagecraft class—Dean forgot his cell phone, which means Sammy has no way of getting ahold of him if he has an emergency and he couldn't call Cas to make sure he was awake on time for his meeting with their adviser. All in all, today's been a fucking nightmare.

Once the door to the dorm room is closed and locked behind him, Dean takes a second to just breathe. It's dim, the blinds drawn and the lights off, just Dean's laptop monitor glowing from his desk. Across the room, somewhere on top of the empty pizza box and overdue library books, his cell phone is chirping impatiently. In the bottom of the bunkbed, Cas is half-dressed and tangled in the sheets, snoring quietly. Dean feels guilty for having let Cas sleep through his meeting—accident or not—but there's something oddly satisfying about retreating back home, proverbial tail between his legs, to find his best friend still here in Dean's bed, top bunk virtually untouched. It's three in the afternoon and Dean's sure that Cas'll sleep the entire day if no one wakes him.

The cell phone's his first priority. There're like twenty text messages from Sammy about nothing important, just random things his brother felt he needed to convey throughout the day, and Dean smiles wearily as he scrolls through them. There's a missed call from Garth, a few emails from the theatre about the shop meeting tomorrow night, a voicemail from campus police that Dean will avoid listening to until Cas gives him that sad, disappointed look he gets when Dean leaves the toilet seat up in the middle of the night or eats an entire pound of bacon for breakfast. It takes a few seconds to send Sam a message—left my phone in the dorm, just got back, meet you in the dining hall later for dinner.

Dean slings his backpack onto a desk chair, sets his keys down carefully and kicks off his boots. He leaves a trail of jacket, flannel, socks, and henley on his way to the bed before crawling under the blankets in his underwear and burying his face in Cas's neck. The other man is pliant and comfortable beside him. Dean closes his eyes and lets the rest of the day leach away from him with every rhythmic rise and fall of Cas's chest under his stolen tee shirt. Dean's been looking for that damned thing for days, but he thinks he likes the way it looks on Cas. Or maybe he just likes Cas wearing his clothes. God, when did he turn into such a girl? They'll be wearing BFF bracelets and passing notes in class soon.

"You already pass me notes in class," Cas rumbles drowsily into Dean's short hair, and did he say that out loud? Shit. Dean burrows closer to warm skin and lets Cas sneak strong, wiry arms around him. "You let me sleep through my advising appointment," Cas murmurs somewhere near his ear. He doesn't sound particularly upset about it, either.

Dean shrugs a little. "Forgot my phone," he sighs. "Sorry. I had an awful fucking day."

Cas makes a soft noise of concern and pulls Dean closer. "What happened?" Then, more clearly, "Is Sam all right?"

It makes the corner of Dean's mouth quirk despite himself. "He's fine," Dean reassures his friend with words as well as hands, carding his fingers through the spectacular wreck of Cas's dark hair. There's no comb in the world to fix that mess. "I woke up late for class, got pulled over for doin' fifteen over the limit on campus. Same dick cop that popped me with that parking ticket, last week. They've got it out for Baby, Cas."

"Hm. Dean, I did warn you that parking in a fire lane was unwise," Cas says quietly.

"And I bombed the Fluid Mechanics test. Thirty percent. I'll be lucky if I can scrape a B in the class, now."

"Didn't you stay out with Ash until two in the morning the day before that test? Instead of studying?"

"Yeah, but it was his birthday."

"Ah."

"Then a state trooper pulled me for driving in the HOV lane. Got another ticket. I guess I prolly deserved that one though, huh?"

"Probably, Dean."

"I handed in my math paper to my English professor. The Lit paper went to my math professor, I think."

"You should be able to correct that easily enough."

"Yeah." Dean pauses and makes a face. "I also mighta killed a squirrel on the way back here." He cringes again when he thinks of the gore plastered to the Impala's tire.

At that, Cas sighs in slight exasperation and rolls Dean onto his back, sliding into the vee of the taller man's legs. Cas props his head in one hand, elbow braced on Dean's chest, and he looks down at his friend with a commiserating expression on his handsome face. "So you had a terrible day because you made poor, impulsive decisions?"

Dean snorts. "Shit, Cas. Tell me how you really feel."

Cas's brows furrow and he tilts his head to one side and Dean tries real damned hard not to kiss him senseless. Fuck, but that's adorable. Ugh. Dean's close to having to surrender his man card, again. "I just did, Dean."

It's sheer force of will that lets Dean control his smile at this point. His best friend is a Vulcan. "Nevermind, Cas. Yeah, I screwed up and today is the worst day of my life." Most of the time it's just easier to agree that Cas is always right about things like this, even if Dean is still a little pissed about that speeding ticket.

"Now you're just being dramatic," Cas sighs like he's personally offended, then he slides down between Dean's thighs and pulls the comforter up over both of their heads. "Rest with me, Dean."

They did this when they were kids, huddled under Dean's blanket like it was their own fortress

and could keep out all of the bad things, a green plaid defense against absent fathers and long-dead mothers and the cruelty of other children. Two grown men with their heads under a worn cotton comforter, hiding from traffic tickets and failed exams should seem ridiculous to Dean, but it doesn't. It feels warm and lazy and secure, and Dean pets Cas's ridiculously chaotic hair where it tickles his sternum. After several long moments of familiar quiet, Cas humming contentedly under Dean's hands like an overfed housecat, Dean's almost lulled himself to sleep. His thoughts are slow and thick, and Cas is like a damned furnace under this blanket, all soft hair and loose limbs sprawled across Dean's chest.

"I want you to come to Stanford with me," Cas murmurs.

Dean's eyes fly open and he stares up at the comforter over his head. "What?" he croaks. They haven't even mentioned this whole topic since the fight they had the night before Sammy barged into their dorm and practically demanded they fuck.

In hindsight, that had been a really weird day.

"Why would I move to California with you?" Dean ventures.

There's an aggravated exhalation of breath against Dean's right nipple that makes him shiver. "Because I can't go to graduate school at Stanford without you." He says it like it's perfectly sensible and Dean is being the slow one here, and for all that Dean is used to the way the guy's head works, sometimes Cas makes these insane leaps in logic that leave everyone around him completely baffled and spinning their wheels.

"But I can't get in to Stanford. I'm not smart enough, Cas, c'mon." And apparently that's the wrong thing to say, because Cas is suddenly looming over him in the muted light, brilliant blue eyes blazing.

"You're one of the smartest people I know," he frowns. "You're just terrified that everyone else will figure that out and raise their expectations of you. You're afraid you'll disappoint people." For all that Cas is socially retarded sometimes he's the single most perceptive person on the fucking planet when it comes to his best friend. "You won't disappoint me, Dean. You exceed my expectations every day."

Dean shifts uncomfortably. He might have years of game time logged with Cas's thousand-yard stare, but the other man's laser-like focus is still too intense to handle sometimes. "You need to raise your standards," Dean mutters.

Cas looks confused. "You are my standard, Dean."

And it's stupid, brutally honest and guileless things like this that made Dean fall for Cas in the first place. You can't not love a guy who puts all of his faith and loyalty in you, like you're the best damned thing that ever happened to him and he'd walk through Hell itself for you without so much as a 'by your leave'. Cas is one of a kind, and not in a useless, world's biggest ball of twine sorta way. "Sam wants to go to law school, and he has expressed a very keen interest in Stanford. You will apply to the graduate program and we will move to California. Sam will accompany us."

Dean's smiling up at Cas because he just can't help it. The other man speaks with confidence and conviction and Dean knows that this is exactly what they're going to do. He's pretty all right with it, actually. It kills three birds with one stone, and Dean can't really stomach the idea of being separated from his best friend by three states and almost two thousand miles. "But Sam's a freshman."

Cas gives Dean his 'you are an intentionally frustrating organism' look. "I'm certain that Sam will

have no issues with transferring. We will discuss this with him tonight at dinner.” Cas leans down and kisses him then, decisive and sweet, and Dean grins into it. He’s still grinning when Cas licks along his bottom lip and pulls back with a slight smile before stretching lazily, tight muscle over slender bones, and collapsing gracelessly once more across Dean’s chest. When Cas takes Dean’s hand and guides it back into the disaster of his thick hair, Dean complies easily and lets his eyes slide closed again. Cas is a drowsy, complacent sprawl of limbs against him, and Dean thinks that maybe today doesn’t suck quite as hard as he thought it did.

September 2008

Chapter Summary

Dean's a little embarrassed with his best friend seeing him a complete mess, which is fucking stupid because Cas was there the day Dean found out that dinosaurs were extinct and cried until he passed out.

“So, hypothetically speakin’, if you were interested in dudes... What would you be attracted to?” Dean regrets having opened his mouth the second it closes, but he’s already said it and he’s never done things by halves. Fuck it. Go hard or go home. Dean’s already committed. Might as well keep the mother of all poker faces and wait for a response, and Michael doesn’t disappoint. He’s looking at Dean like the other man is nine kinds of crazy and maybe a little retarded, but Dean’ll be damned if the guy isn’t actually considering his question. Michael levels those clear grey eyes on him—not quite the right color—and smirks. He’s a good-lookin’ bastard and he knows it, and now that Dean’s acting like some love struck closet case with a Cosmo article checklist, Michael is all ears.

“Hypothetically?” Michael repeats smugly.

Dean shrugs. “‘S what I said.”

They’re sitting up in the catwalk crawlspace of the college theatre, sweating in the late September heat that pervades the higher niches of the old building, pulling lighting instruments off of pipes and replacing burnt-out lamps. It’s slow going, mostly because Dean’s convinced that whichever Lighting Design class that had done this routine last year had intentionally cranked all of the bolts down past the point of function just to fuck with him. Freshman classes suck. He grits his teeth as he leans hard on the crescent wrench in his hands, and when the bolt holding this particular Source Four light gives, Dean sits back with a labored grunt and drags the entire instrument onto the catwalk with vicious satisfaction.

Dean’s up to his elbow in the guts of the lighting instrument when Michael speaks again. ”Hypothetically,” he drawls slowly, leaning back against a metal railing and watching Dean’s progress with an appreciative eye, “I’d be attracted to someone good-looking.”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock,” Dean snorts. “Gotta have standards. But what specifically?”

Michael frowns thoughtfully. There’re dark grease smears up both his arms and staining the front of his ripped jeans, and it doesn’t detract from his appearance like it probably should. ”I’m not sure. Eyes, probably.”

“Yeah? What kind?”

There’s a soft chuckle from Michael’s direction before he replies, “Light color. Green, maybe.”

Dean knows exactly where this is going. Thing is, he’s not sure if he wants to follow it down this path that will inevitably lead to his sleeping with a classmate and regretting it for the rest of the semester. Because Dean always regrets it. He’s a sucker for short dark hair and blue eyes, though.

"What else?" he prods.

"A nice mouth. Not too built, I don't want to have to worry about losing a fight or anything," Michael grins over at him, and fuck is he handsome. "Good teeth, that's important. And a firm ass." Now he's just flirting. He's also moving across the catwalk and dropping into a crouch right in front of where Dean's bowed legs are sprawled, and pulling the wrench from Dean's hands. The Source Four gets set gently aside and Michael's attention is focused on Dean with an intensity that intimidates him, if he's perfectly honest with himself. "But this is all hypothetical, because I haven't told you that I'm interested in guys as well as girls, and you haven't asked," he says quietly.

Michael's less than three inches away, and if Dean sat up and forward just slightly they'd be kissing. This whole tension thing's been weeks in the making, a slow burn of loaded comments and looks, and Dean's played this sort of 'gay chicken' before to see how far he could take it before backing down. Half of him feels wrong for screwing with these guys' heads like this, and half of him feels guilty, like he's doing something wrong by engaging them. Which is absofuckinglutely ridiculous, 'cause it's not like Dean's cheating on anyone. He's a free agent, and he likes it that way—no commitments, no obligations, no one to answer to if he decides to stay out all night. He's an adult and he can make his own decisions.

And Michael's right there, and he's a genuinely nice guy—even if he is an arrogant prick sometimes—and he actually wants Dean. It's a good feeling. "What about you, Dean? What are you attracted to in a guy? Hypothetically."

Dean's skin feels hypersensitive and he wipes his palms down the thighs of his jeans. "Dark hair," he rasps quietly. "Little shorter than me, I guess. Smart. Big heart. Nice ass." Michael nods approvingly. Dean worries his lower lip between his teeth and works up the nerve to continue. "Deep voice. Tattoos, maybe," he smiles a little, and his gaze drags away from Michael's for a moment to glance over the ornate sword inked down the other man's arm. "Good sense of humor."

There's scant centimeters between them now, and Dean's just working up the nerve to seal the deal when his cell phone starts going off in his pocket. Michael jerks backwards a bit, startled, and Dean curses mentally as he lays back on the metal catwalk and fishes the damned thing out of his pocket. He doesn't bother checking the display, just hits the call button and holds it to his ear before growling a very disgruntled, "What?"

There's a pause, and then, "Hello, Dean."

Fuck. "Hey, Cas," Dean breathes, the hostility instantly gone from his tone. "Sorry, you caught me in the middle of some work. What's up?"

Cas sounds slightly flustered. "You asked me to meet you in the theatre after your class so that we could meet Jo, Ash, and Garth for dinner. I am in the theatre. Where are you?" As his friend explains himself Dean can hear his voice through the phone at first, but then in his free ear as well, and Dean sits up and looks down at the stage to find Cas wandering across it and peering up at the rows of electricians as if expecting Dean to appear from the air. "Dean?"

The grin that spreads across Dean's face is completely out of his control. "Yeah, I'm comin' down, Cas. Gimme a minute, okay?"

As he hops to his feet, Dean shoves his phone back into his pocket and starts looking for his tools. Michael stands as well, crossing his arms over his chest and pursing his lips. "So, hypothetically, you're attracted to blue eyes, right Dean?" he asks gently, and Dean straightens immediately, turns to look at him. Michael's got a knowing look on his face. "You're hot as shit, Dean, and fun as

hell to be around, but I've got more self-respect than to play stand-in for what you really want."

"Look Michael, I don't—"

"Winchester, c'mon. You should see the way your stupid face lights up when he's around." Michael shakes his head, smiling sheepishly, and heads for the exit. "I can't compete with that, man."

Dean stares after him, wondering when he became so transparent. What if Cas knows? There's a spike of pure dread that punches through Dean's stomach with all the finesse of a car accident. He abandons the lighting instruments and murky heat and descends the safety ladder to the stage. When he lets go of the ladder rails and turns, Cas is right there—right fucking there—all up in his personal bubble and not a damned bit sorry for it, either. "Dean, I apologize if I interrupted. Michael looked quite unhappy when he passed me just now."

Cas is right there in his face, oblivious to the pure havoc he is causing in Dean's chest with his ridiculous blue eyes and his crazy sex hair, and Dean has to take a slow, deep breath and force himself to look Cas in the eye instead of staring at that full lower lip. "It's cool, Cas. He's not having such a great day."

Dean's shirt is soaked in sweat and it's clinging to his skin uncomfortably. He's also covered in grease streaks, black and brown and gritty, and his hair is spiked with perspiration. Dean's a little embarrassed with his best friend seeing him a complete mess, which is fucking stupid because Cas was there the day Dean found out that dinosaurs were extinct and cried until he passed out; they've been best friends since they were kids and Cas has been there for almost every embarrassing thing that's ever happened to Dean. If Cas hasn't run screaming for the laboratory yet, he probably isn't gonna.

"You ready to go?" Dean asks, voice rough.

"Yes, Dean." Cas has abandoned his usual tee shirt and holey jeans for clean denim and a dark button-up shirt. He's even put on a tie, and Dean feels himself smiling as he reaches out without thinking and straightens the material—it looks like Cas has put in on backwards.

"What are you all dressed up for?" Dean teases, fingers busying the knot and then smoothing the material down Cas's front. "Hot date?" he leers.

Cas cocks his head to the side. "If that were the case then that would make you my date," he says with the same tone he uses to convey data sets and formulas. Dean nearly chokes on air. "Although, I did ask you to accompany me to this specific meeting."

"Yeah, but Cas, c'mon, dude. We're bros," Dean splutters.

The trademark brow furrow is back. Dean thinks one day Cas's face'll get stuck like that, and then where will they be? "We are not brothers, Dean. You're my best friend."

Dean rolls his eyes. Vulcan heathen. He grabs Cas by the tie and tugs him across the stage and towards the door. "Thanks, Captain Obvious. Hurry the fuck up. I think there's a grammar crime goin' down outside somewhere. The unsuspecting public needs you."

They're halfway across the quad when Cas knocks his shoulder amiably against Dean's in a familiar gesture. Dean looks over at him with a raised eyebrow. "When Michael passed me on his way out today he said that you had a weakness for blue eyed nerds."

Suddenly there isn't enough blood to support Dean's higher brain functions because it's all rushed to his face and he's a very creative shade of red. This had better end up a fucking Crayola color.

"Yeah, he was jokin', Cas. You remember jokes, right? I tried to teach you some back in middle school but you over analyzed them and I cried myself to sleep that night?"

Cas ignores him. He's a little too good at that sometimes. "Do you consider me a weakness, Dean?"

And there's Cas being all obnoxiously observant and intuitive. It's annoying. Dean loves him for it despite how much horrific awkward it brings to his life on a daily basis. "No. Course not. Don't worry about Michael, Cas. It's not like the guy even knows me all that well."

They continue across campus in comfortable silence after that. It's a little humid out and Dean thinks he probably should have stopped at the dorm to wash up before meeting their friends, but he can deal. Cas doesn't seem to mind at all, and there're dark smudges on the sleeve of his shirt where he's bumping into Dean as they walk. As they round the fraternity dorm building and approach the main dining hall, Dean spots their welcoming committee. Jo has Ash in a headlock and is making an absolute mess out of his mullet. Garth is doubled over laughing. Their friends are awesome. "Hey, Cas?" Dean asks quietly.

"Yes, Dean?" In his less macho moments Dean thinks that no one will ever make the single syllable of his name sound so damned important.

"Hypothetically speakin', if you were interested in dudes... What would you be attracted to?" For some reason this playful game doesn't feel nearly as offhand as it had with Michael, and Dean realizes that he actually cares about the answers now. This doesn't feel so much like a game of gay chicken as it does Russian roulette.

Cas mulls over the question with the sort of grave import normally reserved for matters of life and death or Biblical prophesy. "Green eyes," he says finally, and he pauses right in the middle of the road they're crossing to grab the hem of Dean's dirty tee shirt and halt him, as well. "But the packaging isn't nearly as important as the man inside it, Dean." His blue eyes are earnest as all Hell and he's giving Dean that heavy, intense stare that makes Dean think of Cyclops from the X-Men, like if Cas concentrates hard enough he'll burn his thoughts into Dean's brain and they'll be forever connected by some profound mutant bond.

A car honks anxiously and Dean snaps out of their impromptu staredown to grab Cas's hand, flick off the driver of the Prius who's giving them a dirty, 'why do you gays feel the need to disrupt the flow of traffic' look, and drag Cas out of the street. Once they're back on the relative safety of the sidewalk and Dean is determinedly pulling his best friend behind him, Cas frowns down at their joined hands and then looks up at Dean's face. "What?" Dean asks self-consciously.

Cas looks back to their hands. "I believe I would be attracted to a man with hands like yours," he says honestly. "They're capable of physical harm but you're very gentle with things you don't wish to damage." Then he drops Dean's hand and continues walking towards the front of the dining hall, where Ash is trying and failing to fix his hair as Jo nurses the split lip she's now sporting from an accidental elbow to the face. Garth is smiling serenely at their antics.

Dean watches Cas walk away, careful to keep his eyes above his friend's belt line, and then frowns before rushing to catch up. "Hey, that's a hypothetical, right Cas? Right? Cas?"

July 2007

Chapter Summary

There's being a supportive and open-minded parent and then there's encouraging rampant gay sex, and Bobby's still a gun-loving Republican for fuck's sake.

The beeps and chirps from that damned heart monitor are gunshot loud in the dark otherwise silence of this damned hospital room, and Bobby's got to steel himself with a deep, slow breath before pushing past the curtain and checking up on his boys. Last time he'd been in a trauma room he'd watched his wife choke to death on her own blood—punctured lung—and the antiseptic smell that pervades every inch of this God forsaken place is getting to him. The monitors above the gurney are glowing enough to show him Sam curled up like the damned dog in one of the uncomfortable chairs lining the far wall.

Bobby sighs sadly and makes his way to the bed. There's a mess of cables and tubes running out from under the flimsy cotton hospital gown the nurses wrapped Cas up in. The left side of the boy's face is a mess of bruises and butterfly stitches. His whole left side is a damned wreck: busted shoulder, lacerations, bruising, the works. The kid's swathed in gauze and bandages. He looks like hell, but Bobby's grateful beyond words that he's breathing on his own. Hell, that he's breathing at all.

The driver of the pickup truck that hit them had been drunk. The minute the trauma room nurses had cleared Dean of any injuries the teenager had accosted the first cop he'd seen in the waiting room and demanded to know where the other driver was. "Died on impact," the cop had responded quietly, and Dean had turned away from the man, nodded at Bobby, and snarled, "Good," before stomping back over to his little brother. Sam had been very, very subdued since the crash.

The Impala's a loss, and that's putting it lightly. Sheriff Mills had gotten the old Chevy onto a wrecker and sent back to Singer Salvage without prompting, and Bobby's eternally grateful for that. Dean hasn't asked about the car even once. That's how Bobby knows that Dean's not okay. He loves that car like he loves pie and chasing skirt. Cas says that the Impala is Dean's longest relationship, and Sammy howls with laughter fit to bust a gut.

Cas ain't saying much of anything, tonight. He's pale and clammy and deathly still. He looks small as shit dwarfed by all the machines and monitors around him, and that's kind of disturbing considering the kid's almost six feet of baby fat and muscle. Dean's practically sprawled across Cas's lap where the older Winchester boy is slumped in another chair at the side of the bed. His green eyes are glazed, and when he looks up at the doorway Bobby thinks that Dean's too young to look that tired, desperate, and heartbroken.

"He wake up yet?" Bobby asks. Dean's scowl intensifies to smiting proportions and he shakes his head before laying his cheek back to his best friend's stomach and watching him sleep some more. "His doctor said they're just keepin' 'im overnight for observation. We can take him home in the mornin'."

Dean grunts noncommittally but doesn't look up. He reminds Bobby of one of those vicious junkyard dogs standing guard over its young'uns, and the old man's pretty sure that no one in this

hospital is getting within arm's distance of Castiel Novak without going through Dean first.

He gets that from his daddy. Granted, John hasn't been around much in the last ten years or so, but some things aren't learned behavior. They're inherited, and the Winchesters protect their own with a fierce sort of self-righteous possessiveness that rivals anything Bobby's ever seen before.

Wearily, Bobby reaches down and ruffles the short spiky mess of Dean's hair. Dean twitches under his hand but doesn't complain. "Bobby, I ain't never been that scared in my life," he mutters quietly, voice muffled, and his shoulders are wracked with a fine tremble but neither one of them are going to acknowledge the tears soaking into the scratchy white cotton under his cheek. "I thought he fucking died." Bobby's long since given up on trying to keep Dean from cussing, and this is sort of an extenuating circumstance. "If I hadn't kept houndin' him to drive this wouldn't have happened..."

Bobby rubs a hands over his beard and shakes his head. "Dean, that's stupid and you know it. It was an accident. Coulda happened to any of you idjits. Wrong place, wrong time—simple as that."

Dean doesn't respond to that with anything other than reaching over Cas's hip to slot his fingers between the other young man's. Watching this is hard. For seventeen, Dean's been through some shit. He watched his mom burn to death, lost his dad to an obsessive manhunt for her murderer, and damned near raised his brother for the first four years after that. Bobby has been the only real parent he's ever had, the only home he's ever known, and the old mechanic knows that he's not a real class act, but he's tried his best. And he's proud of how his boys have turned out so far. They're good kids, all three of them. Losing any of them would kill Bobby outright, no questions asked, but he thinks that losing either of his brothers would cleave Dean into pieces on a soul-deep level.

The heart monitor on the bed picks up slightly, the monotone drone of the beeps fluttering arrhythmically for a moment, and then Cas is cracking open pained blue eyes and staring straight down at Dean. He looks dazed—probably all the pain meds they pumped into his IV—and more than a little confused. "Dean?" he croaks, grimacing, and Bobby winces in sympathy. "Sam?" is his next question, and Dean nods reassuringly.

"He's good. He's fine. Sleepin' on the chair over there." Cas settles visibly at that.

"Sorry about the Impala, Dean." Bobby snorts in disbelief. He's completely convinced that Cas would apologize for world poverty if he could figure out how it was his fault. The kid's the most polite person Bobby's ever met, and he knows damned well that the boy didn't learn manners growing up at Singer Salvage.

Dean sits up and leans over and rests his forehead against Cas's real carefully. "Cas, shut up. It's not your fault. It was an accident." The older Winchester growls in frustration and shakes his head. "Fuck the car, Cas. I can replace the Impala. I can't replace you."

And it's not the words so much as the vehemence in Dean's tone that clues Bobby in, right then and there, that something's different in their usual co-conspirator dynamic. It's new and brittle and real damned subtle, but it's there. And he'll be damned, but Dean's in love with his best friend. Bobby knows that tone, has used it himself before a random act of violence stole his wife from him, and it's there plain as day on that hospital bed.

He's got to sit down for a second. Dean's always been a cocky little thing, full of spitfire and a magnet for trouble, but this takes the cake. And Bobby can't see any way in which this shakes down okay for all parties involved. He has no idea how Sammy'd take it, and John would probably blow a gasket. He's never liked Cas, anyway.

Does Dean even realize what's happening? Probably not. The idjit's never been the sharpest tool in the shed when it came to his own feelings, and while Cas isn't as unobservant as people think he is, he's about as emotionally constipated as Dean. This is either going to be really hilarious to watch or unbearably painful. Bobby doesn't think he has enough rotgut in his house for this. He's not a bigoted asshole like a lot of people in rural South Dakota can be, but he's not real keen on the prospect of having to shelter these boys from any more hurtful and hateful aspects of life. They've had enough. "Dean, I'm takin' Sam home. You stayin'?"

Tired green eyes glance up and over and Dean nods. "Gotta make sure they don't steal his organs or anything," he offers with a weak, half-hearted smile, and Bobby reads 'I can't leave him behind' loud and clear. He can appreciate the sentiment.

"Make sure he gets some sleep," Bobby instructs Cas, whose eyes are already sliding closed again. As he's pulling Sam out into the hall, stumbling and yawning, Bobby hears Cas's gurney creak with the clumsy addition of an additional body and he rolls his eyes. Maybe he should look into separating those two into their own rooms, for his own sanity and peace of mind. If Dean takes to Cas the way he has to every willing teenaged girl he's talked his way into, Bobby doesn't want to listen to it. There's being a supportive and open-minded parent and then there's encouraging rampant gay sex, and Bobby's still a gun-loving Republican for fuck's sake.

November 2007

Chapter Summary

[2:57PM] Your skill with emoticons is both impressive and mildly disturbing.

Chapter Notes

Takes place at the Kansas State Science Fair.

[8:46AM] Dean, I cannot get this tie on straight.

[8:48AM] No, I really need your assistance. The judges are giving me dirty looks. This could affect the outcome of my work.

[8:51AM] Dude, we rly need to teach you to do that yourself. The girls from our Chem lab are giggling at me. WTH? >:/

[9:12AM] Okay, I'm bored. Srsly why'd you have to get a table on the OTHER SIDE of the damned convention center??

[9:13AM] I had to set up my display with the other physics students. You have a chemistry project.

[9:14AM] You should focus on speaking to people about your project, Dean. This is important.

[9:15AM] Only reason I'm here is cause you whined. And Sammy whined. And Bobby glared at me.

[9:38AM] I was just introduced to a professor from KU. He seems interested in my research.

[9:39AM] Yeah? Send him my way. We have to go to the same college. XD

[9:55AM] The student at the table behind mine is shooting spitballs at the back of my head.

[9:56AM] Want me to beat his ass?

[9:57AM] No, I don't believe that would make matters any better. Perhaps I should speak with him?

[9:58AM] Fuck that. I'm comin over there.

[10:12AM] Don't gimme that look Cas.

[10:13AM] I have no idea to what you're referring.

[10:14AM] U have no...

[10:14AM] What are you, a friggin robot??

[10:15AM] I can see u glaring at me from all the way over here.

[10:16AM] Was knocking his display off the table really necessary?

[10:17AM] Yep. He called you a dork.

[10:18AM] Dean, you call me that almost every day.

[10:19AM] Yeah but we're family. He's a stupid prick. >:C

[10:21AM] You could have gotten kicked out of the fair.

[10:22AM] Whatevs. 'S boring anyway.

[11:09AM] Im hungry.

[11:10AM] You're always hungry.

[11:13AM] U wanna get some food?

[11:16AM] Cas?

[11:17AM] Cas???

[11:19AM] C

[11:20AM] A

[11:21AM] S

[11:22AM] ????????????????

[11:28AM] Bobby's here. Says he's comin to c your project.

[11:31AM] Hey Cas it's Sam! Where are u?? I took Deans phone bc I left mine @ home.

[11:33AM] Dude, answer your phone! Sam's being annoying and Bobby doesn't do crowds.

[12:45PM] How was I supposed to know that it fell out of my pocket?

[12:46PM] If you werent wearing that stupid blazer you'd know.

[12:47PM] You're being ridiculous, Dean.

[12:48PM] Ur mom's being ridiculous. :D

[12:50PM] My mother is deceased. She can hardly be ridiculous.

[12:51PM] Dude you cant use that every time someone tells a your mom joke.

[12:52PM] Why not? It's a perfectly valid response.

[12:53PM] Ur mom's a perfectl

[12:54PM] Kno what? Nm. I hate you. >.>

[1:11PM] I don't rly hate you.

[1:12PM] I know, Dean.

[1:13PM] Shut up. :S

[1:37PM] Bela Talbot is here.

[1:38PM] Rly? D: Where?

[1:39PM] I sent her to your table. She is of the opinion that quantum mechanics is for "nerds with their v-cards."

[1:39PM] What is a v-card?

[1:40PM] She said that to u?

[1:41PM] Yes. What is a v-card, Dean?

[1:43PM] I'm going to ask Harry.

[1:44PM] DUDE! DON'T ASK HARRY! HE'S STILL GOT HIS!

[1:45PM] Then he will know what it is.

[1:46PM] Virginty dude. Means ur still a virgin.

[1:47PM] Oh.

[1:48PM] What bearing does that have on quantum mechanics?

[1:49PM] Doesn't dude. She's just bein a BIOTCH.

[2:06PM] Bela just apologized to me. Did you tell her to do that?

[2:09PM] Dean?

[2:10PM] Course not. Musta decided to be nice to you.

[2:11pm] The probability of Bela choosing to exhibit kindness towards me is about as statistically likely as Sam ever being taller than us.

[2:12PM] ROFL XD D D D D D D D D D

[2:15PM] Thank you, Dean.

[2:16PM] nbd

[2:35PM] Aren't they doin final rounds soon?

[2:37PM] Yes.

[2:43PM] No one came to look at my project. Guess I'm not gonna win anything. :c

[2:47PM] There were several judges here just now. I believe I may have caught their interest.

[2:48PM] AWESOME CAS!

[2:49PM] U worked hard on that. You deserve a ribbon.

[2:50PM] Thank you, Dean.

[2:52PM] C U in the ceremony thing place??

[2:53PM] I've been asked to sit with the other physics projects.

[2:54PM] D:

[2:55PM] I have my phone. Just text me?

[2:56PM] ;A;

[2:57PM] Your skill with emoticons is both impressive and mildly disturbing.

[2:58PM] :/ Ur mom's mildly disturbing.

[2:59PM] NEVERMIND SORRY JEEZ

[3:14PM] Dude, we both knew I half assed this project. I hate Chem. Don't make that face Cas. It'll get stuck like that and how will u lose that v-card??

[3:14PM] SRLY?! FIRST PRIZE TO THE SPITBALL KID?!?!?!?

[3:15PM] IMMA BEAT HIM UP AND STEAL THAT RIBBON! WTF

[3:16PM] >:(

[3:17PM] His project was obviously the better of the two. Second place is fine.

[3:18PM] Ur project is way cooler. Fuck him.

[3:19PM] Dean, you're making a scene.

[3:20PM] Am not.

[3:21PM] Why did you trip him?

[3:22PM] He fell on my boot. Shoulda been lookin where he was goin.

[3:23PM] You are incorrigible.

[3:24PM] Ppl like that don't deserve awards, Cas. HE'S A BULLY.

[3:25PM] Why are you so worked up about this?

[3:26PM] Cause I watched u bust ur ass on this for the last three months and u deserve some recognition.

[3:27PM] I did get recognized. I'll simply have to try harder next year.

[3:31PM] Ur perfect, u kno that?

[3:32PM] Hardly. But thank you, Dean.

[3:33PM] Ur welcome. ;D

[3:34PM] Hey Cas??

[3:35PM] Yes, Dean?

[3:36PM] Dont ever change.

September 2012

Chapter Summary

Every time you caught a glimpse of Cas's rumpled, Captain American-clad backside shuffling out of bed and out the door in his impromptu blanket-cape you started to resent your girlfriend just a little bit more.

There's this ridiculously awkward moment wandering through the middle of the campus quad where you're holding Cas's hand and arguing about the God particle and you run directly into your most recent ex and everything telescopes down to her keen green eyes focused laser-sharp on where your sleeve disappears into the front pouch of his faded xkcd hoodie and it's the single most accusatory look you've ever seen.

You dated Anna Milton for a few months, and while the sex was pretty damned fantastic, she always seemed to have some weird distaste for your best friend. She showed up at your dorm room in the middle of a Thursday afternoon three weeks after your first date and found Cas sprawled across your lap on the couch and snoring fit to wake the dead, and her expression had been undecipherable at the time but her tone had been far from pleased. You hadn't felt the need to defend yourself because it was just a fact of life that Cas took up more space than was physically possible for a guy his size and he seemed to have affected his own gravitational pull on anyone within ten feet of him when he nodded off—normally this only applied to you and Ash, because Ash had a disturbing talent for passing out virtually anywhere and some stupid part of you still instigated as much physical contact with Cas as you could legitimately reconcile with your own conscience.

Anna hadn't felt that two grown men cuddling like overfed puppies was appropriate or acceptable behavior when one of these adults was her boyfriend, so you'd shied away from Cas's sleepy octopus limbs after that and he had given you a quiet, wounded face but not pressed the issue because your best friend is polite and courteous and too damned perfect to be real, sometimes. Apparently he had spent a considerable amount of time with Ash, after that.

Now sex is important, sure, and it's definitely worth putting up with personality flaws and mood swings when she's got a body that won't quit and a libido that rivals your own. Anna's not a slut by any definition of the word, but the girl likes sex and you were more than happy to provide. Problem is that she got clingy, and then outright possessive, and it was never directed at anyone but your nerd sidekick who just wanted you to help him study for his practicals and watch TV with him on Friday nights. Cas is nothing if not easy to please, always has been. Anna, on the other hand, was demanding.

It started with casual text messages and progressed to requests for your time that dragged you away from the comfortable circle of your friends and into house parties and frat events that really were never your scene. Those graduated to lengthy phone conversations at one and two in the morning that dramatically increased your dependence on ibuprofen and encouraged Cas to trudge down the hall in his pajamas and sleep on the spare trundle bed in Garth's room. Every time you caught a glimpse of Cas's rumpled, Captain America-clad backside shuffling out of bed and out the door in his impromptu blanket-cape you started to resent your girlfriend just a little bit more.

If you're perfectly honest with yourself then you understand that every poor soul you've dated

since your Science Fair epiphany has been a poor substitute for what you really want but can't have. But you genuinely liked Anna, at least at first, and so you attempted to be a dutiful boyfriend and acquiesce to her demands. You tried your damndest to play the role provided for you and take your mind off of clear blue eyes and that perpetual bedhead, because Cas was off-limits and Anna was right there.

I don't like how dependent he is on you, Dean.

It's creepy, Dean.

Why does he stare at you like that, Dean?

And after a few weeks of defending your childhood best friend to a girl who was probably hopelessly out of your league to begin with, you threw in the towel, raised the white flag, and told her in no uncertain terms that Cas was more important to you than steady ass and increasingly stilted conversations with a girl who was far more interested in what you hid beneath your jeans than what lay beneath your good looks and easy nature.

The insults had started immediately.

Are you seriously turning me down for the nerd, Dean?

You can't possibly be gay. No guy's that good at faking it.

What could you want with him that you can't get from me?

And the words loyalty, faith, family had all railed to the forefront of your mind like freedom fighters but frozen and died on your tongue like sacrifices and the inside of your mouth had tasted like betrayal and insecurity and battlefield, so you had held your peace. You had turned Anna away as gently as you knew how and she had told you—loudly and with as much dramatic flair as she could muster—that she could do much, much better than you, Dean Winchester.

You suppose she was right. Although, the striking jealousy in her eyes as she glares up the length of your arm and into your face is enough to make you wonder. You're sure that your focus is better spent listening to Cas growl out his manifesto of CERN's previous neutrino failures, though. He pauses in the middle of his rambling diatribe to watch Anna pass and you feel him start to tug his hand away. He looks embarrassed for you, so you come to a stop in the middle of the early autumn wheat grass and pull him closer by the belt loops of his jeans—your jeans, if you look carefully at how they linger precariously on the sharp angles of his hips—and you kiss him right there for the entire campus to judge, because Cas is what you've wanted since the eleventh grade and he knows you as well as he understands Calculus and he loves you despite your flaws, and if you're really lucky then he always will.

July 2008

Chapter Summary

It's like contemplating a life without half his limbs, and that's an impressively existential thought considering that Cas still has a pretty painful erection.

This is probably a terrible idea. In fact, most of Dean's master plans tend to resolve in injuries, police chases, or administrative action, but this particular venture seems to be intentionally designed to get one or both of them arrested, and Castiel can't help but wonder why. It's been two weeks since Cas received his acceptance letter from KU, and Dean's still hasn't shown up in Bobby's mailbox. Cas thinks that maybe Dean is, in his own way, preparing for his best friend's inevitable departure by cramming as many adventures as possible into this one last summer in Sioux Falls, dodging the town sheriff and army-crawling through old Mrs. Whilton's hedges like they're still high schoolers with no futures over which to panic.

Cas isn't even terribly sure why they're sneaking through the seventy-three year old widow's landscaping like rebel guerrillas on a Friday evening, or where exactly Dean got those interesting night-vision binoculars, but there are ants crawling up Cas's left jeans leg and one of Mrs. Whilton's rose bushes scratched a deep gouge above his eyebrow that is now bleeding sluggish and wet into his right eye. Besides the miserable heat and humidity of the South Dakota summer, Dean seems relatively happy covered in dirt and sweat and a disgusting layer of random organic debris. Cas has to admit that the black war paint under his green eyes is fetching, if not a bit dramatic.

"All clear," Dean whispers into Cas's ear, voice husky and low, and it does things to Cas that will probably be difficult to ignore if Dean insists on spending the next hour crawling through more foliage and forcing Cas to drag the crotch of his jeans over the sun-baked soil. "We should have twenty seconds to clear this sector and reach the target." Cas takes that to mean the tiny metal gate across the yard that leads into the baseball field. "And then we approach from the southwest—" Dean stops abruptly and Cas feels the loss of his warm breath against the sensitive shell of his ear like a kick to the gut. "Dude, you're bleedin'."

Cas nods absently. Yes, he has been for some time now. Frowning, Dean reaches up with a dirty hand and fits his rough palm to Cas's unshaven cheek, runs the calloused pad of his thumb over the cut oozing sluggishly along the ridge of Cas's eyebrow. It takes a lot of self control not to grab Dean by the damned shirt and drag him closer, but Cas won't do it. Dean is his best friend, they're practically brothers—strange fraternal twins with an unhealthy codependency—and he could never forgive himself if he crossed an unspoken boundary somewhere and made Dean hate him.

The contact doesn't end, and Dean stays right there in Cas's personal space for far longer than is either prudent or inherently socially acceptable, but it's Dean and he's never really shown much respect for Cas's personal boundaries and *it's Dean*.

"You okay, Cas?" His voice is still quiet and gruff but it rumbles out of his chest and into Cas's ribs where their sides are pressed together under the questionable cover of the scrub brushes. Cas opens his mouth to respond but finds himself at a complete loss for words when he realizes just how easy it would be to close the gap between them, to lean forward and take what he wants, and

the real kicker here is that Dean would probably let him.

Dean, with his protective streak and his ridiculously big heart and his atrocious inability to express himself with tact or diction, would let Cas press their lips together and roll him onto his back in the dirt and kiss him, pin Dean to the ground between Cas's strong thighs, all because he wouldn't want to hurt Cas's feelings, because he cares about his best friend more than he cares about his own comfort zones and boundaries. Cas would have to be quite the bastard indeed to exploit that weakness, and while he's perfectly aggressive when he needs to be, now is not one of those times.

So instead of grabbing Dean by the hair and knocking him flat and spread-eagle under the damned hedges of Mrs. Whilton's yard, Cas pushes Dean's hand away from his face carefully and turns away from those ridiculous bottle-green eyes and says, "I can defer my enrollment for up to a year." He's not even sure why he says it, but he knows that it isn't an offer—it's a promise.

Because even hot and sweaty and bleeding, Cas can't imagine life without Dean right there beside him, dragging him into trouble and right back out again. It's like contemplating a life without half his limbs, and that's an impressively existential thought considering that Cas still has a pretty painful erection.

"Don't do this, Cas," Dean sighs explosively beside him. "You got a ticket outta here. You've got a future. Don't be a martyr." It's an interesting choice of words because if there's one thing that Cas has learned while growing up with Sam and Dean it's that Winchesters are very eager to nail themselves to the proverbial cross in defense of each other and those they love. Dean considers Cas a Winchester, so Cas does too, and that more than qualifies him to be the sacrificial lamb in this situation.

"I don't want a future that doesn't include you," Cas replies angrily. Then he realizes exactly how needy and crazy that sounds so he backtracks and adds, "Besides, I wouldn't last ten minutes in college by myself. Nerd, remember?" He gestures at the thick-rimmed black frames perched precariously on the bridge of his nose as evidence of his claim.

Dean gives him a long searching look that Cas tries to ignore, and then the other boy is giving him that stupid, happy half-grin that Dean only gets when he finds money in his pockets or Cas is being exceptionally awesome. Suddenly Dean is tackling him, rolling Cas onto his back in the dirt and dead leaf litter under Mrs. Whilton's kitchen window and half sprawling across Cas's chest. "I've seen you beat the shit outta guys twice your size, you liar. You don't need me around."

And Cas wants to punch him in the stomach and shout that he does need Dean, that he can't leave him behind without leaving part of himself in Bobby's junkyard, but the argument must flare up in his eyes because Dean shakes his head and claps a hand over Cas's mouth that tastes like metal and dirt. "But I'm not gonna let you go to college without backup. We're partners in crime, right?" Cas nods slowly, staring up at Dean like he's seen the face of God. "Damned right," Dean grins down at him, and his smile slips a little the longer he holds Cas's grateful gaze. "What if I don't get in?" he finally whispers.

There's no reason why Dean wouldn't be accepted. Cas had supervised the completion of both their applications, helped proofread Dean's essay and made sure that everything was post-marked by the correct deadlines. Dean is certainly smart enough to go to college, regardless of what he tells everyone, and Cas knows this. The idea that Dean would be wait-listed or rejected is absurd and Cas refuses to accept it, because he can't go to Kansas without him. End of story. That's it.

"It's most likely taking so long because they're trying to find another freshman stupid enough to room with you," Cas says without as much snark as he can usually muster, and Dean gives him a half-hearted smile.

“Yeah. That’s probably it,” he agrees too easily, before dropping his head to Cas’s shoulder. The cicadas are starting to screech in the sparse trees around the neighborhood, and the sun has long since set. It’s the summer after high school graduation, and two able-bodied eighteen year old boys should be cruising the streets in search of trouble or terrorizing girls their age outside the town’s only movie theater. Instead, Dean and Cas lay under the overgrown hedges in a lonely widow’s backyard, hot and uncomfortable and together, and they hide from the outside world and all its complications. Dean’s bony elbow is poking his ribs and the ants are crawling into his sock now, and Cas can’t think of any other way he’d rather spend a Friday night.

November 2012

Chapter Summary

Dean's severely disappointed in himself as a friend and a human being that the very next thought his mind is capable of producing is that he's always wanted to have sex with twins.

Dean knows something weird's going on when he hears the grinding bass and screaming amp coming from their dorm room all the way across the building. Garth's outside the door, frowning at the cheerful blue cuttlefish taped to the dark wood—Cas had decided in a random fit of inebriated passion that cuttlefish were the most intelligent creatures on the planet—and Dean's positive that the guy's there in an RA capacity, not a friendly one. It's just hard to take Garth seriously when he's seen the guy do jello shots out of a graduated cylinder.

Garth still looks slightly relieved to see Dean. "He's been in there all morning, and this is the fifth complaint I've gotten about the volume," he starts to explain, and Dean nods and claps him on the shoulder and slides his key into the lock.

The door swings inward the ungodly pitch of the music increases with painful exponential clarity, until it feels like Dean's fighting his way through a tangible wave of sound. It's dubstep. Cas only listens to dubstep when he's very, very angry, and whatever's got him pissed off enough to break residence hall rules so flagrantly at eleven in the morning can't be good. Dean closes the door behind himself, thumbs the lock, and wracks his brain to pull up anything he's done in the last four hours that could have set Cas off like this. He can't think of anything besides stealing his friend's underwear as he rushed around the room. And that's stupid because Cas steals Dean's shirts and jeans and jackets and... well, pretty much all of Dean's clothes, so if he's in here destroying his eardrums to Skrillex over a pair of tighty-whiteys then Dean needs to re-evaluate their relationship.

Cas is sprawled across the top bunk, glaring holes into the water-stained plaster over his head, and Dean's honestly a little intimidated by Cas on the warpath. The guy's a complete dork most of the time, and it's easy to take for granted how quiet and unassuming he can be. And then there are times when Cas explodes into a flurry of violence and aggression and Dean has to stand back and just fucking observe, because pissing off the nerd has really unpredictable results at the best of times. He's seen Cas angry before, and while the guy doesn't take it out on Dean often, he's been on the receiving end of enough rage-fueled tirades that Dean knows how to handle a bristly Cas.

He starts by slinging his backback down onto the bottom bunk to alert the other man to his presence. When Cas's livid blue eyes leave the ceiling and find Dean, he moves to the desk and inches down the volume knob on the laptop's speakers. Cas doesn't jump down from the bed and hit Dean with his protractor set, so Dean considers that a success. He then kicks off his boots, climbs the rickety-ass ladder on the side of their bunkbed, and crawls onto Cas's bunk. It's strange because Cas never sleeps up here anymore and the engineering major side of Dean's brain is calculating whether or not the damned furniture will support two grown men. He's still deciding if he wants to sit against the wall or closer to his friend when Cas wriggles across the disarray of sheets and curls around Dean's thigh and sort of makes the decision for him.

There's a mop of dark hair against Dean's hip and Cas is pointedly not looking up at him. "I'll

apologize to Garth later,” he mutters. “I’m not having a good day.”

Dean nods noncommittally and leans back against the wall. “You gonna tell me what’s goin’ on?” he prods gently. Dean might be impatient and standoffish about having heart-to-hearts, but even he can tell that something’s seriously wrong with his best friend. “You only break out the crazy industrial techno when you get under ninety on exams.”

Cas snorts unattractively and rolls onto his back to finally look up at Dean. “I got a call from my uncle this morning, after you left.”

Wait, what? Dean runs through a mental tally of all of Cas’s family members and comes up with a flashing ‘no matches found.’ “You don’t have an uncle,” he says slowly, like maybe Bobby’s right and he’s really just fucking retarded after all.

“No, I don’t,” the other man confirms quietly. “At least, I didn’t think I had an uncle. I thought that my father was an only child. He certainly never mentioned having siblings.” Cas laughs then, and it’s dark and unhappy. “Though my father didn’t mention much to me at all.”

Dean decides that he definitely still hates the late Mr. Novak. He cards his fingers through Cas’s hair and tries not to dwell on that. “So you have an uncle?”

“Apparently. His name is Lucifer—” Dean’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline and Cas sighs. “Yes, I know. I suppose the strange predilection with religious themes is a family trait.” And yeah, that makes a lot of sense, because ‘Castiel.’ Who the hell names their kid after the Angel of Thursday, anyway? Cult leaders and Cas’s dad. “Lucifer got my number from a piece of paper he found in his son’s room.”

Dean gapes at him. “You have a cousin, too?” What the fuck? When Cas’s dad had kicked the bucket not a single damned person had turned up for the man’s funeral besides Bobby and the Winchesters, and certainly no one had come forward to claim Cas. Bobby had taken him in without hesitation, of course, but there hadn’t been any ‘next of kin.’ And now Novaks were popping out of the woodwork like cockroaches? Oh, Hell no. “Fuck that. You’ve got me and Sam and Bobby, Cas. You don’t need those bastards. We took care of you, and you’re *ours*, and I’m not lettin’ some crazy fuck named after the God damned *devil* bust up into your life and—”

“*Dean.*” The stern tone of Cas’s voice makes Dean realize that he’s been raising his own and rambling, but there’s no heat in Cas’s eyes. Instead, he looks ridiculously grateful and maybe a little annoyed, but in that weird affectionate way that only Cas can manage. “I’m aware that you are my family. Lucifer didn’t call to kindle any type of familial bond with me. He’s looking for his son, who disappeared a day ago. He had no idea that I was a relation.”

The explanation drives some of the tension out of Dean’s shoulders, but he still feels like he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. It can’t be a coincidence. It’s their last year here at KU, and then they’re moving to Palo Alto—all three of them—and Bobby doesn’t really care one way or another because they always come back during breaks. But things have been going so well, and even Sammy’d said the other day that their lives were going to get so much better once they were at Stanford, and it pisses Dean off that anything could mess this up for Cas because he’s worked so fucking hard.

“You look constipated,” Cas quips from Dean’s lap, and Dean glares at him.

“You look nerdy,” he counters, but he follows the comment with an aggravated half-smile and Cas responds with one of his own. “So where’s Satan’s kid?”

Cas rolls his eyes because putting up with Dean apparently turns significant others into martyrs. “I

have no idea, Dean. I also don't know how he got my cell phone number. But apparently he's not a minor and Lucifer has no real legal recourse to get him back. He left of his own accord and the police won't take a missing person's report until he's been gone for at least forty-eight hours."

Dean nods. "Is he a religious nut like your dad was?"

"Lucifer?" Cas frowns and thinks for a minute. He's making that stupid scrunched up face that Dean will never admit to finding adorable. Never. "I'm not sure. I only spoke with him for a little while, and he seemed relatively normal."

"You mean he didn't ask you to pray for the kid?" Dean drawls. It earns him a vicious poke in the side and he yelps. "What? I'm just askin'!"

Cas scowls up at him. "You're being an ass, Dean. Normal people pray." He cocks an eyebrow. "Sam prays."

That sobers Dean up a little. "Yeah, well, Sammy's always had enough faith for the lot of us. Doesn't mean he's normal." Although Sam really is pretty normal, and Dean's profoundly grateful for that. Cas has been a handful since the day they met, and having two weirdo sibling-types to look after would have made Dean's life infinitely more fucking difficult. Not that he doesn't love Cas, because he does. Dean loves Cas so much it scares the shit out of him. But Sam getting into average, run-of-the-mill trouble on the few occasions that he rarely does means less of a hassle for everyone. Hell, compared to Cas, Sam's a damned angel.

Dean leans down and presses a kiss to his friend's subtly pouting mouth. "Better tuck that lip in before it gets caught on somethin'," Dean grins.

Cas jabs him in the ribs with a bony elbow before turning and burying his face against Dean's stomach. "I can think of something I'd like to catch it on." His voice is muffled against Dean's shirt but it still lights a fire in the pit of his gut. Cas has his friend's shirt nuzzled halfway past Dean's navel and is licking into his bellybutton in a hungry sort of way that should tickle but really, *really* doesn't when someone knocks on their door.

"Just ignore it," Cas growls, undoing the button fly of Dean's jeans with the sort of contagious enthusiasm he normally reserves for linear algebra and cheeseburgers. "It's probably just Garth, again."

Dean opens his mouth and tries to articulate his agreement, but that's really difficult when Cas is trying to rip his damned jeans down his thighs completely unassisted. It's only been three months since they started doing... this, whatever the hell *this* is. Dean doesn't want to call it dating because the nicest place he's ever taken Cas was the food court at the Smithsonian on a field trip, and Cas won't call Dean his boyfriend because they're best friends and that's way more important, but regardless of what they're labelling it, starting this physical side to things has unleashed all kinds of crazy hormonal impulses in Cas. Dean had always pegged his friend for the quiet, shy, reserved type in bed, and if that made for wicked hot daydreams before then having Cas manhandle him and almost constantly in Dean's pants is fucking euphoric.

Regardless, someone's still knocking pretty persistently at their door, and Dean knows that if he ignores it long enough then Garth'll just pick the lock. So he grabs Cas's wrist and extracts it from the front of his obscenely tented jeans and shoots him a warning look when he makes a growling protest. Cas relents with a glare and a really unmanly huff and falls back onto the mattress. He doesn't stop glaring even when Dean's making his way clumsily down the bunkbed ladder or when Cas shifts his hips and palms himself through his Iron Man pajamas.

The knocking has morphed into an insistent banging and when Cas's mouth falls open and slack

around a quiet moan Dean nearly loses his footing and slips on the last rung. "Hold your fucking horses," Dean snaps at the asshole on the other side of their door, and he scrambles to rebutton his jeans. To Cas, who's contentedly pushing into the heel of his own hand, Dean whispers a scathing, "Just you fucking wait." The shit that guy does to Dean with that cocky half-grin of his ought to be friggin' illegal.

Dean reaches for the doorknob and tries to unlock the damned thing while watching the pretty awesome show his best friend is putting on from the top bunk. "Garth, I swear to God if this isn't important I'm gonna fuck Cas right in front of you," he snarls as he wrenches the door open, but it isn't Garth frozen there with his fist raised to slam into the door.

It's Cas.

But that's fucking impossible, because Cas is still shamelessly rocking up into his own hand about two feet to Dean's left and six feet up. Maybe it's just someone who really looks like Cas? Dean squints at the stranger. Same amazing blue eyes, same messy dark hair, same permanent five o' clock shadow. No, Dean's obviously just in a parallel dimension. Or the stress of college has finally caught up to him and he's having a psychotic break.

"Cas, I'm having a nervous breakdown," Dean announces over his shoulder at the not even subtle noises Cas is making from the bed. "I'm hallucinating you."

There's a pause from the bed, and the not real-Cas is staring at Dean like he's grown a second head. "How do you know my name?" he asks Dean in the same gravelly voice that is now asking Dean, "What are you talking about?" from inside the room, and then real-Cas is shoving the door open and gaping at himself.

Dean feels like he's caught in some weird time paradox where everything slows way the hell down. He's half-expecting The Doctor to show up in the hallway and announce himself, it's that fucking strange. Real Cas is staring at not real-Cas and they look so goddamned alike that it's starting to freak Dean the fuck out.

"Who are you?" Cas—Dean's Cas—asks suddenly. And if real-Cas can see him, then Dean's not crazy. Awesome. What the fuck?

"My name's Cassiel Novak," the doppelganger says quietly. He looks shell-shocked. "I'm looking for my brother."

Brother.

Cas has a brother.

Cas has a *twin* brother.

Dean's severely disappointed in himself as a friend and a human being that the very next thought his mind is capable of producing is that he's always wanted to have sex with twins. God, what is *wrong* with him?

"I think you found him," Dean says helpfully, because what the hell else is he supposed to say?

'Nope, wrong room. Try 33A, not B'? Real Cas kicks him in the calf and damned near collapses his knee. Dean turns to glare at him with a half-formed 'ow' and stops when he sees how pale his friend is. It's big brother instinct more than anything that lets him reach out and catch the guy before he hits the linoleum when he passes out. That, and Cas used to faint all the time when they were kids and he saw blood. His boyfriend-life partner-whatever the hell is such a fucking *girl*.

November 2012

Chapter Summary

Cas is still glaring holes of righteous indignation through the front door as if he can strike Dean down from a distance like one of the X-Men.

This is the single most awkward dinner Sam's ever had, and he grew up with Bobby so that's sort of saying something. The discomfort isn't even because they're all crammed into Ash's stupid attic apartment, which is freezing despite the bodies clustered together around the room. Hell, Sam doesn't even think it's because of the rapidly cooling pizza that no one but his idiot brother is eating or the random computer parts and video game controllers strewn about like landmines. No, Sam's damned positive that all the strangling tension in the loft is entirely due to the twins sitting uncomfortably on the upturned milk crates at the center of this weird gathering of everyone in the Winchester inner circle.

It looks like a war tribunal, and Sam isn't really comfortable with the skittish, flighty look on the new addition. Cassiel looks fit to bolt. Granted, the younger Winchester doesn't know him well enough to really judge his mental state. Then again Sam can't imagine facing down half of his own friends like this, crowded and keen in the middle of a stranger's house that's hosting more computer equipment than the damned Pentagon.

Ash's place really is a fire hazard.

"So you're Cas's long lost twin brother that no one knew about from across the country, you ran away from home because your Uncle Lucifer wants to ship you off to seminary, and you found Cas through a series of cleverly executed internet trace searches?" All eyes in the room shift to Jo. She tosses her blonde hair over one flannel-clad shoulder before shrugging. "What? Trying to make sure we got all the facts."

Ash rolls his eyes and gives Garth a long-suffering 'why did we let a girl into our clubhouse' look before extending his hand towards their new addition. "Gimme your driver's license," he snaps his fingers impatiently, and Cassiel stares at the other man's hand for a second before shooting his brother a frightened look. Castiel nods and he pulls out his wallet. The license disappears into a scanner and Ash's fingers fly across the keys of the nearest laptop. "Seven minutes," he chirps.

"Thank you, Agent Smith," Michael drawls from the bean bag at Dean's feet. Ash flicks him off while typing one-handed. Garth laughs. "What's your favorite color?"

It's such a random question that even the clacking keyboard hesitates for a second before everyone's focus ricochets back to Cassiel. The guy opens his mouth to reply but nothing comes out for a second. Beside him, Castiel leans closer to his twin so that their shoulders bump, and it seems to give the new guy enough of an impetus to speak. "Green," he practically spits the word.

Michael nods and makes a face. "Okay. Favorite food."

Cassiel chews his lip for a second before replying, faster this time, "Lasagna."

"Best subject in high school?"

“English.”

“Dogs or cats?”

“Cats.”

“Rich and serious or poor and fun?”

“Poor and fun.”

“Favorite book?”

“1984.”

“Is Elvis dead?”

“Yes.”

The room gets silent for a moment, holding its breath, and then Cassiel adds quietly, “But the King can never really die.”

Michael grins and sits forward, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. Their verbal sparring match comes to a standstill and Sam thinks that Michael, the theatre buff, might actually make a damned good lawyer. “He’s got my vote,” Michael announces to the room. “Who’s next?”

They take turns. It takes an hour. Jo asks about Cassiel’s family life—boring, Lucifer was so normal and unremarkable that Sam’s almost disappointed. Ash wants to know if Cassiel’s ever killed a man—not outside of video games. Garth asks the poor guy if he’s a virgin, to which Cassiel turns fire-engine red and damned near hides behind his brother, but then Jo rolls her eyes and points out the Garth is, too.

Sam wants to know why Cassiel ‘ran away,’ and they get a curt, prepared response. “I didn’t know about my real dad or Castiel until two weeks ago. I saw his picture in a newspaper article about physics research at a competition that my community college was competing in. So I tracked him down and left.” Cassiel glances over at his twin for a second before taking a deep breath and continuing, eyes glued to Ash’s dusty floor. “Lucifer’s not my dad. I didn’t even know our dad was dead.” There’s something pained in his voice, and he sounds so much like Cas it’s freaking nuts, but Cassiel’s voice is slightly higher, smoother, like he doesn’t chew on broken glass for fun, and Castiel’s never had that desperate, hopeless tone to his baritone. Never.

“Castiel’s my only family now. Lucifer lied to me for twenty-two years. I’m not going back.”

The way Cassiel says it and then immediately looks up and pins Dean with his crazy blue eyes is important.

Sam thinks that this new guy can see straight through Dean’s nonchalant, frat boy act and into the heart of him in that same freaky way that Castiel can, and the twin seems to know that Dean is the biggest threat in the room. It has nothing to do with intelligence or brawn or popularity, here—it’s the subtle things. It’s the way that Dean hasn’t taken his eyes off of Castiel once throughout this entire exchange, even when he managed to drop a greasy pepperoni onto the crotch of his jeans because Dean’s a neanderthal and one day Cas will wise up and leave him for a guy with table manners. It’s the way Castiel’s right leg has been looped over Dean’s left one since they sat down. It’s probably even got something to do with the fact that Dean hasn’t said a single damned word since they all piled into Ash’s loft and started this interrogation-slash-introductory dinner where no one’s hungry—except Dean—and everyone’s still staring pretty hard at the new arrival.

“What do you want to know?” Cassiel asks Dean evenly, but his hands are shaking slightly

where they rest on his thighs. Sam thinks that, minus the canvas military-style jacket and plus a few holes in the guy's jeans, Sam wouldn't be able to tell the twins apart unless they spoke or got within arm's length of the older Winchester brother. It's as fascinating as it is confusing.

Dean sets his paper plate aside carefully and crosses his arms over his chest from the recliner he's claimed. There's a determined finality to the set of his mouth before he answers, calm and quiet and serious as the grave. "Nothing," he half shrugs. "But I'm gonna let you know something."

Dean sits forward and gives Cassiel a hard look. "I don't know you from a hole in the ground, and I'm sorry that your uncle lied to you. Cas," he says, and cants his head to indicate his roommate, "Has been my best friend since before I could spell my last name. He's family. If you hurt him, I swear by God they will never find your body."

Sam's brother sits back in the recliner, snagging his plate, and continues to chew stubbornly on the pizza crusts he hasn't finished. Castiel is glaring balefully at Dean in a very uncharacteristic way, and Dean arches an eyebrow at his best friend and glares back. Ash doesn't seem to notice, just nods to himself and hands Cassiel's license back to him. "He's clean." He leers and reaches over to ruffle the twin's hair playfully. "Want me to take a blood sample just in case?"

Castiel rolls his eyes and slaps Ash's hand away before inching his crate closer to his brother's until their thighs are pressed together. It's sort of interesting that they've known each other for less than three hours and they're already so comfortable in each other's space. Dean looks down and away and Sam sees a muscle tick in his brother's jaw. That's never a good sign.

Michael notices it, too. He shoots Sam a quick sideways look but doesn't point it out aloud. It matters that the guy even picked up on it, though. The younger Winchester brother's got a feeling that he, Dean, and Cas's long-nurtured and tight family bond is about to get shaken loose, and Sam thinks that this is the scariest prospect he's faced since the last big fight that he had with John. Some stupid part of him would feel better if Dean just raged and yelled and broke things, because a calm Dean is never a good thing.

Sam has spent his entire life thinking that nothing could ever crowbar its way between Dean and Cas. Seems he might have been mistaken, and Sam's not really sure what the hell he's going to do if Cassiel really is that crowbar. Castiel looks away from Dean finally to where their hall's RA is busy fighting Ash for the last beer. "Garth, you don't mind if we let him stay in our dorm for a few days until we can find a more permanent place for him, do you?"

The dramatic sigh that Garth heaves is enough of a distraction for Ash to wrestle the prized can of PBR away and disappear under his desk with it. "Guys, I can probably get in a lot of trouble for this..." Dean seems to perk up at that. "But yeah, I guess. Just don't let anyone catch you sneaking him in or out, okay?" What a pushover.

Dean's face falls and he looks over at Michael with a familiar, cocky grin, and something curls up and dies in Sam's chest. That's the smile that Dean wears when he's trying to charm his way out of a speeding ticket or into someone's pants, and Sam's fucking positive that Michael didn't join the police force overnight. "Cool. You mind if I crash at your place? Cassie here can have my bunk. Wouldn't want to crowd the poor guy, right?"

There's a flash of something in Michael's grey eyes, like he can feel Sam shouting 'no' at the top of his lungs in his head, but he wets his lips quickly before nodding, and Sam looks over in time to catch the absolutely crushed look that crosses over Castiel's face. Then Cas schools his expression into something cold and hard and barely held-together that Sam last saw at Mr. Novak's funeral. Dean's smile grows, calculated, before he unfolds himself from the recliner and stretches his arms over his head noisily. He's angled his hips towards Michael and the hem of his henley rides up to flash a strip of bare skin before Dean's glancing over his shoulder at his best friend flippantly. "See you kids tomorrow," he quips cheerfully, and Dean and Michael leave.

The door to Ash's place closes behind them like a gunshot. From the couch, Jo shakes her head sadly before throwing her hands up in the air, speechless. Garth looks confused, like he knows that he did something wrong but he can't figure out what, and even Ash looks contrite. Cassiel's shooting his brother a confused look. Cas is still glaring holes of righteous indignation through the front door as if he can strike Dean down from a distance like one of the X-Men. Sam claps his hands together and announces to the room out loud, "Well, that was productive." Castiel arches an incredulous eyebrow at him and Sam feels his anger spike suddenly. "Maybe next time you could just stab Dean in the chest, Cas," he snaps. "It looked like that might actually hurt less."

Castiel's glare dies and he looks cowed. He opens his mouth but doesn't seem to be capable of producing an adequate response to Sam's protective fury, so the younger Winchester gets up and follows Dean out the door. He can't deal with this. He wishes that Cassiel had never showed up. He needs to stop Dean from making the single dumbest mistake of his life, and he needs to not be fighting with Cas.

Sam and Cas never fight. *Never*. But Dean and Cas are Sam's big brothers, and they're in love with each other, and Sam can't watch Cas go away to Stanford without him and Dean, and Cas doesn't need another brother, anyway. What the fuck's wrong with the two he already has?

November 2012

Chapter Summary

Cas doesn't think that he'd be able to regress their relationship back to a point where casual touches and invasions of personal space didn't resolve in Dean breathless underneath him, bowed thighs bracketing Cas's sharp hips and blunt nails raking possessive down Cas's shoulder blades.

It's almost six in the morning when Cas hears the door creak open loudly followed by quiet cursing, but by then he knows that Dean's sneaking in and trying his damndest not to wake anyone. There's light snoring carrying from the top bunk—Cas finds it absently interesting that he and his twin brother both snore—and Dean pauses once he's got the door closed to kick off his boots, shuck his jacket onto the desk chair, run a tired hand through his hair and sigh. If Cas wasn't so anxious about the travesty that had happened at Ash's house earlier he might have been annoyed that Dean stayed over at Michael's until this late, but instead Cas has spent the last few hours staring at the underside of the top bunk and turning over Sam's angry tirade in his mind.

Dean must think that Cas is asleep, because he's all controlled, quiet movement as he comes closer to the bed and stares down at the half-dressed question mark of Cas's body sprawled on his stomach in the sheets. The older Winchester's presence is like a palpable reminder of what had happened earlier, the brittle tension between his best friend and his twin brother, and it sets Cas on edge.

In the grand scheme of things, Dean is his family and always will be, even in the unlikely event that they grow to hate each other. Cas can't really imagine his life without Dean there in it, stealing his notes and singing under his breath while he studies and curling around Cas whenever he gets the chance, regardless of time or place or company. Dean loves him with everything he has because that's just the type of person that he is, and Cas is terrified that he's made a fatal error and Dean is going to pack his things and leave.

Cas has never really examined exactly what it is that he and Dean have because it's always been there. He's grown up with it, and it's made him complacent in a way that only time can provoke.

Dean's always been there for him, always had his back, always supported him whole-heartedly and defended him unabashedly and, apparently, loved him fiercely for so long that the idea of losing this is unfathomable. Cas thinks that if Dean decides to throw in the proverbial towel now, over Cassiel of all things, then Cas might just have to give in to this crazy idea he's been examining on a repeat loop for the last few hours that maybe he's never deserved Dean's reckless loyalty and ridiculously unlikely friendship. Maybe Dean's finally realized that he can do better.

It's completely illogical, because Cas is very much aware of his own intelligence. He knows that he's bright, and relatively attractive, and he's good at what he does. But Dean...

Dean's something else *entirely*.

His best friend is clever, he's quick, and he's really damned good-looking. He's a problem solver, a great one, and he's really good with his hands. Fuck, is he good with his hands. Dean has the type of personality that snags people's immediate attention and then disperses so fully into their memory that he's almost impossible to shake. He's handy in a fight and he knows more about

breaking and entering than an upstanding young engineering major really should, and despite everything that Cas has working against him—he's not built like Dean, he's not nearly as socially adept as Dean, he's curt and abrupt and almost rude most of the time—Dean's never left him behind, not *once*.

Cas really isn't the type to lounge around and lament his insecurities—and they are surprisingly numerous—but Cassiel hadn't said more than a handful of words to him when they left Ash's, claimed the top bunk for himself, and passed out. Cas stripped to the waist, kicked his shoes off, and buried his face in Dean's pillow because his eyes burned and he didn't want to think about what the wicked glint in his best friend's gorgeous green eyes had meant when he'd cocked his hips at Michael and smiled that patented Winchester smile at a guy who knows full well that Dean is off-limits. So Cas had mulled over this mental list of his own attributes and character flaws and found the negative side of things strongly stacked against him.

This entire situation is so absurd that Cas isn't certain that normal operating parameters even need apply. He and Dean fight, have fought at least once a week for the last ten years, but it's always over trivial, inconsequential things that don't matter—the remote, what they listen to in the car, dinner, who actually paid for the Chevy hoodie they both love the most. These arguments are usually resolved within the hour, the winner determined through sheer stubborn willpower or sexually-suggestive wrestling matches that, these days, end in both of them panting and wrapped around each other on the floor of their dorm room. Cas doesn't think that he'd be able to regress their relationship back to a point where casual touches and invasions of personal space didn't resolve in Dean breathless underneath him, bowed thighs bracketing Cas's sharp hips and blunt nails raking possessive down Cas's shoulder blades. Dean's got his own ridiculous gravitational field and Cas has been caught in his pull for so long that leaving his orbit would be scientifically improbable.

Whatever had happened in Ash's cluttered, dirt apartment last night hadn't been their usual confrontation though, and Cas doubts that any amount of carpet burns and verbal sparring will fix it. Dean's never done anything to intentionally hurt Cas, and Cas has never put anyone before Dean except Sam, because they have an unspoken but understood law that Sam is their priority.

And Cassiel might be a virtual stranger, but he's still Cas's damned brother. Cas has never had a brother before, not a flesh and blood sibling and certainly not a twin, and Bobby had raised him to understand that family wasn't necessarily about genetics and heredity and traditional roles, but Dean just doesn't get this. He can't possibly understand what it was like for Cas to grow up knowing that no one in his entire blood-related kin gave a damn what happened to him. He's unbelievably lucky to have Bobby and Sam and Dean, and as far as Cas is concerned he *is* a Winchester, but Cassiel is his *blood*. Dean would do anything for Sam. Cas thinks that, for Cassiel, he has to at least *try*.

And it could turn out that he and Cassiel hate each other, can't work each other into their lives and resolve all of their inconsistencies, or they could be as close as Sam and Dean, as close as Dean and Cas, and maybe this whole nightmare can be a stupid chapter in their lives that they all look back on, roll their eyes over, and promptly forget again. But right now, it's almost six in the morning and Dean is standing beside the bunkbed and Cas just wants to grab him by the belt loops and drag him down onto the mattress so that he can lose himself in his best friend and push away every nagging doubt that's been running rampant through his head for hours.

Cas is about to roll onto his back and address the other man when Dean's quiet voice disturbs the tense quiet of their room. "I'm sorry," he says softly. "I don't even know if you're awake, but I'm sorry. Whatever I did to make you wanna pick a total stranger over me, I promise I won't ever do it again." Dean sounds so absolutely wrecked that it's hard to listen to, and Cas feels something in his stomach clench like he's been hit. "I wasn't tryin' to start shit with him, Cas... But I don't know him from Adam and it's my job to protect you and Sammy. I don't understand what I did

wrong,” he trails off, and there’s a pained anxiety to his tone that makes Cas irrationally angry with himself for a moment, because Dean is strong and brave and confident, and only his family can reduce him to this shaking wall of insecurity at Cas’s back. Cas did this. He brought Dean to his knees with one awful decision, and now he has to fix this. He has to fix Dean. Because that’s Cas’s job.

“Dean,” Cas sighs, and he rolls onto his back, staring up at the other man guiltily. Dean’s got dark circles under his eyes, his hair is a spiked mess—he’s probably been running his hands through it anxiously—and he looks like someone ran over his dog in front of him. It breaks Cas’s heart to know that he’s responsible for that look.

It’s times like now that Cas wonders, on some intrinsic level, what the hell Dean possibly sees in him to generate the kind of love he has for Cas, the deep-seated almost habit-forming level of feeling that can give Cas the power to emotionally devastate his best friend. Cas sits up and wraps his arms around Dean’s waist, tugging him into the open vee of Cas’s legs and burying his face in the other man’s stomach. Cas just holds him there for a minute before he can corral his thoughts and string together coherent sentences. “Dean, you didn’t do anything wrong,” he breathes.

There are tentative hands hovering near Cas’s shoulders and that hurts too, because Dean’s never been afraid to touch him before—nervous, of course, or even a little shy, sure, but never afraid.

Cas shakes his head, forehead resting against one of Dean’s hipbones. “This whole situation is very confusing and I don’t know what to do about my brother. I have to help him,” he says quietly, because it’s true. Cassiel is now his responsibility, come what may. “But I’m not choosing him over you, Dean.” Cas looks up the length of Dean’s torso, rests his chin over his friend’s navel. Dean’s eyes are on him, watching him with the sort of desperate need for reassurance and approval that only John Winchester could ever inspire in the man. It makes Cas want to break things. “I’ll never choose him over you.”

Something in Dean seems to release at that and he sags in Cas’s hold like his strings have been cut. Dean’s eyes close and he leans against Cas and the bunkbed frame wearily. “You gonna yell at me for going to Michael’s?” Dean finally asks, and he sounds more like himself but still far from okay.

“No,” Cas answers simply. He trusts Dean, and even if practically throwing himself at Michael in front of their entire circle of friends had been an obvious slap in the face, Cas knows damned well that Dean would never cheat. Dean just isn’t wired like that.

So instead of yelling at his friend, or spilling his guts about every stupid idiosyncratic insecurity that Cas has managed to bring to the forefront of his own conscience in the past several hours, he drags Dean unresisting down onto the bed and kisses him. It’s guarded and wary at first, like Dean is waiting for Cas to throw him out of the bed and Cas is praying that Dean won’t just get up and leave, but there’s an underlying thread of panic to the way that Dean comes down on his elbows on either side of Cas’s head and physically presses him into the mattress with the flush length of his body, and that’s when Cas throws caution to the wind and locks his arms around Dean’s neck and pours every shred of worry and fear and regret into stealing the air from Dean’s lungs. Cas doesn’t particularly care about breathing when he’s got six feet of Winchester on top of him and Dean isn’t running for the door, leaving Cas behind, moving on with his life.

“I can’t lose you, Cas,” Dean is murmuring against his mouth, desperate, and his hands are shaking where they’re cradling both sides of Cas’s jaw like he’s afraid if he lets go Cas will disappear. Dean’s only like this behind closed doors, when he thinks that no one else in the world but Cas can see or hear him, and that’s when his devil-may-care shield drops and he allows himself to fall apart. “Whatever we gotta do, we’ll handle it. Together. I swear.”

And it’s absolutely insane to Cas that Dean is the one who’s terrified of being kicked to the curb

here, but it's been hard-wired into Cas for years now that his job is to calm Dean down and protect him—even from Cas himself—because that's what best friends do, so he kisses Dean reassuringly, deeply, until Dean is a trembling mess against Cas's chest and there isn't an inch of space between them. "I'm not going anywhere," Cas says against Dean's temple. "Ever."

Dean gives him a jerky nod, eyes closed, and lets Cas push his hair away from his forehead and tip his chin up to kiss him again. He leans into the touch and there's a worried furrow to his brow that just won't go away. Cas rests their foreheads together and tries to figure out when their relationship got so damned complicated, so far removed from the easy friendship they've always had. "I'm sorry," Dean breathes against his cheek again.

Cas doesn't think he'll ever be able to forgive himself for introducing Dean to the kind of crippling anxiety that he's now harboring. Dean deserves so much more than this, and for the first time in Cas's life he's beginning to question whether or not he really is good for Dean. Cas promises himself right there and then that he's going to fight tooth and nail to be whatever Dean needs him to be. That's Cas's job, and he's been doing it for years. They're older now and Cassiel is a whole new set of unforeseen variables, but Cas owes this to Dean. He loves his best friend so much that it physically fucking hurts him sometimes, and if Dean is half as scared of losing Cas as Cas is of losing Dean then maybe they'll be okay after all.

November 2011

Chapter Summary

It makes perfect sense then that Cas would eventually follow in Dean's frat legend, penicillin-laden footsteps and start dating.

Cas has been gone for all of seventeen hours and Sam's about two seconds away from slapping Dean in the back of the head and stealing his cell phone. His older brother—confident, brave, reckless Dean—has been curled up pathetically in Ash's recliner for the past three hours, the tip of his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth as he types dutifully on the phone's keypad. It's been an incessant symphony of dull clicks and heavy, dramatic sighs, and Sam's more than a little unnerved by Dean's creepastic behavior.

Dean and Cas haven't been away from each other for longer than a day since they were ten years old. John had tried, once, showing up unexpected and unannounced at Singer Salvage and ushering his sons into the Impala for an impromptu road trip to the next state over, 'family bonding time' and all of that jazz, and their dad had steadfastly ignored Dean's repeated quiet queries about why Cas wasn't comin' too, Dad, he's family too, right? It had only taken a day before Dean's pouting and confusion and dissolved into full-on waterworks so violent that John had immediately headed back to Sioux Falls.

The codependency there should be way weirder than it is, but when you grow up with it then you tend to overlook a lot of things. Like how your grown-ass brother is acting like he'll die if Cas takes more than twelve seconds to respond to each of his messages. Sam wonders absently how the hell Cas is getting anything done at this physics conference thing of his with Dean hounding him constantly.

When Dean's phone emits yet another Captain America sound effect to signal a new message, Sam snaps. "Dude," he barks. Dean frowns at him but continues to slide his phone open, smiling faintly as he reads the text before typing a reply.

"What?" he asks absently. Sam is now convinced that Dean's emotional capacity never matured past the ninth grade and his brother is helmet-wearing material. This is ridiculous.

"You've been texting him non-stop for over three hours. He'll be back in a day. Let him do his thing, Dean." Sam isn't really sure why he feels so personally invested in defending Cas's right to have a life outside of the older Winchester, but someone needs to. Garth and Ash had given Dean sympathetic pats on the back when he'd skipped all of his classes for the day and slunk over to the apartment, half-dressed and clutching his phone like a lifeline. They were enabling this dangerously obsessive behavior. It wasn't healthy, and it was starting to freak Sam out.

Dean glares over the top of his phone at his little brother and hunkers down further in the recliner, rubbing his unshaven cheek idly against his shoulder. It's with a groan of exasperation that Sam recognizes the faded Chevy logo on the hoodie Dean's wearing—it's definitely Cas's. That has to be the single creepiest thing Dean's done this month, hands down.

"I miss him," Dean growls defensively, refusing to meet Sam's annoyed gaze. His phone chirps again and he's immediately distracted by the screen's bright glow once again.

Sam rolls his eyes and gives up on concentrating his attention on his latest Anthropology essay.

He just can't work in these conditions. "Dean, he's never going to stand a chance of making new friends—or hell, scoring a date—if he's constantly on his phone." Because Sam is the best little brother in the world to two retarded older brothers, he has to think of these things. Obviously no one else is going to step up to the plate and shoulder the burden of ensuring that Dean and Cas are moderately well-adjusted, semi-normal, and not entirely gross. It's a rough job. Sam should get hazard pay.

What he gets instead is Dean's rapt attention, shockingly enough, and a look of unmitigated confusion on his brother's handsome face. "Why the hell would Cas want to go on a date?"

Now, Dean's a smart guy. Make no mistake about it. He can rebuild an engine from the ground up, rewire almost any electrical device he's given, and he even helps Cas study for his higher level math finals. But when it comes to things that would be painfully obvious to anyone else, Dean isn't the sharpest tool in the shed. Obviously, Cas is going to date, maybe even find a long-term relationship and, Heaven forbid, lose his v-card one day. Obviously. So why Dean's looking two parts appalled, one part disturbed at the very idea is beyond Sam.

Dean sleeps around a bit. Okay, a lot. He's not as bad about it as he was in high school—he seems a bit more discriminating in who he'll go home with now, and he doesn't do the whole 'bar trolling' thing as often as he used to—but he still averages a few one night stands a month. The only reason that Sam's even privy to this disgusting bit of trivia is that Cas shows up on his doorstep every time it happens, because Dean is the worst roommate and best friend ever.

It makes perfect sense then that Cas would eventually follow in Dean's frat legend, penicillin-laden footsteps and start dating. Granted, at twenty years old he'd never had a girlfriend that Sam's known of, but there's still hope that Cas won't waste away in a lab somewhere for the rest of his life with only text messages from Dean filling his phone. Right? God, what a terrible way to go.

Sam's so caught up in his own thoughts that he doesn't realize that Dean's up and moving across the room to the fire escape, climbing awkwardly through the window and out onto the metal grating with his phone held to his ear. "Hey," Dean breathes, grinning like a maniac, and then, "Yeah, I know. I miss you, too," and he's so damned earnest and happy about it that Sam decided that maybe he should just admit defeat. Dean and Cas have always been freaks, anyway. If Dean's completely comfortable with acting like a creepy stalker and Cas is encouraging it, then that's really none of Sam's business.

"I promise you're not botherin' me, Cas. Well, Jo asked me to go to the library with her tonight, but I get really shitty cell reception there, so..." The window slides closed behind Dean and the rest of their conversation is cut off. Sam snorts. Those two are unbelievable. What the hell are they supposed to do when they transfer to different colleges, or God forbid one of them gets married?

Sam spends the next half hour chuckling to himself at the idea of Dean and Cas as a sitcom, where Cas marries some crazy-attractive model type and then has to justify allowing Dean to bum in the spare bedroom for the rest of their lives. They would have crazy domestic antics and hilarious hijinks, and Sam of course would have many wonderful cameos. Bobby would stop by on special occasions and futilely attempt to talk Dean into moving out. There would be a special Christmas episode where the Novak family got a new puppy, and a cheesy theme song complete with harmonica.

If only Dean and Cas were nearly as entertaining in real life as they are in Sam's head. The younger Winchester sighs and turns back to his essay and glances out the window at where Dean is swaying from side to side like a Disney princess as he speaks excitedly into the phone.

Nevermind. Cas wouldn't marry some stupid-hot supermodel. Dean would obviously wear the wedding dress.

December 2012

Chapter Summary

Cassiel had drawn the line when Castiel shoved him into the bathroom brandishing a tape measure like a weapon and demanded he drop his pants in the name of science.

Dean Winchester is loud, crass, and has appalling table manners. He looks like he rolled out of bed and picked up the first pieces of clothing he tripped over before forgetting to shower and running to class. He makes crude jokes at top volume at the most inappropriate times and he doesn't seem to care if people overhear him. Yesterday, during lunch at the local burger joint, Dean managed to scare off a family of five with gratuitous use of the f-bomb. Today during breakfast he flipped off a Christian minister because, "He was lookin' at me funny." Dean is like every high school bully that beat the living crap out of Cassiel, but prettier. He's cocky and arrogant and rude and Cass thinks he might be a little in love with the idiot.

It's been over a month since the day he showed up at KU on his twin's doorstep with nothing more than a hastily-packed duffel bag and twenty dollars to his name, and besides that first rough night everything's gone surprisingly well. Cassiel spends a majority of his free time wandering through Lawrence, looking for employment—he's not going to outstay his welcome and burden his brother, not if he can help it. In the afternoons he follows Castiel around the physics labs, making sure to remain unobtrusive and quiet as much as possible, and he doesn't really understand what it is that his twin is researching, but Cas gets very animated and nearly trips over his words in his excitement to explain, expansive hand gestures haphazard in his oversized labcoat. His brother is kind and brilliant and adorably awkward, and Cass wonders how he managed an entire lifetime without his other half.

Dean tolerates Cass's presence, and he doesn't do it nicely either. There are long, drawn out debates that end in one or both of them giving the other the cold shoulder for days, and Cas seems remarkably unhappy when it happens, but he weathers their disagreements with the sort of saintly patience that he must have in reserves for dealing with Dean. Sam is much more accepting of the new addition, and he takes to rescuing Cassiel from the dormitory and introducing him to his own circle of underclassmen friends. There's Bela and Ruby and Brady and Victor, and while they're all very intelligent people Cass finds that he prefers his brother's company above most others.

The problem is that his brother and Dean are apparently dangerously codependent and Cass has to take them as a package deal. This wouldn't be nearly as uncomfortable for him if he hadn't decided several days ago that Dean's abrasiveness and pig-headed moods are ridiculously attractive. Now it's simply a matter of time before Cas realizes that his brother is a terrible excuse for a human being and disowns him. Losing Castiel—especially after just having found him—is the last thing that Cassiel wants.

So he ignores Dean as much as it's possible to ignore something as interesting and blindingly gorgeous as Dean, and he retreats into himself, and after almost a week of ostensibly avoiding the older Winchester, Dean seeks him out, corners him alone in Ash's bedroom, and demands, "What the hell is your problem?"

Cass blinks stupidly at Dean's ridiculous green eyes and stutters, "I-I don't know what you're talking about." It's certainly not his most eloquent response, but when all of the blood in his body

decides to abort higher brain function and evacuate for more southern climes there really isn't much else to do but gawk like a retard.

Dean scowls, and even then he's still handsome. "You've been avoidin' me for days. And it's starting to freak me—*Cas* out. You wanna explain that?"

"Not particularly, no." This conversation is rapidly deteriorating. Some crazy, mutinous part of Cass's mind hopes that Dean will just get frustrated and give up.

Unlikely. Dean growls at him instead, and God if that isn't intriguing. "You're an asshole. What the hell did I do to you? Am I takin' up too much of your bro bonding time?"

Dean's being intentionally cruel now, and Cass frowns up at him. "Are you angry?" he asks quietly. "Why are you angry?"

It seems to ease some of Dean's irritation and his shoulders slump a bit. "I'm not angry," he mutters. "But you're being cagey and I don't understand what I did. I argue with *Cas* all the time and he doesn't disappear on me."

If the petulant confusion in his tone isn't enough to sway Cass then the actual damned pout on Dean's face certainly is. "I'm not *Cas*," he says evenly. "We're identical physically, but I don't like it when you get annoyed with me."

And it's like a light goes off in Dean's head, bright and sharp. Of course, Cassiel and Castiel are brothers, they're spitting images of one another, but they're two entirely distinct people, and Dean has simply assumed that he could treat them exactly the same and they would respond identically. To Cass the realization is as frustrating as it is endearing.

Dean rubs a hand over the back of his own neck and purses his lips, gaze averted to the unmade futon against the far wall. "Yeah. I know that," the older Winchester murmurs lamely. "But I thought..." He trails off and they both stand in the center of Ash's tiny bedroom, tense.

This is a little absurd of a predicament to find himself in. Dean is his brother's boyfriend.

Cass shouldn't even be entertaining these delusional ideas he's harboring that Dean could possibly be interested in a friendship with him; he's obviously just confused because Cass is an exact physical replica of the poor guy's best friend. It's still fairly surreal for Cass to watch his own brother move around and catalog the differences in their behaviors. While fascinating on some level, Cassiel had drawn the line when Castiel shoved him into the bathroom brandishing a tape measure like a weapon and demanded he drop his pants in the name of science.

At the end of the day, though, the twins are two finite and separate individuals, and Dean is very much in love with Castiel. He obviously has no clue how to handle Cassiel. So Cass makes a decision. Dean is obviously very important to his twin, and he's come to mean a lot to their newest family member as well over the past several weeks, and Cass doesn't want to botch this.

He and Dean need to be friends—no, family—and in order to be friends they have to get to know each other. Cass is more than capable of bottling up whatever impulsive attraction he's developing for Dean and ignoring it forever.

Hopefully.

Castiel is far too important to him to risk losing over a childish crush, anyway. Dean is attractive—fuck, is he ever attractive—but his twin is his top priority now, and Cass will be damned if he lets his hormones come between them.

"*Cas*'s favorite color is grey," Cass says quietly. He looks up and meets the lack of

comprehension in Dean's eyes steadily. "Mine's green. Cas is afraid of the dark. I'm not. Cas is allergic to strawberries. I'm allergic to peanuts. Cas loves calculus. I failed algebra twice in high school."

The corner of Dean's mouth is quirking upward and it makes something in Cass's chest push loose and open, like a release of tension he hadn't realized he'd been carrying this entire time.

"Cas picks all the sesame seeds off his hamburger buns before he eats them," Dean offers with a chuckle.

Cass's smile is tentative but real. "I'm a vegetarian."

"Cas is named after a civil war general and the Angel of Thursday."

"My full legal name is John Wilkes Booth Cassiel Novak. I'm named after a Judaic archangel and the guy that shot Lincoln."

Dean barks a laugh and slings an arm around Cass's shoulders and walks them home. They spend the entire trek back to the dorm comparing the twins' favorite movies, tastes in music, and anything else Dean can think up. Cass might be even more hopelessly enamored with his brother's best friend, but at least they're on speaking terms now. Besides, it's surprisingly easy to talk to Dean, and even easier to make him laugh. Cass just prays that the peace lasts. Sam's told him about the going home to South Dakota and Mr. Bobby Singer for the holidays, and Cass doesn't want to be left behind.

January 2008

Chapter Summary

John loves Dean when his son does exactly what he's told or when he remembers that he has sons at all.

The day after Dean's eighteenth birthday, John shows up in Sioux Falls after nine months without so much as a phone call and Dean rips him a new asshole. It's like someone ripped out all of the teenager's filters and threw the floodgates wide, and Bobby sends Sam inside, has to physically restrain Cas from intervening, because the verbal pissing match taking place between rows of rust-baked Oldsmobiles under the cold South Dakota sky has been a long time coming. John Winchester is not a bad father; he's just not a father, and Dean's letting loose every permutation and combination of curses he knows to articulate that point.

Cas is still struggling against Bobby's iron grip as Dean winds down, and John doesn't bother looking over his shoulder at the scene they're making as he orders the old mechanic to control his boy. Dean's snarling in John's face after that, bristling in needless defense of his best friend and that's when the altercation really gets out of hand, because John's always loathed Castiel like none other, says he's distracting Dean from taking care of Sammy. It's ridiculous, because Cas has raised the younger Winchester brother just as surely as Dean has, and John's never been there to see it, doesn't care that his absence has left a void that took two other boys and an old drunk to fill, but Dean knows. Dean cares. Dean cares so God damned much that he's choking on it, and he's spitting nails and throwing around insults like legitimate weapons as Bobby bodily hauls Cas's scrawny ass into the house.

John doesn't bother trying to defend himself. He doesn't even ask to see Sammy. He just steps back from his eldest son, gives him a pitying look like Dean is just too stupid or stubborn to see why he's in the wrong, all wrong, *always wrong*, and gets back into his truck. He leaves Singer Salvage in a haze of winter snow, leaves Dean feeling like he's the slowest kid in the relay race yet again.

Sammy's no where to be seen when Dean walks numbly back into the house, tracking ice and mud all over Bobby's dirty kitchen floor, and the older man looks really fucking embarrassed on John's behalf. Bobby's spent Dean's entire life being ashamed for John, and it doesn't fix a damned thing. Dean takes the narrow stairs two at a time to get the hell away from that sympathetic expression because he doesn't deserve it, does he? His dad's not impressed with him—*again*—and Dean doesn't want anyone's sympathy. He wants to sink into the floor and fucking *die*.

When he gets to his room and finds Cas curled up on his side in the center of his bed, he doesn't even bother with attempting to start a conversation. He doesn't really know what to say. He closes the door behind himself and kicks off his boots before crawling up onto the bed behind him. It takes a few seconds of rearranging himself, but Dean slots his front to Cas's back, wraps his arms around the other teenager's middle, and buries his face in soft, dark hair. He doesn't say anything; he doesn't need to. Cas is warm and solid in his arms under his baggy sweatshirt, and Dean lets his eyes slide closed.

They lay like that for a long time, bathed in the filtered yellow sunlight streaming into the room

through grimy old windows. It's really quiet. Dean can hear Cas's soft, angry breathing, the dogs outside in the yard, the steady ticking of the antique brass alarm clock on the bedside table. It's strangely calming. His body is settling into a loose, lethargic state that feels great regardless of the circumstances. Dean wishes they could just lay here forever, hole up in their shared space and each other and never have to deal with the outside world again. They could build their own home up here on the top floor of Bobby's ramshackle house. They could keep each other safe from all the terrible things that are waiting just beyond the bedroom door—absent fathers and long-dead mothers and the cruelty of others.

Dean thinks that he would never disappoint Cas, hasn't yet, and that if they could just lock themselves behind closed doors and stay wrapped around each other like security blankets then maybe his heart wouldn't hurt so damned much. Cas is pinkie promises and protective fury and unselfconscious laughter, and Dean wants to hide in those brilliant blue eyes for the rest of his life because Cas will never leave him, never hurt him, never tell him that he's not good enough or smart enough or *enough*.

Realistically, Dean understands on some baser level that his father loves him, that he cares, but Dean thinks that maybe it doesn't mean as much when a person in blood-related, family obligated to love you. Maybe it means a hell of a lot more when someone chooses to love you. Cas loves him whether he's had a bad day or failed a test or gotten in trouble with the sheriff again. Cas loves him when Dean can't love himself enough to make the right decisions or hold his tongue to his father. John loves Dean when his son does exactly what he's told or when he remembers that he has sons at all.

He doesn't realize that he's shaking until Cas turns over in his hold, rests their foreheads together and takes Dean's head in his hands. There's the rough pad of one thumb stroking over his temple and Cas's cold nose against his and Dean just can't anymore. This level of unconditional is everything that he'll never get from John, could never ask for and isn't entitled to, and Dean just can't figure out what the fuck he did wrong that his dad isn't proud of him. Bobby and Sammy are, always have been, even when he does stupid shit that he knows he shouldn't or snaps at them or lets them down. How can John be so disappointed in him every time he sees the man when Cas is looking at him like he's the second coming of Christ, like Dean hung the fucking moon and invented gravity and saved every orphaned kitten in America just by fucking being.

This thing between him and Cas, this weird codependent friendship, is unconditional. Dean's never going to find this with anyone else and he knows it.

"Fuck him," Cas breathes against his lips, eyes closed, and because they've obviously got some type of psychic bond, "Bobby and Sam love you. I love you." Dean feels another rip in his chest that's different than the raw and bleeding stab wounds that are his father's hallmark. No, this is that jagged tear Dean always gets when he realizes that Cas will never see him as anything more than a surrogate brother and partner in crime. He's getting used to them but they still hurt like a bitch.

"I know," Dean sighs quietly. "I love you, too." And he means it, from the fragmented depths of his battered heart, Dean means it. Cas just doesn't understand how much. But that's okay. He doesn't need to. Dean can hold this torch all by himself, shoulder the burden and carry the fuck on because that's what he's always done. And if it means that he can just lay here in their cramped little bedroom and hide his freezing toes under Cas's and pretend that the world outside isn't waiting to throw another punch the second he turns his back, then Dean can live with this.

John doesn't love him enough and Cas loves him the wrong way, but it's better than nothing at all.

December 2012

Chapter Summary

This is either going to end in some pretty kinky shower sex or Dean's in trouble for something, so he wracks his exhausted brain for anything he's done in the last twenty-four hours that would warrant non-sexual manhandling and comes up blank—all systems go.

Dean's expecting a lot of things when they all pile into the Impala and drive back home to Sioux Falls for winter break—beer, dogs, shooting cans off of the old split-rail fence that surrounds Singer Salvage, maybe even a decent Christmas dinner. What he *isn't* anticipating is explaining to Bobby why his adopted son has multiplied. They're an hour outside of the South Dakota state border when Sammy suddenly slams his fist into the passenger door and curses loudly. Dean blinks at the windshield, turns to his brother, and gives him a 'who lit the fuse on your tampon and why are you hurting my baby?' look. Seriously. Is he the only sane man in this family?

Sam ignores him, because that's what annoying little brothers who look like mooses do, and turns his gigantonic body in the front seat to point an accusing finger at Cas. "You didn't tell him about *him*," he says viciously, now pointing to Cass, "Did you?"

Castiel has the good decency to look mildly affronted. It's a testament to his history with the Winchesters that he can actually decipher the influx of pronouns in Sam's sentence. "You mean between engineering lasers for NASA and studying for seven final exams? No, I'm sorry. I didn't have much free time," he drawls, and Dean thinks that his best friend is fucking sexy when he's feeling sassy. Then he berates himself for mentally using the word 'sassy.'

"Don't even look at me," Cass exclaims, raising his open palms in the universal gesture of surrender and spinelessness and giving Sam a warning expression. "I don't even know the man."

Sam sighs in frustration and it blows his stupid, shampoo commercial bangs into his eyes.

Pa-thetic. "Great. This is just great." He slumps back into his seat and crosses his arms over his chest and pouts like a giant girl. Dean wonders when he got a sister and if they even make dresses in his size. Then he's got a stunningly disturbing visual of Sammy in a tube top sundress that Anna had once worn and Dean makes a face like he just swallowed someone else's vomit.

Behind him, Cass barks a startled laugh and Dean sees both twins watching him in the rearview mirror with matching smirks. He's never gonna be used to that.

"Okay, so maybe we should just call him?" Dean offers helpfully, because he's an awesome brother.

Sam looks at him like he's just waiting for someone to put Dean on the short bus. "No, we can't *just call him*," he rolls his eyes. Dean hopes they get stuck like that.

From the back seat, Cas mutters, "Keep that up, Sam, and your eyes will get stuck like that."

Dean steers with his knees long enough to pull the silver ring off his right hand and reach over his shoulder to wave it at Cas. "Marry me?" Cas gives him a bewildered look before accepting the ring quietly and staring down at it. Dean grins—confusing Cas is one of his favorite hobbies—and reaches towards the stereo to flip the tape over. Zeppelin II hums on in the background.

“I don’t think same-sex partnerships are legal in this state,” Cas says like it’s the biggest dilemma they’re currently facing. Sam buries his face in his hands and whines something about disowning them all.

“We can explain everything when we get there,” Cass speaks up. He’s snatched the ring away from his clueless twin and handed it back to Dean, because civilized human being actually proposes like that. “He probably won’t believe us if we call him.” And it’s a damned good point, because Bobby is a cantankerous old bastard—though they love him—and he’d hang up on them. Hell, *Dean* hadn’t been able to wrap his head around it for the first few weeks, but it’s been two months now and Cass has sort of blended into their family unit, and if Dean’s still entertaining thoughts of epic twin sex then that’s his own business. Cass spends more time with Cas than the Winchester brothers, but that’s all right too.

Sam nods in the defeated sort of way he gets when Dean insists in public that they’re related but doesn’t argue the point. After that the car lapses into a comfortable silence. When Dean guides the Impala off of the main road and into the gravel-strewn parking lot of a run-down diner, Sam yawns loudly and bustles out of the car to stretch his giraffe limbs. Dean turns in his seat and finds the twins slumped against each other, both snoring identically, and reaches forward to poke Cas in the ribs. He gets an annoyed murmur and a flailing arm for his efforts, but then Cas is untangling himself from his brother and climbing haphazardly over the back of the bench seat to land in Dean’s lap, warm and loose and clad in Dean’s favorite hoodie. “Whoa, cowboy,” Dean leers. “Not in the car.”

Cas fixes him with a baleful blue stare that’s completely undermined by the disaster of his hair and kisses him anyway. “Shut up, Dean.” He blinks lazily, reaches up under Dean’s jacket, and twists his right nipple painfully between two knuckles. “That’s for fake proposing to me.” Then he’s shuffling out of the car and opening the back door to drag Cass out by his sensible canvas jacket. Dean palms his abused chest and scowls. His boyfriend is a fucking masochist.

They get their food to-go, Sam cradling his salad box to his chest like Dean might steal it and throw it away if given the chance, but Dean thinks that Cass is more the more likely suspect.

They’re both half-rabbit. Cas climbs into the backseat again and eats his burger as obscenely as possible, licking grease off of his fingers with enough enthusiasm to shame a porn star. Halfway through the damned thing, Dean catches calculating blue eyes in the mirror and Cas fucking smirks at him and he knows that he’s doing that shit on purpose. Dean chews his lower lip and shifts in his seat and decides that he hates his best friend. *Masochist*.

They don’t reach Singer Salvage until late that night, but Bobby’s still sitting up on the front porch when they pull down the dirt driveway and park. Everyone clambers out of the car, flexing cramped joints and sore muscles, and Bobby’s eyebrows disappear under the brim of his old trucker cap. “Boy, what the hell are you gettin’ up to in that damned lab?” he asks Cas, pulling him unresisting into a paternal hug, and Dean laughs.

The whole story is explained, condensed, over a late dinner of instant mashed potatoes and what looks to be macaroni casserole, and Bobby slaps Sam in the back of the head when he picks at it suspiciously with the tines of his fork. Cass muffles a snort into his glass of milk and Dean bumps their knuckles conspiratorily under the table and Cas gives them both a long-suffering look while he stuffs his face with slightly-burnt dinner rolls.

Sam flees to sleep in his old room, if only to get away from the disgusting spectacle that his blood and surrogate brothers are making—“Seriously, you two are giving me fucking cavities with the longing looks!”—and Cass is relegated to the couch in the living room, which he promptly collapses into. Bobby gives Dean an arched eyebrow and corners him on the way up the stairs.

“I don’t have to give you the whole ‘I own a hundred acres and a lot of guns’ spiel about Cas, do

I?" he mutters, and Dean gives him a terrified, violent shake of his head before scrambling up the stairs after his best friend.

Dean's halfway to dry coming out of the shower in the tiny bathroom upstairs when Cas comes in, shoves Dean down onto the closed lid of the toilet, and shuts the creaking door behind them. This is either going to end in some pretty kinky shower sex or Dean's in trouble for something, so he wracks his exhausted brain for anything he's done in the last twenty-four hours that would warrant non-sexual man handling and comes up blank—all systems go. Cas gives him a thoughtful look, head cocked to the side in a way that has always been pretty damned adorable, and leans down to kiss him. It's soft and slow and a lot sweeter than Cas normally kisses him, because the guy's got a case of terminal nerd and repressed his insane libido with years of video games and test prep.

Dean reaches up and takes him by his pajama-clad hips and pulls him closer.

They share each other's space like it's the most natural thing in the world, and after almost two decades it sort of is. Cas pulls away after a little while, runs a hand through the damp spikes of Dean's hair. Then he slides a hand down Dean's bare arm to the silver ring now sitting snugly on his right hand and says, "It's legal in California."

Dean nods stupidly because he literally has no idea what the hell Cas is talking about. Lots of things are legal in California. Cas gives Dean a patient stare and waits for the ungreased clogs and gears to start spinning in sync with one another, and Dean remembers the almost-but-not-really proposal in the car earlier that day, and Cas's deft fingers are still hovering over the ring on his hand, and Dean stares back into blue eyes and thinks, *oh*.

They're going to Stanford next year. They'll be living in California, where same-sex marriage is completely legitimate under the law. Dean has never once considered being anyone's husband.

He'd make a terrible spouse. The only role models he's ever had in that department were his dad—not even gonna go there—and Bobby—Karen died when the Winchester boys were really little and still living with John out of the Impala.

But then again, Cas isn't much better off. His mother died when he was a baby and Bobby was his legal guardian after his dad croaked. "You wanna marry me?" Dean asks quietly, disbelief and awe warring with his expression. Cas looks down at his best friend like he's a new and creative kind of retarded, and why does *everyone* in his immediate family think that he's mentally deficient?

"No, I'd like to cohabitate in the same dwelling and have filthy gay sex with you for the rest of our lives with no legal recourse over anything that happens to you." Dean decides that he needs to teach Cas to play poker like yesterday; the older Winchester can't even mention sex without leering or giggling like a teenaged girl, and he's twenty two for fuck's sake. And he's obviously zoning out again because Cas is reaching down and taking Dean's chin in his hand and tilting his face up to meet Cas's blue eyes. He doesn't let go. "I've been in love with you for years, Dean. Why wouldn't I want to marry you?"

Dean doesn't have a good answer to that. He tries imagining his life ten years from now, and there's a Cas-shaped hole that needs to be filled, right next to the ornery Bobby hole and the gigantor Sammy one, and Dean frowns. "Yeah, okay," he says, and that's that. It's easy, like almost everything is with Cas.

Chuckling, Cas stands to his full height and ignores the hands grabbing at his ass as he backs into their old bedroom, so Dean follows him. They're under the blankets and pulling at each other's clothing within minutes, kissing wet and open and messy, and Cas may or may not rock his hips down into Dean's with a little too much force and slam the old wooden headboard into the wall. Then the dogs are barking downstairs, and Bobby is cussing up a storm from down the hall, and Dean and Cas both freeze where they're wrapped around each other and try to control their

snickering and fail miserably. They hide under the faded GI Joe-patterned sheets of Dean's bed, Cas cradled between Dean's splayed thighs, and rock-paper-scissors to determine who has to break the news to the rest of the family.

Dean loses, of course—"Dean, always with the scissors, you make it way too easy!"—and shoves a laughing Cas off of him. Cas makes it up to him with a thorough and very enthusiastic blow job. In the end, breathless and completely exhausted and arms full of Cas, Dean decides that he has the greatest almost-husband ever.

August 2013

Chapter Summary

Growing up at Bobby's had been harrowing—shotguns around every corner, rotting floorboards and ornamental rugs like pit traps in the dark, a house in disrepair that mirrored the loneliness of the gruff old man inhabiting it.

Their new house is tiny, barely big enough to house two grown men, let alone four. It's a narrow three-story brownstone on a respectable street in Palo Alto, and Cas is convinced that the neighbors on either side of them are watching their new place for any indications of immoral homosexual intent. Cass rolls his eyes and gives his twin a quick, one-armed hug before he runs out the front door to his new job, and Sam looks slightly appalled that their neighbors might consider him an active participant in whatever obnoxious gay shit Dean and Cas get up to in their attic bedroom. Dean couldn't give a shit less what the neighborhood watch thinks of his shamelessly gay relationship and even takes to strutting around the house in his underwear with all of the windows thrown open to the beautiful California sunshine and AC/DC blasting through the house.

Bobby shows up a week after they move in, helps Dean redo some of the ancient plumbing in the basement and rewires the appliances in the kitchen. The two toilets make strangled gurgling noises if flushed simultaneously and the dishwasher should have been put out to pasture in the 1970's, but the old mechanic pronounces the water heater fit to do business and that sort of evens things out in Dean's mind. It's not the greatest house in the world, but it's their house, and even if Bobby does clamber back into his old pickup truck and start the daunting trip back to South Dakota without them, they'll still see him when it counts. There's new tile to be laid down in the kitchen, a creaky door that needs to be rehinged outside of the living room, and Dean's got to do something to reinforce the floor boards in his and Cas's bedroom or Sam's convinced that they're going to fuck straight through the damned ceiling.

Dean finds this pretty ironic, considering that he and Cas haven't even had actual, proper sex yet. But that's none of his little brother's business.

Classes at Stanford start in two months for Sam and Cas. Dean's still waiting on a decision, but he applied to both the Physics and Engineering graduate programs, so they'll just have to see.

Worst case scenario in his mind is that he ends up getting a laboratory job nearby, or maybe even goes for his teaching license. Sam had laughed himself sick when Dean had first mentioned the idea, citing his brother's fondness for creative swearing and his lack of patience as glaring obstacles to a life of K-12 servitude. Cas had quickly conceded the point, though he had been a lot nicer about it. Cass had shrugged and told Dean to do what he thought he'd enjoy, and that had probably been the best advice of all.

So Dean's going to do what he can for now, fix things with his hands and hold down the fort while Sam gets his paperwork together and Cas rereads every single one of his theory textbooks in preparation of entry into grad school. Cass works days at the local bookstore and nights as a bartender a few blocks from the house, and he's always quiet and unobtrusive and stays out of Dean's way. Dean thinks that he's eternally grateful for it, because Cass seems just as lost as Dean's feeling, lately. They're both stuck in a strange holding pattern, not really sure where their lives are headed but relieved that their family is close still. Every day, Dean goes out and checks

the mailbox that he and Bobby replaced, stands on the front step of the Winchester-Novak homestead and valiantly swallows down the nervous disappointment when the postal haul yields coupons and utilities and journal publications, but there's no official Stanford letterhead with that annoying tree emblazoned on the envelope.

Dinner is usually something that's easy to microwave or has less than three steps in the directions on the box, because they're all grown men but they suck at cooking. Pizza is the staple of their diets now, and Sam complains that they're all going to get fat or die of heart attacks but he still eats enough to feed a small army. They sprawl around the living room and watch local news through static and interference on the enormous floor TV that they found at the thrift store.

Sometimes Dean will fight Sam for the ratty old couch he'd hauled in from the corner, discarded in favor of a better model but not a damned thing wrong with it, really, but most nights he curls around Cas on the floor and kicks half-heartedly at the tin foil covered rabbit ear antenna while Cas buries himself in yet another book.

It feels domestic, and Dean takes to it like a fish to water. He's never had this before. Growing up at Bobby's had been harrowing—shotguns around every corner, rotting floorboards and ornamental rugs like pit traps in the dark, a house in disrepair that mirrored the loneliness of the gruff old man inhabiting it. College dormitories had their own cultural chic, but Dean certainly doesn't miss communal bathrooms or the constant lack of privacy or the ever-expanding list of prohibited items. No, this place is theirs and Dean intends to make it not only livable but a nice home for Sam and Cas and even Cass, too. It's really the only thing he's good for at the moment.

So he patches holes and greases hinges and puts down ant traps to prove to Cas that he's still useful, still necessary, can still be great spouse material even if he won't end up with a big fancy degree from Stanford like Sam and Cas will.

Weeks trudge by, and after a while Dean stops running to the mailbox and Sam stops asking for news. No one mentions it, not even Cass on the odd occasion that he's home while everyone else is. The summers in California are mild compared to the Midwestern heat and sun to which they've all grown accustomed. Dean builds up an old lawnmower from practically scratch and spends hours cutting their tiny plot of a yard with an obsessive focus. He even ends up befriending one of their neighbors, a squirrely writer-type named Chuck, and they sit on the front step of Dean's house and drink beer and laugh about Chuck's work—he writes trashy gay erotica novels, and he's making a small fortune.

One month after they spend all of Dean and Cas's combined savings on the place, the property deed shows up in the mail with both of their names on it and Dean thinks that it makes his chest hurt in a way that a letter from Stanford never could. The walls of the brownstone get repainted—white in the living room, yellow in the kitchen, blue in the bathrooms because the paint was on sale. Dean hangs up the few family photos that they have in frames he makes himself, uses a level to ensure that everyone's diplomas are straight and not cockeyed like the shelves in the kitchen that he really needs to fix soon.

Dean finds himself stalking around the giant home improvement store at four in the afternoon one warm day in July, frowning at ceiling fans, when his phone goes off in his pocket. It's Bobby, and he wants to know if Dean's heard anything about grad school. Green eyes linger on an antique-looking lighting fixture that would go great with the new handles Dean just installed on the upstairs bathroom cabinets, and he scoops up the box under one arm and heads to the checkout. Dean asks Bobby to help him cash out his graduate school savings account and wire him the money the next day. Sam's gonna need his own beater car soon because the public transportation system really isn't all that efficient and Dean's been eyeing a new TV at the Best Buy around the corner. Bobby doesn't argue because Dean has that stubborn tone to his voice that dissolved a strained albeit lifelong relationship with his father and kept Cas in check for years—Dean's made up his mind.

Cas doesn't ask where the money comes from for the older model Chevy pickup that he finds Dean under in their driveway a week later. There's grease smeared up both of Dean's arms and his shirt is sticking to his chest with perspiration. Cas sits down beside the front bumper and grabs the edge of the creeper and wheels a startled Dean out from under the sun-baked frame of the truck and kisses him firmly. "You got something in the mail," he says quietly, and Dean can tell from the tone of his best friend's voice that it's not good. Cas holds up a slim envelope with that stupid damned tree in the corner and Dean just lets out a slow breath and nods because he'd figured as much. The letter inside is short and sweet, a polite and carefully-worded 'fuck you' to everything that Dean hadn't realized he'd wanted until right now. He trashes it and lets Cas baby him for the rest of the night, because that's what Cas does.

Sam is beyond excited about having his own vehicle, even if it does groan a little when it starts up in the mornings and he can't take it over forty-five on the highway without the steering wheel shaking fit to come loose. Cass spends his time between jobs helping Dean work on the truck and keeping the Impala in immaculate running condition for a lack of anything better to do. Dean teaches him everything he needs to know about cars—nothing is better than a Chevy, standard is way easier than metric, carburetors are better than fuel-injection if you tune 'em right. Sometimes Chuck comes over and watches them, 'for research purposes' he says, but Dean thinks that the guy's just lonely and that's okay, too.

By the end of the summer, the Winchester-Novak household has two fully operational vehicles, a renovated house, and two soon-to-be college students. Dean lays in bed the night before half of their family starts at Stanford and watches the ceiling fan that he installed circle lazily overhead.

Cas is plastered to Dean's side, face mashed into his throat, fingers laced through Dean's and resting over his heart, and Dean thinks that if someone had told him at fifteen that he'd be here at twenty-three, he'd have laughed and then punched them in the mouth for taunting him. But he's laying on a well-used mattress on the floor in the attic of their house, and Cas is wrapped around him like a security blanket, and Sam is snoring fit to wake the dead a floor below them. Bobby's coming back out next week to help Dean find a decent washer and dryer combo—but mostly he's visiting because California is a lot farther away than Kansas and he worries about his boys. This is Dean's life, now. He's not sure whether he should be deliriously happy or cautiously optimistic. Dean's completely out of his element, here.

"Why are you glaring at the fan, Dean?" Cas's voice, low and rough on any given day, sounds gravelly and soft in his ear.

Dean snorts quietly. "M not."

"All right," Cas sighs like a martyr and kisses a path from behind Dean's ear to the hollow of his throat. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or am I going to have to drag it out of you?"

Cas's eyes are stupid blue, even in the dark, and they make Dean's stomach flip even now, like he's still sixteen and just discovering love for the first time. "You're gonna hafta drag it outta me," Dean murmurs, then arches an eyebrow in a suggestive leer. "Guess where you gotta get it from?"

The pillow to the face is a little dramatic, Dean thinks, but it gets Cas distracted from his original purpose and between Dean's thighs, so that's really all that matters. He winds up with six feet of his best friend sprawled over him, warm and firm and familiar, and Dean doesn't bother thinking about how they ended up here or why when he slides a hand into Cas's hair and pulls him down and bites into his lower lip softly. He swallows down Cas's quiet moan and licks along the seam of his lips until they're wrapped around each other, sheets kicked onto the floor, hands wandering over bare skin. "You're trying to distract me," Cas accuses breathlessly as Dean scrapes his teeth over a nipple and grins.

“Not trying to do anything,” Dean groans, laying back on the bed and letting Cas fumble with the waistband of his boxers. “Sides, you’re not really trying to stop me.” Cas rolls his eyes and fists Dean inside his underwear and strokes him with the same single-minded determination he has for calculus problems.

After Dean tenses up and throws his head back and drags his nails down Cas’s back, he rolls his best friend over and returns the favor, and Cas is all desperate pleas and growled demands that sound like blasphemies and Dean’s name. He collapses back wide-eyed, and Dean curls around him because there’s really no where else he’d rather be, even if they’re both covered in sweat and other things, and it’s actually sort of hot in their room now despite the ceiling fan. “I’m gonna apply for the teaching license, see if I can get a job at the local high school or somethin’,” Dean says quietly.

Cas nods and lets his eyes slip closed. “You’ll get it.”

“Yeah?” Dean wraps his arms around his friend’s slender waist and tugs him closer. “I think so, too.”

There’s a long, comfortable silence between them before Cas speaks again, and Dean can hear the exhaustion creeping into his voice. “You know that I’m proud of you, right? You don’t have to go to graduate school for me to be proud of you, Dean.”

“Yeah. I know,” Dean mumbles, even though he really needs to hear it because he *doesn’t* know. He nuzzles under Cas’s jaw, likes the sandpaper rough scrape of stubble against his skin, and sighs. “Sammy wants a dog.” It’s a total non sequitur, random enough to put Cas to shame, and they both know that Dean’s trying to change the subject because he’s uncomfortable. “Said Bobby’s hound just had pups and he misses Cheney.”

Cas cards his fingers through Dean’s hair and hums noncommittally. “I don’t know that a hound is an ideal pet for a townhouse,” he says, then frowns. “Do you want a dog?”

Dean shrugs. “Wouldn’t mind one, I guess.”

“You’d have to walk it for him. The neighbors would probably watch you like hawks to make sure you pick up after it.” Cas has that conspiratory quality to his voice that never fails to make Dean laugh.

Dean grins. “I’d let it shit in all their yards.”

“You’d have to wash it to make sure it didn’t get fleas.”

“I’d hose it off in the front yard in my underwear,” Dean chuckles. “Hell, I’d even give it beer.”

“What would you name it?”

“Something really fucking obnoxious. Like Killer or Spike.”

“We should get a pitbull and name it Fluffy. The Ramseys and their pomeranian across the street would be mortified. Have I mentioned that I loathe our neighbors?” Dean barks a laugh and leans up and kisses Cas, who is also grinning like an idiot. They’re the most ridiculous and unlikely pair ever, and Dean loves it.

“This is why I love you. Behind the nerdy glasses and the hot body, you’re a twisted bastard,” he quips, and Cas looks proud of himself. “I think this whole domestic thing’s gonna work out just fine.” Dean lets Cas wind his arms around him and drag him back down to the mattress and sprawls against him bonelessly. “Hey, Cas?” He’s answered by a quiet hum of

acknowledgement and Dean yawns, struggling to stay awake. “Why d’you think Stanford didn’t take me?”

Cas’s hand hesitates in its persistent comb through Dean’s hair. “I don’t know, Dean.” He frowns a little. “Maybe the other candidates had more competitive resumes.”

Dean nods. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Dean, you know that I love you, and not your degrees?” Cas sounds mildly disturbed that he even has to explain this at all. Dean shrugs it off, but Cas starts to sit up on his elbows and gives his friend an intent stare. “Baby, I’m serious. You can be a mechanic, or a resource science teacher, or a damned cop for all I care. I’ll love you regardless of your job description.”

He sounds upset, and Dean is quick to rest their foreheads together and kiss him quiet again.

“Hey, calm down. It’s okay. I get it, all right? I’m the greatest thing since sliced bread and you don’t care if I’m a firefighter or a serial killer or whatever. Chill out, Cas.” Dean pushes the other man’s unruly bangs away from his eyes and gives him a reassuring smile. “Go to sleep. You’ve got class in the morning and we’ve gotta find a really scary ass lookin’ dog tomorrow.”

Cas pauses, trying to gauge whether or not Dean’s really okay, before relenting and laying back.

He ends up with an armful of his best friend and huffs into his hair. “How appalled would the Ramseys be if our pitbull knocked up their pomeranian?”

Dean laughs against Cas’s chest. “Don’t fucking tempt me.”

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