

# The Day The World Went Away

by pyjamagurl

**Dean/Cas || NC 17 || Post S5**

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After being reunited with Sam and leaving Lisa, Dean is finding that adjusting back into the hunting lifestyle is harder than he thought it would be. When a particular hunt goes badly, he gets knocked out, only to awaken five years in the future. Things are definitely different; Castiel is a hunter, Sam is married and *things* between Dean and Castiel have gone somewhere Dean really hadn't expected. And somewhere in all of this there is a lesson to be learned.

**Warnings:** Based post 5x22, Contains potential S6 Spoilers, eventual smut.  
Falling/fallen-Cas.

<http://pyjamagurl.livejournal.com/166757.html>  
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## Prologue

*The world isn't the same without Dean Winchester in it. Castiel's life has once again become about what is duty bound, emotionless, blank, uncaring. He isn't happy, but there's no place for happiness. It's an emotion he had never been aware of in the personal context before. Castiel misses the happiness that had come with being around Dean.*

*They've been keeping an eye on him, the two figures behind the curtain that no one can see; they are too high up the chain of command. They have no doubt that Castiel is a hard worker; he fights, and more importantly he fights for what he believes in, for what they believe in. For something he cares about, but it's clear that being back here has left him with a void that Heaven cannot fill.*

*'He's changed,' the first figure says. The second figure glances at the first, feathers made of lightness and darkness rustling against a purple sky as he moves. He looks back down at Castiel.*

*'Are you surprised?' the second figure asks.*

*'That it took this long, perhaps,' the other answers. He knows everything, everything that is, everything that was, and everything that will be. Castiel is neither new nor a conundrum, but he's interesting.*

*'He does good work,' the second figure says. 'Better than most, but...'*

*'He doesn't belong here anymore?' the first figure asks, he turns to the second, raising an eyebrow at him.*

*'No...not that,' the second splutters. 'Just...'*

*'This isn't his home anymore,' the first says. 'Where we come from and where we belong are often two very different things.'*

*'So where...' the second figure cuts himself off, frowning down at the sullen figure that is Castiel—he looks exasperated, dealing with three garrisons all questioning his allegiance. It's foolish; they should all know that if Castiel is here, then there is no doubt of his allegiance. 'It's where his heart lies?'*

*'Home is where the heart is,' the first figure says. The second looks at him, hazel eyes meeting mischievous blue, and he quirks an eyebrow at him.*

*'You can tell you were a writer down there last time.'*

*The first figure chuckles.*

*'The joy of creating worlds is one that can never be quashed,' he says.*

*'I'll take your word for it.'*

*'You've dabbled.'*

*'I've played with what you have provided,' the second argues amicably. 'A little fun never hurt anyone.'*

*'No...' the first says. His demeanor turns grave as he looks down on Castiel again. 'I don't think Castiel is having fun.'*

*'He never knew how,' the second reminds him. 'Not until Dean... pain in the ass, that kid.'*

*'Which one?'*

*'Both,' the second says, and the pair grin at one another. The first figure rubs a hand over his face and looks back to Castiel again.*

*'Go through the usual channels,' he says. 'Tell Castiel that Dean needs him, and he will return.'*

*'Yes, sir,' the second says. 'And then?'*

*'Come back here,' he replies. 'I have a job for you.'*

*'Anything like the last one?'*

*The first figure smiles and claps a hand against the other's shoulder. 'Not quite as taxing, I feel, but it will be worth it in the end. Don't disappoint.'*

*'Do I ever?' the second figure asks.*

*He doesn't wait for an answer; he disappears in a flurry of feathers and light. The first figure smiles to himself then waves a hand and the vision fades out behind the curtain.*

## Part One

### *I've Got an Angel on my Shoulder and the Devil on my Heels*

Dean has barely been back on the job for two weeks when things get too real, too fast. Both brothers are back where they are supposed to be, with the Impala's comfortable leather beneath them and the road unraveling ahead of them. He's home, back on the job, and it's supposed to be easy.

It isn't.

Dean thought it would be like riding a bike. That he could easily jump back into the lifestyle after an impromptu, year-long hiatus, but the truth is that a year of acting like an Average Joe has left him *sloppy*. Long drives take their toll quicker, and he lets Sammy take the wheel more often than he used to. Motel room beds are lumpy and difficult to get a good night's sleep in (on top of that, the space beside him has never felt so *empty*). And *bloody hell* Sam is gassy—how had he forgotten how toxic his little brother could get?

He has taken to pushing his list of complaints to the back of his mind and putting his sloppiness down to needing to get his head—and his rather domesticated body—back in the game. Even Castiel is popping back in again with increasing regularity and Dean hasn't yet begun to question if he is getting in trouble for that. Dean has quietly accepted he doesn't want Cas to leave ever again, and asking questions about what the hell Cas is doing back on Earth may only serve to send Cas straight back up Heavenwards.

When Cas had first come back—a few days before Dean and Sam had been reunited, panic mongering as usual—Dean had tried to hide his delight, but if Lisa's curious look had been anything to go by he had failed miserably. It had been all too easy to fall into a routine of cantankerous exasperation with Castiel around again. Dean had complained at Castiel popping in unannounced—especially when he did it within such close proximity—and when Cas had spent at dinner with Dean, Lisa and Ben, it had resulted in Dean grumping at Cas that it was creepy that he refused to eat when the rest of them were stuffing their faces. Lisa had given him a dirty look, but Cas seemed to see right through the façade, noticing how much Dean visibly relaxed in his presence.

That, and the fact that Cas had saved Dean's ass three times last week, has led to almost constant hovering. It gets old quickly, Cas lurking behind him, and more times than Dean would like he has caught Sam and Cas sharing worried glances. Dean fears a girly heart-to-heart any day now.

They drive to upstate New York—Dean finally manages the whole sixteen hour journey without making Sam take over—following the trail of supernatural goings-on to a worrying increase in deaths-by-exhaustion in the Syracuse area. Dean thinks it's a possible succubus, Sam thinks it's another siren and Castiel just reads the articles they have collected and frowns. When Dean looks in the rear view mirror outside of Buffalo, expecting to see Cas shuffling through more paper only to see that Castiel has taken off, that ticks him off just as much as the hovering.

They don't see Cas for the rest of the journey and Sam is oddly quiet as he flips through newspaper articles and occasionally looks up entries in their dad's journal. Dean thinks of interrupting the noise of the car and the quiet Metallica playing over the stereo in favor of asking Sam numerous things, but each time he decides against it.

He ends up thinking about their last hunt and how easily the vampires had nearly taken him out. He can't help but dwell on the fact he nearly got *eaten* by something he used to be able to fight in his sleep. He is quite thankful when they reach Cortland and civilization breaks over them. It is only then Dean decides to speak up.

'Remember the last time we were up by this way?' Dean asks. Sam looks up from all his papers to glance out of the window, taking in their surroundings before turning to Dean and giving him a curious look.

'Was about six years ago...' Dean prompts and Sam shakes his head, giving a little shrug as he does so. 'Does the name *Sarah* ring a bell?'

'Oh...' Sam gives a little laugh and nervously rubs at the back of his neck—he *does* remember, then. 'I'm surprised you remember.'

Which Dean would have taken for an insult if it hadn't been for the fact that he had definitely had more preoccupying things on his mind for the past six years. Still, he is much better at remembering girls *Sam* had been with than girls *he* had been with—if for sheer numbers alone. He had liked Sarah though. She had been a memorable ally, and he had often wondered why Sam hadn't kept in touch with her.

'Should have married her like I told you,' Dean says, flashing Sam a grin before he pulls into the parking lot of a motel promising "The Best Sleep in the State!" Dean very much doubts it, but it will do for the duration of their stay.

'Like you should have married Lisa?' Sam counters as he folds bits of newspaper back into Dad's journal, and Dean realizes he has hit a sore spot.

‘That was different,’ Dean says in a clipped tone. Now he knows exactly why he has been biting his tongue; he hadn’t wanted things to come back to his failure to settle into the Apple Pie Life like Sam had wanted him to.

‘How so?’

Dean kills the engine and glowers at his little brother. ‘Because at least I gave things a go with Lisa before I realized it wasn’t right for me.’

Sam looks briefly like he is going to say something else but appears to think better of it and lets out a tense sigh. He clicks the passenger side door open and unfolds his ginormous self out of the car.

Dean is just about to get out too when his phone rings out ‘the birdy dance’ and he frowns as he pulls it from his pocket; he had definitely not picked that ringtone. He leans out of the window looking in Sam’s general direction.

‘That’s lame even for you,’ he snipes, flipping his phone open and putting it to his ear. ‘Yeah?’

‘Where are you?’

‘Niceview Motel, just outside Syracuse—’

‘Okay, I got caught up,’ the voice on the other end says. ‘Do not start the hunt until I get there.’

‘Cas—’ but he is talking to the dial tone. ‘I can look after myself,’ he grumbles as he snaps the phone shut and gets out of the car.

Sam is just coming back out of the reception when Dean is getting his duffle bag from the trunk.

‘Who was that on the phone?’ he asks.

‘Who do you think?’

‘Oh...’ Sam looks around as though expecting to see a familiar trench-coat wearing figure. ‘He isn’t joining us?’

‘Not at the moment,’ Dean says. ‘His highness has Heaven to sort out too, y’know. Babysitting me has been left in your dutiful hands.’

Sam has the good grace to go a little red and do one of those shoulder rolls that Dean has kind of missed getting annoyed at, and then leads the way over to their motel room. Dean slams the trunk shut and follows him, not even trying to hide his amused smirk at getting one over on his little brother.

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Castiel hates returning to heaven for only one reason. Raphael is inordinately smug every time Castiel returns from his time on earth. Castiel knows Raphael only tolerates him because God has saved him twice and the second time had seen him promoted to the same rank as his once-destroyer.

This time when he returns, Raphael is waiting for him with Zadkiel and Remiel at his flanks. Raphael is not their superior, but Castiel has no doubt that he has talked more suspicion into his brothers' minds. Castiel clenches his jaw and rolls his shoulders back, holding his head high as he steps towards his brothers. He knows what is coming, but he isn't going to let them belittle him.

'You've been gone some time, Castiel,' Raphael says by way of greeting, and Castiel would like nothing more than to wipe that smug look off his face.

'I trust you have been keeping an eye on things,' Castiel says, not letting the other angel rile him. Dean might be having an influence on him, but he still knows that smite-first-and-ask-questions-later isn't appropriate for every circumstance.

'What was so important as to keep you away this time?' Raphael asks, sharing a look with the two angels at his sides.

Castiel stares hard at him, because he knows that Raphael knows the answer. He is trying to goad him, embarrass him because he can't handle that Cas' open-minded viewpoint is working in reorganizing Heaven into some semblance of order. Its' brothers like these three that delay all the changes; the ones who don't, nor ever want to, understand the attachment Cas has to humanity.

'Nothing that concerns you,' Castiel replies, not rising to the bait. For a second Remiel looks like he is going to interrupt, but Raphael raises a hand to silence him.

'You have loyalties here, Castiel,' Raphael tells him.

'I have loyalties down there, also,' Castiel says.

'You can't keep returning to the Winchesters every time one of them puts himself in

peril.'

'I don't expect you to understand,' Castiel says. 'You are of the arrogant stock we lost so many others to.'

'Some day, Castiel, you are going to have to make a choice,' Raphael says with a smile that is cold and bitter; it's more of an aggressive display of teeth than it is a smile. 'I implore you to make the right one.'

In the blink of an eye the three brothers are gone and Castiel is left alone with his thoughts. He stares at the spot where his peers had stood for a long moment. Then in a flutter of wings goes to find the information he came up here for in the first place.

If he hurries, he'll be back with Dean before the night is over.

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Cas doesn't show up all evening. By the time eight o'clock swings around, Dean decides that he is going stir-crazy poring over the same damn bits of paper hours on end and insists that they go to a bar in the city. Sam caves a lot quicker than he normally would have, but Dean knows it's because he realizes they have reached a temporary roadblock.

The bar isn't their usual kind of haunt. It isn't a biker bar where Dean thinks he would feel slightly more comfortable, all things considered. It's the kind of bar where barely-legal kids hang out and smatterings of people Dean's age occupy the darkest booths, ignoring the other patrons. Dean feels old. Before his brief attempt at settling down he wouldn't have cared. Now, he feels out of place.

The only people he would even consider chatting up on an ordinary day are the group of women currently drinking shots at the bar. He is too fresh out of domesticity to even think of flirting, though. Plus they look like they are having a bachelorette party and he doesn't want to get involved in that. Let the girls have their fun. Dean isn't interested in cheap thrills any more, and that is something he never thought he would say.

He is on his second beer when one of the women detaches from the crowd at the bar and approaches them. She's wearing the most ridiculous get-up Dean has ever seen—a turquoise tutu, leg warmers, a black net vest top over a turquoise wife-beater—and her hair is so *poofy* that he can't fathom how she managed to do that. He looks slightly horrified when he notices her coming over and kicks Sam under the table. Sam glowers at him then looks over when Dean nods frantically in the girl's direction. It would figure the first woman to hit on him since being officially free and



single would be a Go-Go's wannabe right out of the '80's.

The woman isn't looking at Dean though. Her attention is all on Sam. Dean breathes a short huff of relief at that.

'Sam?' she asks as soon as she is near enough the table for them to hear over "Don't Stop Believing" that Dean has heard three times since they have been here.

Dean looks from the woman to Sam, seeing a slight thread of recognition in his brother's eyes. He stares at her for a long moment, then back at Sam and recognition slowly sinks in. He is about to greet her when Sam gets there first.

'Sarah?' Sam says, getting up out of the booth and looking her up and down. 'What \_\_\_'

'Bachelorette party,' she says, turning pink as she glances back at her friends.

'Oh.' And Dean can hear the disappointment in his brother's voice.

'My friend is getting married next week.'

'Oh! I, er—'

Sarah grins at him, her whole face lighting up in a way Dean remembers from years ago. Yeah, there is no denying the chemistry between his brother and the auctioneer. Even after five years it's electric.

'Look at you!' she says, looking Sam up and down. 'You got big!'

'I wasn't little before.'

She tilts her head and smiles at him. 'I meant those guns,' she says, grabbing one of Sam's biceps and giving it a squeeze. She bites her lip and looks up to meet Sam's eyes. 'Sorry.'

'It's uh...'

'I'm a little drunk...'

Sam lets out a laugh and nods. 'Yeah, I got that.'

'Your hair got long, too...'

‘Oh, yeah, I’ve been meaning to get it cut...’ Which is the first Dean has ever heard of that. He just thought Sammy was just finally embracing his inner metal-head and growing it out.

‘Oh, don’t!’ Sarah says, reaching a hand up towards Sam’s hair then thinking better of it and letting her hand drop. ‘It suits you...’

‘Thanks.’

Dean is beginning to feel very much like a third wheel when, thankfully, his phone rings. The ringing—which Dean is actually surprised they can hear over the music—makes Sarah finally look in his direction and she grins at him.

‘Dean!’ she shouts, and she looks as though she is about to start talking to him when he holds up a hand to stop her.

‘One second,’ he says, looking at his brother who takes Sarah by the arm and leads her away from the table a bit. He flips his phone open. ‘Took you long enough to get back,’ he says.

‘I was following a lead,’ the impatient voice tells him. ‘You’re not at the motel. Where are you?’

‘We’re at a bar.’

‘Which one?’ Castiel sounds very much like he is rolling his eyes.

‘It’s called...’ Dean picks up the menu on the table and reads the too-trendy name. ‘Behind the Wall.’

‘Okay, I’ll be—’

‘Cas.’

‘What?’

‘Come in the front door will ya,’ Dean says. ‘Don’t just pop in; you’ll scare the crap out of people.’

‘Okay,’ Castiel’s voice sounds amused. ‘I’ll see you in a minute.’

Barely thirty seconds pass before Castiel comes through the front door. Dressed in his usual tax-accountant attire complete with tan trench coat, he sticks out like a sore

thumb. He quickly locates Dean and makes his way over to the booth.

He nearly gets intercepted by one of Sarah's friends. Cas looks mildly horrified at the woman suddenly lurching towards him. Dean lets out a sigh. Really, he's going to have to get that angel laid. Castiel dodges around her to get to the booth, and Dean stands up to let him in.

'Siddown,' Dean says. 'I'll get you a beer.'

'I don't—'

'You are having a beer.'

'Dean...' If Castiel protests any further, Dean doesn't hear it.

By the time Dean gets back to the booth, Sam and Sarah are sitting opposite Castiel. As Dean puts down their beers and slides into the booth beside Castiel, he pretends not to notice how relieved Cas seems to be at his return.

'What are you three talking about?'

'You,' Sarah says.

Dean pulls a face and Sam shakes his head. 'Sarah was giving Cas the third degree —'

'Good luck there,' Dean smirks, then takes a drink of his beer.

'Castiel is a weird name, huh?' Sarah says looking from Dean to Sam. Sam smiles and looks like he is biting his cheek to stop from laughing.

'His parents are overly religious,' Dean says.

'My Fa—' Cas starts then frowns as Dean elbows him in the ribs and gives him a look that says *shut the hell up*. 'What was that for?'

'How'd you meet Sam and Dean,' Sarah asks, she leans across the table, as near to Castiel as the table will allow. Cas actually leans out of her way and Dean tries to hide his amusement. 'You don't look like you're in their line of work.'

'I'm an ang—'

'He's a friend,' Dean provides, giving Cas another jab in the ribs and receiving a

confused frown for his efforts. ‘Saved my ass enough times that we like to keep him around.’

‘You make him sound like a pet,’ Sarah says, leaning back again and taking a swig of Sam’s beer. Sam snorts with laughter and quickly looks away from Dean’s glare and Castiel’s quizzical head tilt.

There’s a whoop from the bar and all four of them look over to see the bachelorette crowd downing shots. One of the girls turns to look at them and raises a shot at Sarah before beckoning her with her free hand.

‘I better go,’ she says. She grabs a napkin from the dispenser before she stands up from the booth and pulls a lipstick from her purse. She scribbles on the napkin and hands it to Sam. ‘Don’t be a stranger, okay?’

‘Uh, sure,’ Sam says, tucking the napkin into the pocket of his shirt and deliberately avoiding looking at Dean.

‘I mean it,’ she says, then flashes them another smile before dodging through the crowd to get back to her friends. All three of them watch her for a moment until Cas breaks their silence.

‘You know this girl?’ he asks, looking at Sam.

‘We met a few years ago, yeah,’ Sam says, finally looking away from the girls.

‘She seems ... nice,’ Castiel says. Dean can’t tell if he is joking or not but he laughs anyway, which earns him a small smile from the man next to him.

‘She is,’ Dean tells him. ‘Sammy should’ve married that girl like I told him to.’

‘*Dean*,’ Sam starts, but Dean waves his hand dismissively.

‘I’m dropping it,’ he says. He takes another drink of his beer, looking over at Cas who hasn’t touched the bottle in front of him. ‘Hey man, drink up.’

That’s when things get hairy.

To start things off, a group of Sarah’s friends come back from the bathroom, and from the worried expressions on two of the girls’ faces Dean knows something is up. He is about to put it down to one of the girls being sick or lost something when Cas stiffens next to him.

‘Cas?’

Cas is looking right past Dean, brows furrowed and eyes flicking through the crowd like he is looking for something. Dean is about to shake Cas' shoulder when he speaks up.

'It's here,' he says tightly, looking at Dean.

'What is?' Sam asks.

'Where?' Dean asks at the same time, glancing around them before peering in the same direction Cas had been looking a moment ago.

'Incubus,' Cas says quietly. 'I think. I can't see him, but I can sense him.'

'I thought we were after a succubus?' Dean says.

'Sometimes the succubus and incubus are not mutually exclusive,' Cas says. 'Where one goes, the other follows.'

'Let's go,' Dean says, not waiting to digest the information as he starts to get up from the booth.

Sam grabs his forearm before he gets to his feet.

'Dean, wait,' Sam frowns in the direction of the bachelorette party as he stands up. 'Let me talk to Sarah first.'

'Sam—'

'What if one of her friends is missing?' Sam says. 'They'll need a search party,' Sam adds pointedly, and Dean shakes his head, sitting the rest of the way back down as Sam goes off to talk to the girls.

He sighs and turns to look at Cas, who is still sitting stiffly beside him, eyes scanning the bar.

'Do you know where he is?' Dean asks.

Cas doesn't look at him, but shakes his head.

'My powers don't work like that...' Castiel says quietly.

Dean's jaw stiffens. He can't help wondering if Cas' powers aren't what they used to

be, if Cas is being slowly cut off from Heaven again and is just too damn stubborn to tell him. Castiel has been spending a lot of time away from Heaven again, and it's not hard to guess that Dean's the reason for it. Whether it's because the angel feels responsible for helping to watch after Dean, or because Cas has decided he actually likes spending time with Dean and Sam, Dean's not going to take a guess. All that it means is that Castiel is spending time away from Heaven and Dean's the cause, which is more than likely moving Castiel down on the list of Angel Favorites. Taking away Castiel's mojo again seems like a dick move the angels would pull off. He doesn't want to think he's responsible for Cas sacrificing everything for *him*. Again.

'Alright, man,' Dean says. 'We do this the proper way.' Cas tilts his head at him curiously. 'We hunt this son of a bitch down.'

Dean can feel himself getting impatient as he watches Sam talking to Sarah. There is concern on both their faces, and Sam looks around the bar before he whispers something in Sarah's ear then comes back over to the booth.

'Sarah's friend Melanie has gone missing,' Sam says. 'She went to the bathroom with the group and they couldn't find her when they were done. No one's seen her since.'

'They look outside?'

'Said we'd do that,' Sam says. 'Let's go.'

They decide it's better to split up rather than go together and Dean, for one, feels something of relief to not have someone hovering behind him. He's actually a little surprised that Castiel didn't insist on following him, but when Sam had suggested that Cas take the back door and Dean the alleyway, Dean had jumped at the chance to prove that he still had what it took to do his day job.

He wasn't expecting things to go sour. It's only two weeks since he's been back hunting; he can handle one stupid little incubus, right?

Things happen too quickly. He makes his way down the alley, making sure there are no passersby's before he pulls his gun from where it had been tucked into the back of his jeans, keeps it pointed down, ready if he needs it. He hears a noise, a muffled grunt and the sound of something, someone, being slammed against a wall. He raises his gun and quietly steps around a dumpster.

The first thing he sees is the girl struggling against the grip of a man not much smaller than Dean, and the protective part of him kicks into high gear. The man, however, seems to see this as well, because he whirls around and spots Dean.

Dean should do the sensible thing, he should run off a shot before the son of a bitch actually hurts her, but there's the little nagging voice at the back of his mind—that sounds suspiciously like Sam—telling him this could be your run-of-the-mill douche bag. So instead of shooting, he raises his gun hand and smacks the guy across the face with the butt of it before the man has the chance to size Dean up.

The guy is up far too fast to be human. There's a trickle of blood coming from his hairline, but other than that he seems unfazed. There's a smirk on his face and he is on Dean in a matter of seconds, fists hitting home hard—Dean is going to have bruises tomorrow, he can feel it—before he grabs Dean by the lapels of his leather jacket and slams him bodily against the opposite wall. Dean's gun slips out of his hand, clattering onto the pavement.

'Jeez,' Dean hisses.

He's determined not to let the guy get the upper hand and shoves hard, kicks his feet out and tries to pull the other man's feet from underneath him. It doesn't work.

He gets another full body slam off the wall for his efforts, and he feels something snap in his rib cage. A grunt leaves him, his breath coming too heavy and panicked now. He isn't afraid, just really pissed off at the fact that a year ago he could have done this as easy as breathing. He knows the bad guy is winning, but hell if he won't go down swinging.

'Bring it, you son of a bitch,' he grunts out. He lifts his knee hard, colliding with the other guy's crotch. Sometimes the oldies are the goodies.

The guy stumbles back with a groan and Dean pushes off the wall, eyes searching for the woman the incubus had been preying on. She's still standing against the wall, eyes wide in panic; she's frozen in fear and staring at Dean.

'Run!' he tells her. 'Go! And tell Sarah to send Sam.'

'W—what?'

'Sam, she'll know who I'm talking about,' Dean said. 'Go.'

Apparently she just needed to be told three times, because she finally moves away from the wall, hurries off down the alley with just one backwards glance at Dean before she disappears from view. Dean doesn't have much time to think about how the hell he's going to defend himself without his gun. The incubus knocks him flying, taking Dean's feet from underneath him and sending him face-first into the dirt.

Dean lets out a groan as the wind is knocked out of him and feels a kick to his side which sends him rolling over the pavement—yeah, he definitely has cracked ribs. Dean looks around, looking for his gun, a rock, anything he could use as a weapon, when he notices something shining under the nearby streetlight. And, oh fuck, that's his ring sitting in a puddle of blood. He's so screwed, he thinks, and then another kick lands on his shoulder, turning him over onto his back. He blinks back blood that's oozing from above his eyebrow and there's blood on his tongue and as he stares up at incubus he isn't thinking at all. He knows he isn't going to win this one.

The incubus leans down, up in his personal space and grabs a hold of his chin as he stares him down.

'You cost me dinner tonight,' he says in a soft, silky-smooth voice that sends a repulsed shiver down Dean's spine.

'Good,' Dean croaks out, glaring up at the demon.

The incubus responds by throwing Dean's head back to the ground. Dean can hear the crack inside his skull. It takes him a moment to regain full awareness and open his eyes, and when he does he sees the incubus looming off to the side. The creature seems to wait until Dean's focused on him before he sneers and he stands above him.

There's a sharp, blinding pain, and then darkness.

### ***The Lines Between Dreams and Reality Are Blurred***

Dean wakes up snuggled into someone and for a brief moment he thinks he's back at Lisa's. He doesn't hurt nearly as much as he thinks he ought to, but it's possible his brain just hasn't caught up yet. He thinks he's curled around Lisa's slender frame, safe and secure and a million miles away from Things That Can Do Him Harm. He pulls the arm he already had draped across her middle in tighter, palm flat against smooth skin. She feels warm and solid, and for the first time in two weeks Dean doesn't feel alone. He buries his nose further into her neck, ignoring the tickle of hair up his nose. He presses his lips against soft skin.

All he thinks about is warmth and comfort, and it's only as his brain slowly wakes up—he starts to think that maybe the last two weeks had been a dream and he hadn't been in a fight with anything, despite it feeling *so real* because he certainly doesn't hurt like he ought to—that things begin to click. The body next to him isn't as soft and curvy as Lisa's—it's all juttled awkwardness, still soft and warm but *different*.



The hair is too short and it tickles at his nose on each inhale. And then there's the smell.

Lisa had smelled lovely—like fresh laundry and coconut shampoo and vanilla scented hand-wash she insisted on having in all three bathrooms—but this ... this is masculine and comfortable. This is familiar and *alien* all at once. He knows this smell, he'd smelled it a thousand times and always with a protest of personal space. It smells like...

Dean opens an eye and his suspicions are right. Castiel lies with his back to him, one hand up under his cheek while the other is resting just above Dean's, one leg tangled between Dean's and the other kicked out like he doesn't know what to do with it. As confused as Dean is about what the hell is happening, his body isn't complaining much. Dean springs back from Castiel, resisting the urge to press closer and runs a hand through dark hair.

His heart is beating hard in panic, his breathing too heavy now as he tries to wrap his head around this. What the hell is going on? Why the hell are he and Cas sharing a bed—never mind so damn intimately? And ... since when did Castiel sleep?

'Cas?' Dean croaks, voice straining from disuse. He places a hand on Cas' shoulder, squeezes lightly. 'Cas,' he repeats more firmly, shaking him a little harder.

Cas snuffles, lets out a noise that sounds vaguely like 'Five more minutes...' and goes on sleeping like Dean is just a minor annoyance and he'll get to him later.

Dean can't wait five minutes. He feels panicked and like his heart is going to burst out of his chest if he doesn't get an explanation. He disentangles himself from Castiel, and manages to land on his feet as he careens back from the bed until the back of his knees hit a chair and he almost falls over it. It's only then he notices the rest of the room.

It's a generic motel room, nothing more impressive than any of the others that he and Sam have spent their time in, but it isn't the motel room he remembers from last night. For a start, there is only one bed in this room, and while last night's had kind of been a homage to the hunting lifestyle, this one is actually quite nice. The walls are black and grey, the bed—which had been really rather comfortable before Dean had bolted from it—has matching dark grey sheets. The furnishings are matte black to match the doors, and if Dean wasn't sure he was in a motel, he'd think he was in a rather nice bachelor pad.

The problem is he doesn't remember this room. He hasn't the foggiest idea of where he is and new panic seeps in as he wonders where the hell his Sam is. He should

phone him, he really should, but he can feel a panic attack coming on, and the first thing he needs to do is empty his stomach into the toilet, then he might be able to form a plan of action.

He stumbles towards the bathroom and clicks the bathroom door shut, careful not to waken the slumbering angel on the other side, and turns to the sink. Taking in a few deep breaths, he waits for the panic to settle. Only when he feels the nausea sink back and disappear does he turn on the cold tap full force until it's screaming and splash his face with cold water. It should soothe him but it doesn't. It raises goosebumps and chills him to the bone, and it doesn't calm his rattling nerves in the slightest. He drags his hands over his face, and finally looks at himself in the mirror.

There's no sign of the fight the night before. He should be bloodied and bruised but there's nothing, just his pale-faced reflection staring back at him, eyes wide in panic. He pulls his shirt up, frowning at his unmarred chest before letting it drop. He should have cracked ribs and bruises from the kicks he had received. As he looks down at his body he notices a long scar down his knee that he doesn't remember getting, but other than that his skin as smooth and pale as the day he was yanked out of Hell. He looks at his hands and, fuck, he really had lost his ring. At least that's evidence that the fight with the incubus did occur and he's not dreaming this shit up. What is going on? Had Cas healed him? But if that were true wouldn't he remember it, or had he been so out of it he had slept through it?

That still doesn't explain why Cas is in his bed though...or where Sam is. Or where the hell they are, for that matter.

He stares at his reflection hard for a moment longer, then scrunches his eyes tight shut, trying to see if he can recall any details from the night before. He remembers the bar, meeting Sarah, her friend going missing, and finding said friend with the incubus. He remembers fighting with the demon and losing. Then there's nothing but darkness. There's only waking up next to Cas—and apparently certain parts of his anatomy really aren't bothered about that; they are rather interested, actually, which is even more disturbing.

'What the hell?' he asks his reflection as he turns the tap off, but his mirror image is just as clued in as he is. He turns his back to his useless reflection and leans his hands on the sink, letting his head fall back until it touches the mirror.

He closes his eyes and tries to empty his mind. He tells himself that he probably imagined Cas being there. He has probably imagined the whole thing and when he walks back into the room Sammy will be sprawled across his bed snoring and Dean will be able to laugh at his ridiculous imagination. He decides he's going to have a piss, then he'll go back out and everything will be fine. He spares a frown for his

reflection as he washes his hands, as though expecting it to contradict him, turns on his heels, and opens the bathroom door.

When he steps out of the bathroom, though, the room is still as he left it. The only difference is that Cas is now lying on his back, spread over the middle of the bed, chest rising and falling softly in sleep.

For a moment, Dean can't do anything but stare. He's never seen Cas like this before; sleeping, comfortable, relaxed. It is weird, and yet stirs up an unnamable feeling in Dean's gut that isn't wholly unrelated to what he'd felt upon first waking and realizing it was Cas with him. It's softer, less physical, and yet leaves a strange clenching in his chest. It's not the first time he's felt it, but this is the first time he's ever been able to dwell upon it without the fear of Cas staring back at him and asking questions.

He distracts himself with getting dressed; checking his clothes for blood for good measure, but there's nothing. When Dean eventually turns back to look at Castiel, the angel hasn't moved in the slightest. He approaches the bed, contemplating just leaving Cas to it and getting the hell out of dodge; but it's *Cas*, and he can't bring himself to be that much of an asshole. Instead he smacks the sole of the foot that is poking out from the covers.

'Hngh...'

'Cas,' Dean says, tapping Cas' foot again, a little harder this time. He resists the urge to run his finger up the arch foot just to see if Cas is ticklish or not.

'Whaaaat...' it's low and whiney, and Cas pulls Dean's pillow over his head.

'Come on, get up,' Dean says. He wants an explanation, he wants to figure out what the hell is going on, but a small part of him is also terrified of finding out.

Cas pokes his head out from under the pillow, glances at the bedside clock before looking up at Dean. Dean has to swallow hard, because Cas with bed-head? Completely hot...strangely hotter than the normal dishevelled Cas.

'I thought we were meeting Sam at eight...' Cas says, his voice croaky and heavy with sleep.

'What?' Dean asks, frowning.

'It's only quarter past five,' Cas says. He sounds slightly annoyed now, like Dean has just woken him from the best sleep ever. For a brief second, Dean wonders what Cas

had been dreaming about.

‘Why are we meeting Sam at eight?’ Dean asks, ignoring Cas’ protest. ‘Where the hell is he anyway?’

‘In his bed, I imagine,’ Cas grumbles and rolls over, turning his back on Dean and burying his face in the pillows again. Dean scowls at Castiel’s backside for a minute then smacks his calf. ‘Dean!’ Cas whines, but it comes out muffled and therefore less effective in Dean’s opinion.

‘I’m going to get some gas,’ Dean says, moving around the bed and picking his wallet up off the side table. For good measure, he yanks away one of the pillows from under Cas’ head. Cas grumbles and opens one blue eye to glare at him. On an ordinary person it might look ridiculous, but on Cas it works. Dean takes a step back. He’s been on the bad side of enough angels to know not to mess with them when angry. And while Cas is his friend, he has no doubt that Cas will smite him if he feels so inclined. ‘Be up when I get back, there’s a hell of a lot you need to fill me in on.’

Cas actually rolls his eyes and turns his head away, and for a moment Dean gawks at him. This isn’t a side of Cas he is familiar with at all...is this even Castiel? He drops the pillow onto Cas’ shoulders and makes his quick exit.

When he’s in the parking lot—his baby is sitting three spaces along from where their door is, thank God—he pulls his phone out of his pocket and flips it open. And okay, this isn’t the phone he had yesterday, either, but Sam’s number is still number one on his speed dial. He hits the call button, and waits for Sam to answer.

Sam picks up on the fifth ring and sounds just as annoyed as Cas did. Dean ignores this; his own problem is a lot more important than Sam’s complaining right now.

‘Where the hell are you?’ Dean demands as he stalks across the parking lot towards the Impala.

‘At home,’ Sam says. He sounds sleepy and slightly bewildered, like Dean just woke him up. ‘I can get to Syracuse in time, Dean.’

‘Home?’ Dean echoes. ‘What the hell do you mean, home?’

‘My house, Dean,’ and Sam sounds snippy now, impatient and irritated. ‘Y’know, where I live.’

‘Don’t be a smartass, Sammy,’ Dean says and runs a hand over his face because this isn’t making a lick of sense either.

‘I’m not the one being a smartass,’ Sam replies. ‘You’re the one phoning ridiculously early in the morning, and being weird on top of it.’

‘I’m not being weird,’ Dean argues and frowns at his reflection in the window of his car before he unlocks the door and slides into the driver’s seat. ‘I wake up and everything’s *different*.’ He pauses. ‘How the hell am I being weird?’

There’s a long silence on the other end. He can hear Sam moving about, probably getting up out of bed, hears a creak that is no doubt Sam going down stairs.

‘Different how?’ Sam asks. He sounds worried.

‘I woke up next to Cas for a start,’ Dean blurts out, and that *really* isn’t the first thing he wanted to say to his brother. But it’s out there now and he’s pretty sure Sam is going to laugh his ass off at that, because Dean sleeping with his *male* angel buddy is pretty far out there. Instead of laughter, though, there’s another silence. ‘Sam?’

‘Uhm ... don’t you wake up next to Cas every day?’ Sam says, slightly suspiciously like Dean is being slow.

‘No!’ Dean all but yells into the phone. He gives an awkward cough, and looks around him. There isn’t a soul in sight which is a blessing right now because Dean is pretty sure his face is lobster-red by now.

‘Okaaay...’ Sam says. ‘Well ...uhm, I don’t know how you and Cas do things—and please don’t tell me—but obviously things went well last night?’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ Dean snaps. ‘I got my ass kicked by a demon. How is that a good thing?’

‘What?’ Now it’s Sam’s turn to sound horrified. ‘What happened? Are you alright?’

‘That’s what’s weird, Sam,’ Dean says, starting up the engine—it turns out he really does need gas—and putting the car into gear. ‘It’s like...it’s like last night didn’t happen.’

‘What? Dean-’ he stops abruptly. ‘Are you drunk or something?’

‘No!’

‘Okay, okay, but... are you okay, Dean?’

Dean sighs. ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’ He rolls his shoulders, just to make sure, but there’s still no hint of last night’s struggle. ‘I’m really okay.’

‘Cas is there with you, right?’

Dean looks at the empty passenger seat. ‘Yeah,’ he lies.

‘Okay,’ Sam says. ‘Well, he can figure it out before I get there.’ There’s a huff of breath on the other end of the line before Sam speaks again. ‘I’m not awake enough for this yet,’ he says. ‘I need some coffee...I’ll meet you at the diner at eight, like we arranged.’

‘Oh ... okay,’ Dean says. He doesn’t even want to ask *what* diner because Sam will no doubt think he really has lost it, and Cas will probably know anyway.

‘Dean,’ Sam says and he sounds like the older brother rather than the younger one. ‘If something’s wrong, we’ll fix it.’

‘Sure,’ Dean says shortly, and he hangs up on his brother before Sam decides they are having a full-blown heart to heart. It is way too early in the morning for that.

He throws his phone onto the passenger seat and drives.

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Castiel is dreaming. It’s a good dream. It is, strangely, about ice cream. Chocolate ice cream and in his dream it is quickly melting as it runs down pale skin. His tongue laps out to catch a stray droplet before it hits the clean sheets, and he lets out a small moan as cool ice cream gives way to the taste of warm skin. The groan from above makes him grin, kissing a trail up the pale-skinned stomach beneath him, dipping his tongue into the chocolate-filled belly button before looking up from the navel he’s licked clean to meet dark green eyes.

‘Cas...’ it comes out a hiss of sound, and Cas grins.

‘Like that, do y—’

‘Cas.’ It sounds more urgent this time, too real, but he isn’t letting this dream go lightly.

‘Five more minutes...’ Cas mutters aloud. He really wants to finish this dream...

The interruptions stop and Cas smiles to himself as the dream continues to play out. The ice cream is melting too quickly, eliciting goosebumps along the pale stomach as Cas licks away the last of it. He kisses a trail up the sternum, following the line of collarbone and nuzzling at the warm neck before he pulls back and stares into lust-blown green eyes.

‘What next, Dean,’ he asks, pecking a kiss to Dean’s lips. Dean leans up towards him, deepening the kiss, bringing a hand into Cas’ hair and—

‘Cas,’ too hard, too insistent. Cas feels the punch of wakefulness breaking through his dream. The dream is slipping away quickly, like the ice cream on hot skin. Cas lets out a noise of protest when he feels himself being jostled.

He wakes to Dean being an asshole for utterly no reason. Usually he does his best to ignore Dean when he is being insistent and annoying and a general pain in the ass. So he gives clipped replies and tries to get back to sleep. He has no intention of getting up when he can still get another hour in at the very least.

Dean grumbles at him, before the sound of a door slamming cuts off the noise. Cas closes his eyes again and tries to conjure up the dream once more; it had been going so well.

He manages to coax out the bed scene, but Dream Dean doesn’t want to cooperate any more. He pushes when Cas pulls, he dodges and complains and is generally acting like Castiel is somehow repulsive; which just shouldn’t happen in his dream. The moment is gone.

Castiel reluctantly wakes up, slowly pushing himself out of bed and sitting on the edge of it. He stares at the door, his mind wandering away from him as he wonders how long Dean has been gone, and what had happened that Dean had been in such a hurry to leave.

~\*~

Dean has always found driving to be therapeutic. There’s something about taking his car out on the open road, listening to classic rock and feeling the rumble of the Impala beneath him. It has always been his escape. Put enough miles behind him, and he can forget his woes for a while and just enjoy the road unraveling in front of him. It doesn’t even matter where he’s headed.

Today, it isn’t working. Today he just can’t get his mind around how weird everything is. When he arrives at the gas station he is almost floored when he sees the gas prices—they certainly hadn’t been that high two days ago—but fills up his baby

and grudgingly parts with the cash.

He checks the newsstand out of curiosity rather than necessity, because this feeling is too familiar. It feels like he has been thrown through time in his sleep, and last time that happened it was because an angel wanted him to “fix” things, but Dean hasn’t met any angels other than Cas lately. And with heaven still in chaos, he’s pretty sure he isn’t high on their list of people to dick around with at the moment. Besides, Cas would have warned him if he was suddenly on their Hit List.

The newspaper he picks up informs him that it’s the November 27, 2016. Dean drops it on the floor, scrabbling for other papers and magazines on the shelf, but they all tell him the same thing. He takes in a deep breath, trying to calm his anger-nerves-nausea in his stomach as he scowls down at the New York Times in his hand. Little things make sense now; Sam not being there when he woke up, gas prices being higher. But that doesn’t answer the bigger issues at hand.

He’s still trying to get his mind around what the hell he is doing here and *why*. Things are undeniably *different* than the last future he was in, which had been an apocalyptic wasteland, and Dean can’t help but feel relief at that. This...this is kind of more of the same 2011 with a twist. A pretty damn huge twist that has him waking up next to Castiel. He isn’t ready for this. It’s too much to swallow. It’s not been *that* long since he parted ways with Lisa. Sinking into a comfortable routine had been hard enough in the first place, learning to concentrate on girlfriend and stand-in son instead of Sam. And when Sam had come back, his loyalties had been too torn, too much. Dean Winchester didn’t do commitment, didn’t do Apple Pie, and he’d learned quickly that hunting didn’t mesh well with his new family. So he’d made a choice, and it had been harder than he’d thought. He left with Sam, and it had been in not only his best interest, but in Lisa’s as well. And he’d just started to get comfortable in a life without commitments again.

Now, it seems, Dean not only has to worry about how and why he’s been thrown into 2016, but he also has to deal with an apparently *close* relationship with Castiel. It’s too soon for him to digest whatever might exist between himself and Castiel. Because there is obviously *something* going on. He doesn’t wake up, entwined around an angel for no reason. Fair enough, he had been pleased, relieved, and *comfortable* to have Cas back in his life after a year of absence, but this is just too much. There’s a leap he just can’t comprehend at the moment. To step from one committed relationship to another is just plain unheard of in the life of Dean Winchester.

He puts the newspapers and magazines back on the shelves and drives back to the motel in a daze, trying to figure out how and why he got sent to the future.

Cas is sitting on the edge of the bed staring blearily at the door when Dean returns.



He starts when Dean opens the door, then gives a lazy smile. It's like he doesn't even remember being rudely awakened half an hour ago. He's still sitting in the clothes he slept in, and Dean wonders how long he has been sitting there, staring at the door. Dean won't deny that his heart is thundering in his chest. Even heavy with sleep those blue eyes do things to him that Dean has spent two years pushing to the back of his mind.

'Hey,' Dean says, pulling off his leather jacket and tossing it on a nearby chair beside a small table. Papers on a side table catch his eye and he scoops them up, starts rifling through them as he walks over to Cas; who knows, maybe there will be a clue as to what's happened amongst them.

'Hey,' Cas says, his voice closer, and Dean didn't hear him move. The next thing he knows there are arms wrapped around his middle and Cas is pressed against his back, nose rubbing against Dean's shoulder blade. And he's warm. Really, really warm.

'Uhm ... Cas...?' There's a quiver in Dean's voice, but he can't move a bloody inch. He won't deny it, it's kind of nice having Cas wrapped around him, and there's something stirring low in his belly. But it doesn't ease the discomfort of "too soon" making him clench his hand around the papers.

'What's the matter, Dean?' Cas says in his ear, sliding a hand further down Dean's stomach, and Dean stops him there. He grabs Cas' hand before it can go any further, because he knows *exactly* where it had been headed.

'What are you doing?' Dean asks. It comes out slightly snippier than he meant it.

'You weren't complaining last night,' Cas says. It sounds so like the Cas Dean met in the future that Dean finds it impossible to suppress a shiver, because this Cas is like the Cas he met in 2014, only not stoned. The low drawl of this Cas isn't thick with booze and drugs, and Dean can't help but think he needs to hear more of that.

'Last night?' Dean asks as he unhooks Castiel's hands from around his waist and turns around to look at him. Castiel frowns and tilts his head in a way that is reassuringly familiar.

'As far as I know, we were both sober,' Cas says, and there's a teasing note there that Dean has never heard before. He kind of likes it.

It's Dean's turn to frown now. His heart is still pounding hard in his chest, and he really can't wrap his mind around this close intimacy he has with *Cas*. How had they gone from carefully toeing the line, from friends and confidants, to *this*? There's a time and a place for everything though, and right now Dean would like to work out how he got here before he tries to figure out this *thing* between himself and Castiel.

Cas doesn't seem to be in any hurry to drop the charade though. He doesn't back off from where he is standing too close to Dean and pulls the bunched up paper free from Dean's hand before he tosses them aside. When Cas reaches a hand up towards Dean's hair, Dean grabs his wrist, stopping him in his tracks. Cas sighs.

'What's gotten into you?' he asks.

Dean's not sure what kind of reaction he's going to get from this Cas. He's loose and joking, but at the moment also incredibly determined. And Dean's only ever seen his Castiel this determined in matters concerning seals and orders from Heaven. Contradicting that one-track mind had never been a good thing, and Dean's not sure he wants to see what kind of reaction he'll get from this Cas if he tries to deter him with less than gentle force.

'Nothing,' he says quietly, because he would really like to make sense of what happened between him being knocked out and waking up in bed with Cas, but he doesn't think he is going to get his explanation from Cas when he's apparently determined to have his way with him. 'I'm just ... we have to go meet Sam soon.'

'Right,' Cas says doubtfully. 'Since when did you overlook a quickie in favor of meeting Sam?'

Dean blinks in surprise, because while he had got that there is quite clearly something between him and Cas in this timeline, but it is another thing to *hear* it. Dean blushes and scratches at the back of his neck, completely and utterly out of his comfort zone.

'Cas...' Dean says as he takes a step back. He ends up with the lip of the table biting into his butt for his efforts, because Cas has taken personal space to whole new levels.

'Dean...' Cas says in the same tone, like they are playing a game. Cas crooks an eyebrow at him, then shakes his head as he leans back. 'Are you all right? You seem a bit ... off.'

'I'm fine,' Dean says, his voice raising an octave. That earns him a sceptical look from the angel. Dean's seen that look before, usually when Dean is being especially pig-headed about something, except now it is tainted with concern.

'Sure,' Cas says sarcastically.

'Will you just ... go get ready,' Dean says, and Cas shakes his head at him before he turns on his heel and heads into the bathroom. He pauses just before he closes the

door. The grin on his face is nothing short of mischievous.

‘You could join me,’ he says, and Dean goes a whole new shade of red.

‘Just ... go,’ Dean says eventually.

‘Fine...’ Cas says, and Dean hears him mutter something about Dean being grumpy this morning as the door clicks shut.

Dean spends the ten minutes it takes for Cas to shower digging through the papers he picked up from the table. They don’t help very much; they are newspaper clippings along the same kind of note that Dean remembers reading before he had dragged Sam to Syracuse on the incubus hunt. The book on the table is one of Bobby’s and specializes in demons that absorb human life force. A quick flip through it confirms Dean’s thoughts that no succubus or incubus has the power to make him forget everything and wake up in bizarro land. Which leaves angels as the only solution to this future mess, but Dean has already found the flaw in that deduction.

When Cas finally comes out of the bathroom, he looks no less disheveled than when he entered, and Dean begins wondering if Cas does that bed-head look to his hair on purpose. But Cas paws at his hair in a futile attempt to get it to lay flat as he makes his way across the room to the duffle bag lying on the spare chair.

Dean wants to protest when Cas starts rummaging about in it—because it’s *his*—but he ends up just staring at him, dumbfounded, instead. He nearly gets an eyeful when Cas drops the towel to pull on a pair of boxers, but he drops his eyes to the floor before he can see much of anything. He can feel his cheeks heating up regardless. He peeks a look just as Cas is pulling on a pair of jeans and catches the smirk on Cas’ face. Dean watches as Cas pulls on a dark blue plaid shirt and he is reminded again of how this Cas is nothing like the one he knows at all. But the clean, well-worn jeans and plaid shirt are nothing like the future Cas he met last romp into the future, either.

This Castiel is too comfortable in his own skin, too understanding of Dean’s quirks, too aware of himself and the impact he has on Dean. And yet he seems to be completely aware of who he is, and it seems all owed to the fact that he’s comfortable in his own skin and his humanity, not because he is blissed out on drugs. This Cas doesn’t need to bury his pain in the iniquities of humanity; he is happy and whole and healthy without that mess, and Dean wonders how much of that is because of him. Dean has wanted Cas to be able to relax for a long time, and it isn’t like he has never wondered if Cas would ever change clothes. Dean kinda misses the trench coat, though, and he is beginning to wonder if there is still some of the Cas he knows in there, or if he’s disappeared behind this mask of normalcy, of *human*.

It's not until Cas is pushing a pair of hiking boots onto his feet that Dean finally speaks up.

'What's with the get up?' he asks.

'What do you mean?' Cas picks up his wallet and phone from the bedside table and starts towards the door. Dean ogles him for a moment longer, then lets out a long sigh. Today is just laying on the bizarre.

'Never mind,' he says. Cas is frowning again, though.

'Are you sure you're all right, Dean?' he asks again, and there's that concerned look in his eye again that Dean really hasn't seen much of. It scares him slightly, because up until very recently Cas hasn't shown concern; he usually just gets frustrated.

'Fine,' Dean says shortly, and grabs up the research they had gathered and leads the way out of the motel room.

## Part Two

### *Of Things That Are Different and Things That Are Very Much The Same*

It only takes ten minutes for Dean to find the diner. Asking Cas what the name of the place is had earned him another worried look. He must have looked annoyed, though, because Cas had just given him the name and then sat in watchful silence the rest of the way. The diner isn't difficult to find; he had passed it on the way to get gas earlier, and Dean has a knack for remembering roads and landmarks when he has to.

Dean pulls into the parking lot in front of the rather quaint little eatery and parks up near the front door as a huge smoky grey beast of an SUV parks right next to him. He makes a face at it and mumbles about things that big being unnecessary. He shoots a glance at Cas as he starts to get out of the car and catches Cas' affectionate smile.

As Dean closes his door behind him, he notices the driver of the SUV getting out of his car, and for a second he stares in a mixture of surprise and utter horror. Sam grins at him as he slams the door of the SUV shut.

'Good morning,' Sam says, quickly checking his phone before pushing it back in his pocket.

'What the hell is that?' Dean asks by way of greeting, not taking his eyes off his brother.

Sam's gaze flicks to Cas, who is leaning against the hood of the Impala with his hip. Dean sees him give a lazy shrug out of the corner of his eye, and Sam frowns as he looks back at Dean. Dean forgets the time jump. At the moment, he's in disapproving big brother mode, and that has the tendency to block out all other things.

'My car,' Sam says in a way that implies Dean is being thick.

'That's not a car. It's a monster.'

'I like it.'

'You would.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It's everything my car isn't!' Dean argues. 'I bet you even have an iPod dock in there.'

Sam makes a face, shifting his weight from foot to foot. There is indeed an iPod dock, and no sign of Dean's favorite ten songs within the iPod currently hooked up to the sound system. Dean gives Sam a knowing smirk, receiving a tight-lipped smile in return. Dean can read his brother like a book, and Sam knows it.

'It's a practical, family car,' Sam mutters.

'So is the Impala.'

'Yeah, well, Dad left you the Impala, not me.'

'What are you talking about, you never wanted her,' Dean says, feeling slightly defensive suddenly.

'I know,' Sam says with a tilt of his head and a flicker of a frown before he pushes off the SUV and starts towards the diner. 'Can we just get some breakfast?'

'What the heck is that thing anyway?' Dean asks, curiously ogling the front of his brother's car. Good Lord, it's even a hybrid.

'GMC Yukon,' Sam replies. 'You helped me pick it.'

'Hmph,' Dean snorts, as he steps around the car and leads the way into the diner. 'You must've caught me on an off day. Was I hungover?'

Another ten minutes and the three of them are sitting in a spacious booth by the window, waiting for their breakfast. Sam's half of the table is covered with the papers that Dean brought from the motel room. He's flipping through the clippings with a look of intense concentration on his face. Dean lounges in the corner, lazily watching his brother while Castiel is sitting quietly at his side, sitting perhaps a little too close. But Dean hasn't the heart to tell him to scooch over. Cas sitting too close is something he's used to, something *his* Cas has always done, and he's gotten oddly used to it since he started hunting again after Lisa. It's comforting, when everything else is so strange and unnerving. As long as Castiel doesn't make another move on him, he's fine. Anything beyond this too-close familiarity is what frightens him.

It isn't until their food is in front of them and Castiel is nursing a hot cup of tea that the silence is broken. Sam, who hasn't yet touched his plate of pancakes—which Dean keeps glancing at as though his own plateful isn't nearly enough—folds the papers into Bobby's book, pushes it aside, and looks over at Dean.

'So,' he says, and Dean looks up to meet his gaze. 'What's this you were saying

about a demon attack earlier?’

Cas chokes on his tea, spluttering so badly Dean has to thump him on the back. When he can breathe again he says, ‘You didn’t tell me about this.’ He sounds hurt and worried, and Dean can feel a knot of guilt in the pit of his stomach that he can’t even explain.

‘I—it’s nothing...’ Dean says cautiously because it’s one thing to realize he’s in the future, but it’s another to completely freak out the future versions of his brother and...whatever Cas is.

‘You phoned me in a panic earlier,’ Sam points out, and while that is true, this had also been before Dean had realised he is in 2016.

‘Yeah, I...er...’ Dean sighs, they’ll find out sooner or later. It’s not like Dean is doing such a fantastic job of fitting in anyway.

‘Come on, Dean,’ Sam says. ‘You can’t phone with a bombshell like that and then not tell me what happened.’

‘Fine,’ Dean says. ‘I was at a bar with you two and we ran into Sarah—the auctioneers daughter,’ he adds to clarify. Sam frowns at him slightly but there’s an amused smile on his face at the same time. ‘One of her friends went missing and we split up to find her and I ran into the incubus, fought it and lost...’

‘Sounds like a dream,’ Sam says, shrugging loosely.

‘That happened five years ago,’ Cas chimes in at the same time, and Sam looks at him curiously for a moment before it dawns on him and he nods in agreement.

‘Yeah, well that’s not the weird part,’ Dean says. ‘The weird part is I woke up this morning next to you,’ he pauses as he looks at Cas, who merely quirks an eyebrow at him. ‘And...it’s 2016, I don’t remember anything after that fight. Nothing. It’s like I woke up in the future and I have no idea how.’

‘Incubi have no control over time,’ Cas says, brow furrowed in puzzlement.

‘I know,’ Dean says. ‘I don’t know what happened. Do you think it was the angels?’

‘I’m cut off from Heaven, Dean,’ Cas says seriously. ‘I have no way of knowing.’

‘Why would they drop you in the future after that?’ Sam asks, looking from Cas to Dean and back. ‘Other than meeting Sarah, I can’t even remember what happened.’

‘You remember meeting Sarah?’

‘Yeah,’ Sam says. ‘It’s the night she came back into my life, of course I remember.’ It’s Dean’s turn to look puzzled.

‘Sam married Sarah,’ Cas clarifies for him.

‘Oh...’ and Dean feels a mixture of surprise and pride. He smirks. ‘I always did tell you to marry that girl.’

Sam rolls his eyes at that, and shakes his head like he’s heard that a thousand times. ‘Are you sure you didn’t hit your head or something and just don’t remember?’

‘I hit my head *then*,’ Dean says. Sam looks at Castiel who shrugs at him.

‘I don’t know what could have that effect,’ Cas says. ‘Nothing so bad that it could erase five years of memory.’

Sam sighs shortly. ‘Fine, maybe we should try and figure out what’s going on with that, rather than this,’ he says, waving a hand at the papers he has pushed to one side. ‘No,’ Dean says, and Sam looks at him questioningly.

There’s a part of him that wants to find out how on earth he got here and why. But he also knows that the last time he was sent to the future it was to learn a lesson and perhaps hunting the creature in this timeline is what he has to do in order to learn whatever lesson he has been sent to learn this time around. Hunting the thing that kicked his ass embarrassingly easily last night isn’t high on his list of “things to do,” but he can’t fight the feeling that he is meant to. He doesn’t even know how long he will be stuck here, so tracking down the incubus seems as good an idea as any.

‘Dean,’ Cas tries to interrupt but stops when Dean shoots a glance at him.

‘If I *was* sent here then it’s probably for a reason. We should just ... do what we were going to do anyway and you guys can fill me in on anything I’m missing, okay?’

‘Reason?’ Sam asks.

Dean shrugs. ‘Yeah. Last time I was mojoed into the future, I had to learn a lesson, right? So... maybe this time it’s not that different.’

Sam doesn’t say anything, and when Dean looks at Castiel the ex-angel is staring at him like he’s some sort of puzzle. But there’s a dawning realization in the sudden



frown, a slow understanding, and when Dean sees Sam shoot Castiel a look, Castiel nods shortly.

‘Okay,’ Sam says after a moment. ‘There isn’t much to go on,’ he says, finally lifting his knife and fork and pulling his plate closer to him.

‘We’ve gone on hunts for less,’ Dean replies, eyeing the article still poking from the book. It’s one very similar to the one he had pointed out three days ago before they travelled to Syracuse, and Dean had needed to argue his point that time too.

‘Three cases of death from exhaustion?’ Sam asks, a forkful of pancake halfway to his mouth as he gives Dean a dubious look.

‘We think they are related to the three “mysterious” pregnancies reported in the last three weeks,’ Castiel says before taking a bite of toast. Both Dean and Sam look at him; this information seems to be just as new to Sam as it does to Dean. The case Dean remembers from the day before had no mention of an incubus until five minutes before Dean had lost the fight to one.

‘How?’ Sam asks incredulously.

‘Dean thought it could be a succubus and incubus.’

‘I did?’ Dean asks in surprise, not taking his eyes off Castiel, because last time Dean heard of the succubus-incubus combo, it had been Cas who had revealed they were hunting both.

‘He does?’ Sam chimes in at the same time.

‘Well, uh, you did last night,’ Castiel says, and the teasing note is back in his voice. ‘But that was before you went through your weird memory wipe.’

‘Dude—’ Dean starts, but Sam cuts across him.

‘Well, from what you guys have got here, I think you could be onto something,’ Sam says, even though moments ago he had been arguing the opposite. Dean raised an eyebrow at him. ‘What’s the plan?’

‘The plan...?’ Dean echoes stupidly. He is still wrapping his mind around the fact they are hunting both a succubus and an incubus. Again.

‘We could start by interviewing the man who claims he survived a succubus attack, and the women claiming *miraculous* conception,’ Castiel says, taking a slow sip of

tea as he looks from one Winchester to the other. ‘Then I think we should go to the morgue and see what the dead men have in common. See if anything unusual happened to them.’

‘Yeah...’ Dean says distractedly, strangely impressed with Castiel taking the reins on this one. It’s what he and Sam would do on an ordinary case; he isn’t sure why *Cas* taking control does weird things to his insides, though.

‘That sounded slightly bitchy for you, Cas,’ Sam says with a grin.

‘I may be a *former* angel of the Lord, but I still know that there was only one true miraculous conception from God ... there are no plans for another.’

‘Jesus *actually* existed?’ Dean asks, receiving an amused look from his brother and their companion.

‘After all you’ve seen it’s *Him* you question?’ Castiel says, though it’s with amusement if the curl of his lip is anything to go by.

‘He didn’t believe in angels until you came along, either,’ Sam points out, wagging his fork in Dean’s direction.

‘You were rather startled by my presence on occasion,’ Castiel admits.

‘That’s because you have personal space iss—’

‘Yeah, he was jumpy for days after he first met you,’ Sam grins.

‘Yeah, like you weren’t silently fangirling the first time you met Cas and Uriel!’ Dean snaps, and Sam frowns at his pancakes.

‘It was a revelatory moment,’ he says quietly and Dean knows he’s crossed a line. Sam had been the devout one, and neither of the angels had been very impressed with him. Dean, on the other hand, had been their favorite toy.

The table descends into an awkward silence after that, all three of them focusing on their breakfasts and Dean carefully avoiding Sam’s gaze. Cas finishes first and drapes an arm lazily along the back of the booth, and Dean can’t help but be aware of how close Cas is and how his fingers keep lightly brushing at the hair at the nape of his neck. It’s far more comfortable and soothing than it should be, in Dean’s opinion.

Sam finishes his plate of pancakes, then takes a long gulp of coffee before he sits back and looks back up at Dean and Cas.

‘So, what’s our cover?’

~\*~

There have really only been a handful of times when Castiel has questioned his decision to leave Heaven. All of them have been when Dean distanced himself. Each of those times, Castiel has wondered if Dean realized everything that Castiel had given up for him, for *them*, the ramifications of his choice. At those times, he wondered if perhaps his sacrifice is what scared Dean in the first place.

Nothing has spurred this distancing, though. Things have been good between them for a long time; Dean had finally stopped running away and had accepted that yes, he had feelings for Castiel. They still argued, still had disagreements, but nothing more severe than when they had been Just Friends. So it was a shock to wake up the morning after their third anniversary to find Dean freaking out. Cas had tried to brush it off, filing it into the Dean Folder he had locked in his brain that included all his other small freak-outs, and he’d been willing to push it aside and ignore it until Dean worked through it.

Then he finds out that this Dean isn’t his Dean. That this Dean is from five years in the past, when Dean had been fresh from domesticity and Cas had been toeing the line between duty to Heaven and where his heart lay.

What he’s most surprised about, though, is that he couldn’t tell immediately. Even without the powers of Heaven at his disposal, he had assumed that he knew Dean so well that he’d be able to tell instantly that Dean wasn’t *Dean*. While he had known something was off, this Dean was still close enough to his Dean that it wasn’t until Dean mentioned being thrown through time that it finally clicked as to why Dean had been acting so strange.

Since Dean told them, he hasn’t the slightest doubt that he is speaking the truth. Cas also knows of no other being other than his once-kin that would be able to meddle with time. He lets Dean theorize while personally he is wondering who had authorized Dean’s jaunt through time and why.

The one thing he knows for sure is that he isn’t going to push this Dean in case he freaks him out any further. He wonders why his Dean never mentioned this time jump before. But thinking back to when he and Dean first got together, he wonders if Dean’s few panic attacks then had something to do with this. Had Dean known all along that they were headed along this path? Had Cas’ own doubts influenced the doubts that Dean had before they had finally got together?

No. He isn't going to push Dean. If this Dean is still figuring things out, he needs to learn what is right by himself in his own time.

~\*~

Breakfast is really far too quick an affair for Dean's liking. Not only has he been dumped inexplicably into the future, he is also denied the pleasure of taking his sweet time eating his pancakes. Sam, taking charge in his usual annoying way, hurries him along, telling him that they need to get going ASAP. He is barely allowed to wash his pancakes down with a bitter cup of soothing coffee before he is instructed to go back to the motel and get changed into something more appropriate for interviewing people under the guise of an FBI agent.

Much to Dean's disdain, it is decided that they would be much better making the rest of their journey in Sam's monster of an SUV. His protests of all his equipment being in the trunk of his beloved Impala go largely unnoticed when Sam shows him the SUV's all too impressive trunk filled with everything he could think they might need. He also finds that he is beaten two to one on the fact that the SUV looks more like an official government vehicle than the Impala—despite years of that not mattering at all—and arguing proves a whole lot more difficult when he can't simply pull the "I'm your big brother and what I say goes" card due to Castiel's rather amused presence.

To make matters worse, he actually kind of likes Sam's car. His determined distaste goes quickly out of the window when he settles down in one of the comfy leather passenger seats, and he has to try very hard to show Sammy that he isn't really that impressed. Sam, however, seems to see right through his stubborn facade and drives for a good five minutes with a satisfied smirk on his face until Dean punches him in the arm.

By the time they reach their destination, however, Dean is so sick of Sam's music that he is desperate for the refuge of his beloved muscle car and his classic rock. Castiel also seems unimpressed with Sam's music choice, choosing to leaf through Dean's research. Castiel keeps occasionally shooting him furtive glances. It's slightly worrying, but he puts it down to Castiel's usual behavior and concentrates on clicking through tracks on Sam's iPod, much to his brother's annoyance.

The small town of Galeville, just outside of Syracuse doesn't strike Dean as a hovel for demon activity. He has been in enough places in the past, though, to know better than to take things at face value alone. The town is near enough the main city to still deal with overspill. Besides, even if there is bad in town, it isn't likely to get up to any real trouble before sundown. Succubi in particular, tend to be predictable that way.

They pull up at the curb close to a cafe and pile out of the car. Dean is glad to get out, his ears still ringing with the sound of a chirpy girl band singing something annoyingly catchy. He catches himself humming the tune under his breath when he reaches the house of their first interviewee, and swears he's going to get Sam back for this.

Dean is paired up with Castiel—something he isn't overly sure he is happy about, still trying to piece together the *shift* their relationship has apparently taken in five years—but Sam had won the coin flip to go to the hospital and find out more about a woman claiming to have been impregnated by an incubus in her sleep.

Whatever reservations Dean has, though, he needn't have worried. Castiel is as professional and distant as ever, his penchant for personal space no less or more than usual, but he's careful and he's *Cas*. He still shoots Dean an adorable smile just as they ring the doorbell, though.

Dean presses the doorbell, shifting his weight from foot to foot as they wait for someone to come to the door. After a minute or so with no reply, Dean attempts to look in the narrow window at the side of the door panel. He sees nothing beyond a shoe-cluttered hallway and pulls away, knocking impatiently at the door.

'Told you it was pointless at this time in the morning,' he mutters as he glances at his watch. It's just after nine in the morning. 'Nobody gets up this early unless they have to. Especially students.'

Castiel hides a smirk, placing a hand on Dean's arm. 'Just be patient,' Cas tells him. 'Not everyone gets up the second they hear a noise.'

'I don't,' Dean protests, though it's a lie. He hadn't been able to break the habit even when he'd been with Lisa, and the slightest noise would rouse him.

'You do.' Castiel grins again. Dean pulls his arm out of Castiel's grip and scowls at him before jabbing the doorbell again.

'Alright, alright, hold your horses, man,' comes a grumble as the door opens to reveal a young man in boxers and a t-shirt and sporting a serious case of bed-head. 'What's the matter?'

Dean gives Castiel a look, receiving a small shrug as Cas pulls an identification badge from the inside pocket of his suit jacket that he holds out towards the young man.

‘Morning sir, I’m Agent Smithers,’ Castiel says, ignoring Dean’s amused smile as he goes on. ‘And this is Agent Burns. We are with the FBI.’

‘FBI?’ the kid repeats, though he doesn’t look any closer at the badges. Instead he rakes a hand through his messy blonde hair as he looks from Castiel to Dean and back. ‘What are you guys doing here?’

‘Do you mind if we come in?’ Castiel asks. ‘This is a sensitive matter.’

‘Uh, sure...’ the young man says with a confused frown, standing aside as he pulls the door further open and allows the duo to step inside. ‘Living room is first on the left.’

‘So ... Michael—’ Dean starts.

‘It’s Martin,’ the boy interjects, pacing the room as Dean and Castiel sit down on the sofa.

‘Martin,’ Dean corrects himself, sharing a glance with Castiel before he looks back at the boy. ‘Why don’t you tell us what happened with this ...’ Dean deliberates, looking at his notepad as though pretending to take note of something. ‘Succubus, you reported?’

‘The FBI looks into that shit?’

‘The FBI looks into anything if the danger is high enough,’ Castiel says, and Dean can’t help but be impressed with him—last time he’d gone on a hunt with Cas, the angel had been abysmal at it. ‘Just tell us what happened.’

‘I told the cops, man,’ Martin says, pausing in his pacing to look at Castiel. ‘They thought I was nuts.’

‘We aren’t normal cops, kid,’ Dean says. ‘Just tell us.’

‘Uhm, okay,’ Martin says, sitting down tentatively on the armchair opposite them and letting out a huff of breath. ‘I’d been at Behind the Wall—a bar in town—drownin’ my sorrows after my girlfriend cheated on me.’

Behind the Wall, *Behind the Wall*...hadn’t that been where he and Sam had met Sarah the night before? Dean taps his pen against his notebook, lost in thought, until he feels Castiel’s elbow pressing against his ribs. He looks up just in time to catch Cas nodding once in Martin’s direction. Martin doesn’t seem to have noticed that Dean had spaced out, though. He’s running a hand through his hair again and looks up to see Cas and Dean looking from one another to him. There’s a flicker of *something*

behind his eyes that Dean can't interpret, like he's wondering what they are thinking, but he shrugs it off.

'...she came up to me when I was on my third or fourth beer,' Martin is saying. Dean belatedly wishes he had been paying attention, because now he isn't sure who the kid is talking about and it seems rude to ask. 'Said I seemed like I had a lot on my mind and then offered to buy the next round. I said sure—free beer, man, I don't turn that down.' He pauses as Dean smirks at him and he smiles back, relaxing a bit on the armrest of his chair.

'She wouldn't leave me alone after that, really,' Martin goes on. 'I didn't mind. I was drunk, I was rambling all kinds of nonsense until I'm pretty sure I wasn't decent to even walk to the door, never mind get home.'

'Anyway, she offered me a lift home and I said sure, let her half-drag me to her car —'

'Do you remember what kind of car she drove?' Dean asks, though he thinks it's a long shot.

'Nah, man, I was hammered,' Martin says, shaking his head regretfully. 'It wasn't very big ... probably one of those little VWs you see about. Nothing notable.'

'Did she take you straight home?' Castiel asks, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

'No ...' Martin says, eyes clouding over as he frowns, sorting through the jumble of what had happened and what he couldn't remember. 'Took me a while to realize, though. I think I fell asleep for a bit. Next thing I knew we were pulling up to an apartment block. We must have got on the elevator 'cause I don't remember going up any stairs.'

'Rest is a blur ... things got hot and heavy kinda quickly, but I...I didn't want to. I was still hung up on Nikki, I couldn't.' Martin avoids their gaze now, as though ashamed, but if anything Dean understands how he feels. Jumping in the sack again so soon after leaving Lisa behind would feel wrong. It's an understanding Dean isn't used to having, but it's there nonetheless. 'Anyway, I tried to push her off, slow things down, and that just seemed to make her mad.'

'I've never seen anything like it,' he says, shaking his head. 'It's like she was possessed. She was crazy strong and every time she kissed me I felt weaker...I've never had that with booze before...'

‘How did you escape?’ Castiel asks.

‘It was freaking luck, man,’ Martin says, running a hand through his hair again. ‘One minute she was all over me, then there was this knock at the door. At first she ignored it, but whoever it was just kept on knocking until she decided to answer.’

‘It took me a minute to get going. I felt so weak. But as soon as I could get to my feet, I ran. Got out the kitchen window and down the fire escape. I’ve never been so glad to get out of anywhere.’

‘Do you think you could identify her if you saw her again?’ Dean asks.

‘I don’t know if I ever want to see her again,’ Martin says quietly.

‘I understand,’ Castiel says, and Dean looks at him in surprise again. ‘Could you at least give us a description so we could look for her ourselves?’

‘Uh, sure,’ Martin says.

They leave another five minutes later, slightly more informed, but Martin’s memory of the girl had been hazy at best. They are looking for a woman of average height, slim but not too slim, dark hair, brown eyes, kinda pretty. Dean thought it was all very generic and not very helpful at all. Cas thanked Martin politely, shot Dean a glare, grabbed him by the arm and quickly ushered him from the house.

‘Manners never hurt anyone,’ Cas says once the door is shut behind them and they are making their way down the steps outside the house. Dean pulls his arm from Cas’ grip and glares at him.

‘He wasn’t very helpful.’

‘The man survived a possible succubus attack,’ Castiel says snippily. ‘What did you really expect, for him to draw what she looked like? He’s traumatised, Dean.’

‘You sound like Sam.’

‘Someone needs to talk sense into you,’ Cas mutters as he leads the way back towards the car.

‘Since when were you all understanding of humanity anyways?’ Dean asks, feeling his blood beginning to boil at being treated like an idiot. ‘Normally *I’m* the one having to tell *you* to tone it down a bit.’



Cas turns on his heel, stopping in his tracks so suddenly that Dean almost walks into him. Cas raises a hand towards Dean's chest and he takes a step back.

'Look, Dean,' Cas starts. 'I know you've been dropped five years into the future and that things are probably confusing for you right now. But I'm not the same person anymore. I'm different ... I'm *human*, and yeah, I don't get everything—I doubt I ever will—but I'm not stupid.'

'Sorry,' Dean says quietly, and he can feel his cheeks growing hot.

'And please stop acting like every time I move towards you I am going to have my way with you,' Cas says, shaking his head. 'I do have self-control. *You* on the other hand...'

'Hey, I *have* self-control,' Dean argues.

'Good. Then act like it.'

When they get back to the car, Sam is leaning against it, waiting for them. He pushes off when he catches sight of them and walks over to meet them. He falls into step with Dean, walking towards the café that they parked in front of.

'Well, how is the reincarnation of Christ doing?' Cas asks Sam, and Dean does a double take at the sarcasm in his voice. It sounds too familiar, and Dean has a feeling that Cas learned all his tricks from him. It makes him feel a bit guilty, but it also fills him with a strange sense of pride.

'Nice healthy baby,' Sam says with a grin. 'Seven pounds, four ounces.'

Cas laughs and steps ahead of the Winchester brothers to push the door to the café open. He leads the way over to a table in the middle of the dining area and sits down. Both Sam and Dean sit down opposite him. Dean tries to ignore the little frown of disappointment that flickers over Cas' face before he looks over at the waiting staff.

As if on cue, a woman approaches their table with a notebook and pen in hand. She smiles at them and looks at the three of them expectantly.

'Morning gentlemen,' she says politely. 'What can I get for you?'

'Three coffees,' Sam says. 'Black.'

'Sure thing,' she says. 'Anything else?'

‘Got any pie?’ Dean asks, glancing hopefully over his shoulder towards the counter. He glowers at Castiel when he feels a sharp tap to his shin.

‘Yes, sir,’ the waitress says. ‘We have apple, cherry or pecan today.’

‘Give me a slice of the cherry,’ he says, and with another, more painful, tap to his shin he adds, ‘Thank you.’

‘Welcome,’ she says, jotting their order down on the pad. ‘It’ll be with you shortly.’

‘What’s with all the kicking?’ Dean hisses at Cas once the waitress has left, leaning across the table.

‘The first one is because you are meant to be cutting back on pie,’ Cas says. He smiles at the look of horror Dean shoots him. ‘The second because you have the manners of a street urchin.’

‘What?’ Dean splutters while Sam guffaws beside him. ‘Shut up, Sammy.’

Sam wipes a tear of mirth from his eye, looking from Dean to Cas. ‘Alright, we going to leave the domestic dispute at the door?’

‘We aren’t having a domest—’ Dean starts.

‘Yes,’ Cas interrupts, ending the argument. ‘How did things go at the hospital?’

‘Kerry Hume, twenty-three,’ Sam says. ‘Swears she was—still is—a virgin...’ he pauses when Dean makes a snorting noise and shakes his head. Sam crooks an eyebrow at him.

‘Seriously, who’s still a virgin at twenty-three?’

‘Lots of people are,’ Sam says in a long-suffering tone. ‘Not everyone sleeps with anything that moves.’

‘I don’t—’ Dean argues.

‘You used to before...’ Sam pauses as he looks at Cas and swallows hard. ‘Before Lisa.’

Dean glances at Cas, too, and quickly realizes from the stony expression on his face that his time with Lisa has become a sore point. Dean doesn’t know how that happened, or what has been said about his relationship with Lisa in the past, but

Castiel doesn't seem happy about it. He is saved from saying anything by the arrival of coffee and pie.

As he stuffs his face with pie, Sam and Castiel continue talking about what each of them has found out.

'Anyway,' Sam says, taking a sip of coffee. 'As I was saying, Kerry said that she was a virgin. She didn't even know she was pregnant until she went into labor. Had intense stomach pains so bad one of her friends took her to hospital. Next thing you know, she's being told she's in labor and there's a bouncing baby girl coming into the world.'

'A girl?' Cas says, like that is the weirdest part of the whole story.

'That actually happens?' Dean asks between mouthfuls of pie. 'I thought that was a myth. How do you not notice that you're pregnant?'

'It happens more often than you think,' Sam says before looking back at Cas. 'Does it matter that it's a girl.'

'Not implicitly,' Cas says, jaw stiffening, and Dean knows from the look on his face they aren't going to like what he says yet. 'Either way...if this child is the offspring of an incubus it must be destroyed.'

'Whoa, whoa—' Sam starts.

'Hold up a minute, Cas,' Dean interrupts, dropping his voice. He leans in closer to Cas again, who is watching him with cold eyes. 'You can't go killing children...we talked about this last time.'

'The demonic influence will always win out,' Cas says seriously, and all of a sudden this is the Cas Dean knows, the one that still hasn't grasped that the line between right and wrong can often be a blurry one. That nothing is ever plain black and white, that sometimes there are exceptions to the rules. Innocent children who have no idea what they are and what they could become are one of those exceptions. There's a part of Dean that is oddly relieved that there's still a part of *his* Cas in there.

'Cas, it's a baby,' Dean says, pushing his half-eaten pie aside and leaning his elbows on the table so as he can lean in closer to Cas. Cas' eyes flick to his lips, and Dean pretends he doesn't see that.

'How would you feel if someone told you DeeJay was a demon and had to die?' Sam asks, and Dean turns to frown at his brother.

‘Who’s DeeJay?’

Sam stares at him incredulously for a moment before he runs a hand over his face like he’s just remembered that Dean doesn’t *know*.

‘Your nephew,’ Sam says, watching as Dean’s eyebrows rise in surprise and he sucks in a breath.

‘Nephew...’ Dean repeats quietly. ‘I ... you have a son.’

‘Yeah.’

‘How old?’

‘He just turned two a month ago,’ Sam says.

‘With ... with Sarah?’

‘Of course.’

Dean looks back at Cas to see that his facial expression has softened; there isn’t steel behind those intense blue eyes anymore. He stares at Dean for a long moment as though trying to glean his thoughts, then looks at Sam. He lets out a slow, steady breath.

‘It’s different,’ Cas says, finally answering Sam’s question.

‘It’s only different because it’s family,’ Sam says angrily. ‘You can’t change the rules because you love someone Cas.’

Cas stares at Sam for a long moment that has Dean watching the pair of them in awe. He’d never been aware of his brother and the angel being particularly close, but to watch them interact like family is weird and oddly heart warming. Eventually, Cas nods and drops his gaze to his coffee. He doesn’t need to say anything for Dean—and Sam—for them to know that he isn’t going to press the issue any further. The Winchester’s can chalk this one up as a win.

‘I can’t believe I’m an uncle,’ Dean says, hoping to break the ice if nothing else. Cas smiles at that and reaches a hand out across the table towards Dean’s. Before Dean realizes what he’s doing, he reflexively pulls his hand out of his reach. Castiel frowns, his hand going back and picking up his coffee cup to take a sip, and Dean ignores the look that Sam gives them.

Cas fills Sam in on their meeting with Martin and they spend the rest of their time in the café devising a plan of action. It's still too early to go to the bar—which doesn't open until noon for the lunch service—to check for clues there, so instead they decide to head to the morgue and take a look at the newest corpse said have expired by means of exhaustion.

### ***Questions That Need Answers and Questions That Need Avoiding***

Dean refuses to let Sam play his iPod on the ride to the morgue and insists they listen to the radio instead. He loves his brother, but there is only so much catchy pop music he can listen to, and he has reached his quota for the month, never mind the day. And he isn't wholly convinced by Sam's insistence that most of the songs are Sarah's.

It is a young doctor who introduces himself as Dr. Christopher Ryan that speaks to them. He has dark hair smoothed into an impeccable side parting, dark eyes hidden behind blocky, black glasses and who would be about the same height as Castiel if he didn't slouch. He doesn't question them much beyond looking at their badges, and leads them calmly along to the examination room while explaining his findings. Sam and Dean follow silently behind him while Cas flips through the patient files the doctor handed him.

The examination room is the same as countless others they have been in, but Dean gets an uncomfortable shiver up his spine anyway. He should be used to it, but a year out of action seems to have had an effect on his resilience for stomaching dead bodies. He takes a couple of steps back and makes a face when the doctor opens one of the refrigerated drawers and pulls back the sheet covering the dead.

'If you don't mind,' the young doctor says, making a step towards the door. 'I have other autopsies to do today.'

'Sure,' Sam says, taking one of the files from Cas as he nods at the doctor. 'Thanks.'

'Just be sure to close up once you're done,' he says, and with that the three of them are left alone in the examination room.

'Looks like the pathologist put it down to heart failure,' Sam says, flipping through the folder before throwing it onto the table nearby and looking at the body. The body is that of a man in his mid to late twenties. He might have been handsome at some point in his life but right now he looks emaciated. Like the life has been sucked out of him.

‘Gross...’ Dean mutters to himself.

Cas ignores him. ‘All the files say the same thing,’ he says, piling his files on top of the one Sam had just thrown aside. ‘All the pictures are similar to this guy, too.’

‘I can’t believe I ever got used to this,’ Dean says quietly.

‘Buck up,’ Sam says with a grin as he smacks Dean on the arm. Dean retaliates with a scowl. ‘We deal with this stuff all the time.’

‘I know...’ Dean says and runs a hand over his face. ‘But we shouldn’t have to.’ He looks up to find both Sam and Castiel looking at him questioningly. It is unsettling how Cas has learned to mirror his brother’s expressions just as well as Dean’s.

‘So, uhm,’ Sam starts, and Dean resists the urge to roll his eyes. His brother has the subtlety of a freight train. ‘How long after Lisa is this for you?’

‘A couple of weeks,’ Dean admits. He carefully avoids Cas’ gaze, because he doesn’t need to see the underlying anger there. He really doesn’t. But as he looks up to Sam, the sympathy there isn’t much better.

‘It gets easier,’ Sam says.

‘Yeah,’ Dean mutters, suddenly feeling like he is under a spotlight from two pairs of eyes, and he really hates all this focus on him. ‘Can we just work on the case?’

‘Yeah,’ Sam says, and the next time Dean looks up both Sam and Cas are looking anywhere but him.

The rest of their examination of the corpses confirms their suspicions that it is a succubus they are dealing with in the cases of death by exhaustion. As well as the emaciated corpses that look like the life has been drained from them, there are signs of sexual intercourse and an increase in oxytocin in the victim’s systems similar to the attack of a siren. Sam opens up the mortician’s incisions to examine the organs, but Dean sits that one out after bile burns a trail up his oesophagus. He lets Sam do the gross stuff and listens to Sam’s running commentary on how the organs were dried up and discolored a dark pink. Dean watches from the doorway as Cas helps Sam, asking questions here and there, and Dean can’t help but feel a little warm inside as he observes Sam teaching their friend without protest. It’s like watching Sam stepping in as the big brother, and it kind of suits him.

It’s a little after noon by the time they finish up at the morgue, and while Sam is

determined to continue on with their investigation and go looking for the girl Martin had escaped from, Dean is determined that they eat first. They decide to kill two birds with one stone and eat lunch at the bar before they start snooping around.

The drive back into Syracuse is filled with an awkward silence that Dean wants to break but has no idea how. He fiddles with the radio for five minutes until Sam smacks his hand away from it and gives him a dirty look. Cas sits in the backseat poring over all the information they have gathered, and a small part of Dean is very thankful that Cas is still his bookish, nerdy self. A larger part of him knows that eventually he is going to have to face up to this *thing* between him and Cas, and it's that prospect that has him glancing over his shoulder every couple of minutes. It's like he's still thinking Cas might disappear on them, simply mojo himself away, even though he knows Cas *can't*.

Once they are in the slowly filling bar and seated at a table, Dean can't stomach the awkward silences and the just-missed looks any longer. There's been a building curiosity as to what else has happened in the five years between leaving Lisa and ending up here. So far, all the facts have all been bomb shells—he and Cas are closer, Sam is married, Sam's a father—and he's not sure there can be any bigger ones, but he'd like to be filled in on things he is supposed to accept as the norm. Dean feels like he should have a greater understanding of what has happened in the time that has passed if he is indeed stuck here or meant to be learning a lesson.

'So, what else am I missing?' he asks once there is a bacon cheeseburger sitting in front of him and a cold beer in his hand. He notices the disapproving look from Cas when the plates are placed down in front of them, but he ignores it.

'What do you mean?' Sam asks, pouring one of the little pots full of some kind of sauce all over his salad.

'What else happened in the five years?' Dean asks. 'Any more bombshells? How's Bobby?' he looks at Cas. 'We don't have children, do we?'

'Last I checked that was a physical impossibility,' Cas replies with a smile.

'We could have adopted,' Dean says defensively, and Cas gives him a strange look that he can't interpret.

'Bobby's fine,' Sam says. 'Not that much has changed, really...we still hunt, we still save people. The only difference is that now I have Sarah and Deej, and you have Cas.'

'I always had Cas,' Dean says a bit defensively, and it's only a moment later, when Sam gives him an amused look, that he realizes the implications of what he's just

said.

‘I meant in the *biblical* sense.’ Sam smirks and Dean goes beet red despite himself.

‘Not in the... I mean in the gospel, holy *angel* sense!’ But Sam’s smirk has only widened. Dean busies himself with eating his cheeseburger and deliberately avoiding his brother’s gaze for a minute.

‘We spend a lot of our time between New Paltz and South Dakota,’ Cas tells him before taking a bite of his club sandwich. ‘We still hunt, though.’

Dean stares at Cas for a long moment as he chews his sandwich, then picks up a bit of lettuce that has fallen from his sandwich and pops it in his mouth. He still can’t quite digest how different this Cas is. The few glimpses Dean has seen of Cas being human were always weird. He can still remember the haunting memory of the drugged up, apathetic man who had still been ready to put his life on the line for him, but this man is different, and Dean can actually see himself getting used to him.

‘How did it happen?’ he finds himself asking, and Cas tilts his head at him in that curious way that Dean’s committed to memory.

‘Us?’ he asks, and Dean can feel that his cheeks haven’t cooled down any.

‘No ... I er ... I meant how did you become human?’ Dean asks, briefly wondering if it is still a sore point with him. Cas smiles at him gently though, and Dean thinks that maybe it isn’t.

‘I made a choice,’ Cas says simply.

‘You Fell?’

‘No,’ Cas shakes his head. ‘If I had Fallen, I would have to have ripped my grace out ... I wouldn’t know where I’d be and I’d forget about my life before as Anna did.’

‘So instead?’

‘I made a choice,’ Cas says again. ‘And I paid the consequences of that.’

Dean thinks he really shouldn’t press any further. He doesn’t dare ask what choice he made, as he has very little doubt that the choice was *him*.

‘What about you, Sam?’ he asks instead, changing the subject. Sam looks up from his salad in surprise and gives Dean a questioning look.



‘What?’

‘Do you have a day job in your new life?’

‘This is my day job,’ Sam says. ‘I didn’t stop hunting just because I married Sarah.’

‘Don’t you worry about the things that could get to them?’ Dean asks.

‘I think I’d worry just as much, if not more, if I wasn’t hunting,’ Sam says. ‘Wouldn’t I worry more, not knowing what’s out there?’

‘I suppose,’ Dean says quietly. When he’d been with Lisa, he had slept with a gun under his pillow and had kept a spare in the glove box of his truck; that was as far as he’d gone with the hunting lifestyle when he had been trying so hard to live a normal family life. He hadn’t wanted to do both, couldn’t. He doesn’t know how Sam manages it.

‘The same things don’t work for everyone,’ Sam says carefully, like he knows Dean is thinking of the life he had with Lisa.

‘Yeah, no, I get that,’ Dean says before taking another bite of his burger. He looks around the bar as he chews, looking around at the waiting staff. ‘I don’t see any brunettes,’ he says, trying to bring attention back to the case.

Sam follows his gaze and looks around. He puts his fork down, and starts to get up. ‘She might not be on yet. I’ll go ask around.’

Sam leaves the table and heads over to the bar, leaving Dean and Cas alone, and Dean doesn’t remember feeling this awkward since he’d realized it was Cas he was sleeping next to and not Lisa. Dean’s appetite is suddenly gone and he pushes his half-eaten burger away from him and clears his throat. He can see Cas watching him curiously out of the corner of his eye.

‘What are you afraid of?’ Cas asks after a long moment of silence, and Dean looks at him in surprise.

‘I’m not afraid of anything.’

Cas tilts his head at him, giving him a doubtful look that says he knows that was a lie.

‘Is it the intimacy?’ Cas asks, and Dean had almost forgotten how forward Cas is, how unafraid he is to say the wrong thing because he just doesn’t get it.

‘It’s just not me,’ Dean says quietly.

‘I know,’ Cas says, and there’s a kind smile on his face that Dean doesn’t really think he deserves. Cas moves a hand across the table, and for a moment Dean thinks he is going to take his hand. Cas seems to think better of it when he sees Dean flinch back and makes a grab for his soda instead. ‘It’s not like you changed for this to work, Dean. You’re still you. It’s not like we’re into PDA.’

‘PDA?’ Dean smirks, because Cas had said it like he wasn’t sure of what he was saying, a little confused frown in place as he used an unfamiliar phrase. ‘You been listening to Sammy?’

‘I may have heard it from him,’ he replies with a grin that lights up his whole face. Dean thinks he hasn’t seen nearly enough of that yet. He can feel himself getting too used to this side of Cas too quickly.

As if on cue, Sam comes back to the table, giving Dean one of those “I told you so” bitch faces, before he sits down opposite them again.

‘Manager says it could be one of two girls that aren’t here,’ Sam says, eyeing Dean’s half-eaten lunch and raising an eyebrow. Dean shrugs in reply. ‘I got their addresses, though. One lives about a five minute walk away. The other’s a ten minute drive.’

‘Great. Wanna split up?’ Dean asks.

‘Sure,’ Sam says. ‘You want to walk or drive?’

Five minutes later, Dean has been entrusted with the keys to Sam’s monster and he hops into the driver’s seat with barely concealed glee. Cas looks amused when he slides into the passenger seat beside him, and Dean pulls away from the parking lot with a screech as soon as Cas has buckled up. He catches Sam’s discontented frown in the rearview mirror before he tears off down the street.

‘You shouldn’t wind him up so much,’ Cas says, but there’s no sting to his words and he’s still smiling when Dean glances at him. ‘He *is* being nice to you, after all.’

‘Yeah, but I’m his big brother,’ Dean grins. ‘It’s my job to wind him up. And besides, when I gave Sammy my car he put an iPod dock in it.’ Yes, he could still be bitter about that eight years later. Cas looks confused when Dean says that and does that adorable head tilt he’s known for.

‘I don’t remember this,’ he clarifies.

‘It was before we met,’ Dean says, then he thinks about it for a moment. ‘Well, before you had a vessel.’

‘Long time to hold a grudge,’ Cas says, watching Dean.

‘I guess I’m my father’s son after all.’

‘Forgiveness sets us free.’

‘Don’t spout that at me Cas,’ Dean says with a smile. ‘Sam knows I forgave him for everything a long time ago.’

‘Everything?’

‘Everything,’ Dean says in a tone that finishes the discussion. He doesn’t want to get into all the things he has forgiven Sam for, most of them much graver than putting an iPod dock in the Impala. At the end of the day, Sam is family, and he’s redeemed himself in ways Dean had never imagined he would. Granted, Sam leaving him to his apple pie life for the better part of a year still smarts, but he’s working on forgiving him for that too.

Cas seems to understand, because he doesn’t press any further and they drive the rest of the journey in companionable silence. It should feel awkward after that conversation, but Dean’s mind is still on Sam and Cas is staring out of the window, just letting Dean have his time to think. Dean wonders if this is what it’s always like; quiet, easy, homey. If it is, he could get used to it, and that frightens him more than a little.

They pull up in front of an apartment block that looks like a renovated warehouse, and Cas makes a face before he gets out of the SUV. Dean gets out and joins him as he walks up towards the front door.

‘What?’ he asks Cas.

‘I don’t really like these modern creations,’ he says, and Dean lets out a laugh and claps Cas on the back.

‘No one’s asking you to live in one,’ Dean says.

‘Promise if ever we do get an apartment,’ Cas says, meeting Dean’s gaze. Dean should look away, he really should because Cas is talking about the future. And that could be a far-distant thing, or a future right around the corner, but it’s a future that’s

Dean's nonetheless. Because this, in all respects, already *is* his future. 'It'll be a home and not one of these trendy studios.'

Dean's heart is thundering so hard it's nearly all he can hear; his mouth is a little dry, too. He can't imagine settling down again so soon, especially not with Cas who has only recently come back into his life after too long an absence. But he nods anyway, and his next words are too soft, too true.

'I promise,' he says. Cas smiles at him. It's one of those kind, private, smiles this Cas seems to share with him quite often.

The spell is broken when Cas rings the doorbell for the apartment number they were given. There's a buzz as someone lifts a receiver, followed by a crackly 'hello?' Cas takes a step forward, closer to the speaker.

'Hello. This is Agents Smithers and Burns, from the FBI. We were hoping to speak to Christa Hampden,' he says. There's a long silence on the end of the receiver before the crackly voice replies.

'FBI?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Cas says politely.

'There ain't nobody called Christa live here,' the voice tells them, and Dean takes that as his turn to step up. He puts a hand on Cas' arm and pulls him back. Cas shoots him a questioning look but takes a step back and lets Dean move past him. They're close enough that Dean brushes up against Cas when he moves, but he doesn't comment on it. He doesn't flinch away either.

'Ma'am, it's a felony to lie to federal officers,' Dean says in a grave tone before smirking at Cas and putting a finger to his lips as Cas quirks an eyebrow at him.

'I'm telling you, mister,' the voice says, sounding a little ticked off now. 'There ain't nobody called Christa here. My name is Veronica, and I live here with my boyfriend. Do you want me to send him down, cos he won't be happy.'

Dean sighs and rolls his eyes at Cas at the sudden aggression in the crackly voice coming from the speaker. As far as Dean is concerned, there is no need for it. All he's looking for is the truth. Getting into fights because of crossed wires has never been a pastime Dean's enjoyed.

'That'll be all right, ma'am,' Dean says, clearing his throat. 'Sorry to bother you.'  
'Now *that* was a waste of time,' Cas says as they make their way back to the SUV.

Dean laughs at that and beams at Cas as he jumps up into the driver's seat. He could get used to this Cas after all.

Sam is standing outside the bar waiting for them when Dean pulls back into the parking lot twenty minutes later. Dean catches him giving his truck a quick once over before he smiles at Dean and holds out his hand for the keys. Dean tosses them to him, then drops himself down on the bench next to him.

'Find out anything?' Dean asks as Cas comes and sits down on the other side of him. He sits too close, but Dean doesn't move away.

'Nothing,' Sam says, sounding fed up. 'Amanda finished early, said she left the others to close up because she had to get home to her son. I really don't think she's who we are looking for. Kid has chicken pox. I don't think she'd be bringing guys back to her apartment.'

'Seems unlikely,' Cas agrees. 'Especially when Martin claims the drive was longer than five minutes.'

'Yeah,' Sam says, letting out a yawn before running a hand over his face. 'What did you guys find out?'

'Absolutely zilch,' Dean says. 'The address and name he gave us don't match up.' 'The woman who lived in that apartment wasn't exactly friendly,' Cas says, folding his hands in front of him.

'Great,' Sam sighs and he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He brushes his too-long hair out of his eyes and looks at Dean. 'What next?'

'No idea,' Dean says. 'Did the manager say Christa was meant to be in today?'

Sam pulls a notebook from his inside pocket and flips it open to the appropriate page. 'Said she's meant to start at nine o'clock tonight.'

Dean glances at his watch. It's barely after two. He shakes his head. 'I guess we head back to the motel and wait it out, come back here after her shift starts.'

'Yeah,' Sam says. He puts the notebook back in his pocket, and pulls his phone out instead. 'We could go back to the house. DeeJay would be stoked to see you.'

Dean blinks at him in surprise, because yeah, it's one thing to hear that your brother has settled down and has a kid, but it's another to see it. He really does want to, though. If there's ever been one thing that Dean wants, it's to see his little brother

happy and settled down. He always felt bad that his brother never got to have that, even though it had been what he had always wanted. Dean had come to accept that neither he nor Sam were destined for happy endings.

‘Sure,’ Dean says, nodding. He can feel his mouth going dry again, and he pulls his tie loose as if hoping that will help cool him down. ‘What will you tell them about ... about me not knowing anything?’

‘Just act like yourself around DeeJay and you’ll be fine,’ Sam grins. ‘I’ll fill Sarah in myself.’

‘Sarah knows about all this stuff?’

‘She’s my wife, Dean,’ Sam says. ‘Of course I tell her everything.’ He trades looks with Castiel and the pair of them grin at one another in an unnerving way. ‘Like she’d give me any other choice in the matter.’

‘Okay,’ Dean says, and he feels slightly nervous now at the prospect of seeing Sam in a domesticated setting. Seeing Sam in that setting hasn’t happened since he was attacked by the djinn, and that had been a long time ago. ‘First though, we need to go back to the motel and change.’

‘Let’s go, then,’ Sam says, pushing himself up off the bench and unlocking his car. ‘I’ll drop you off at the motel and—’ he stops himself, then looks at Dean like he’s suddenly remembering something. ‘Cas, do you know how to get to the house?’

‘Not from Syracuse, sorry,’ Cas says.

‘Okay, I’ll wait for you. You two can follow me in the Impala, alright?’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Dean says.

It doesn’t take long for them to get back to the motel and get changed out of their suits. Just changing from the constricting shirt and tie and the oppressive black suit makes Dean feel easier about facing Sarah again and meeting DeeJay for the first time. He feels more like himself in jeans and a t-shirt with his dad’s leather jacket on his back. It’s still weird seeing Cas dressed up as his mirror image though. But it’s a weird he’s getting scarily used to. He frowns when he sees Cas quickly tuck away a chain beneath the neck of his t-shirt as he finishes changing, but he decides not to question it.

He and Cas pile into the Impala, and Dean lets out a happy sigh as he sinks into the comfortable, familiar leather of the driver’s seat. He flips on the radio and grins when

it's Led Zeppelin that blares from the speakers. Yeah, it feels like he's just come home, all right. He looks up to see Cas smiling at him like he just *knows* how happy Dean is to be back in his own car with his own music. Dean doesn't care, he just turns the radio up a little louder and sings along as he pulls out of the motel parking lot and follows Sam's monster out of Syracuse.

The journey takes just over two hours, driving just a little over the speed limit. He knows that Sam had been trying his best to go at the speed limit, if not a notch or two lower, but Dean had kept overtaking him just he'd get the hint to go a little faster. Sam had taken the hint, but Dean had no doubt he was going to get a look at Sam's future bitch face when they arrived.

## Part Three

### *A Little Slice of Happiness That Isn't Mine to Keep*

Cas thinks it should be alarming how quickly he is warming up to this younger version of Dean. He misses his Dean, he really does. He misses the easy way they have around one another that he's taken to be second nature these days. He misses the feel of Dean sitting too close and the freedom of being able to hold his hand whenever he feels like it, even though Dean always protests.

He still likes this Dean, though. He isn't far off from the Dean Cas knows intimately. When he gets that worried look in his eye though, or he moves just out of Cas' reach, he knows that this Dean isn't ready to accept how he feels just yet. He understands and knows Dean's terror, but a small impatient part of him is kind of sick of it.

The car journey is actually far more awkward than it has any right to be. Dean listens to the radio just a little bit too loud and sings along. Cas is usually fine with the singing along, really, he's even known to join in on occasion. It's just that he knows Dean is only listening to it that loud so they won't have to talk. He knows Dean is avoiding any form of confrontation with him, but he'd rather Dean would ask whatever is on his mind instead of hiding behind his feelings.

But this is Dean Winchester he's thinking about. And Dean Winchester isn't exactly known for pouring his heart out. Not this Dean, and not Castiel's Dean either.

They don't talk at all until they are about half an hour from Sam's house. Dean turns down the volume dial of the radio and shoots a quick glance Cas' way before looking back at Sam's SUV. Cas lifts his head from where he's been leaning it against the window. He cocks his head at Dean in question.

'White picket fence?' Dean asks, and it takes Cas a moment to realize what he is talking about before a slow smile creeps on his face.

'Do you really want me to ruin the surprise?'

'Not really, but I think I know Sammy well enough to know he'd have a white picket fence,' Dean says. Cas can't help it; he chuckles to himself and smiles when Dean looks at him.

'Wait and see.'

'Where do we stay when we come up here?'



Cas looks at him curiously. Hearing Dean refer to them as “we” is surprising, considering how uncomfortable he seems to be around him, but this is the second time he’s said it in a matter of hours. It feels so much more reassuring than Dean probably realizes.

‘The spare room,’ Cas says, and it comes out a lot more “that should have been perfectly obvious” than he really meant it to.

‘Oh,’ Dean says quietly. Cas studies him for a moment longer, noticing the flush of pink colouring Dean’s cheeks. Dean looks awkward and turns the volume up higher once more.

Cas wonders what his role is to play in all of this. What the lesson is exactly that Dean is supposed to be learning. He wonders what part he plays in helping Dean figure it out, if he has any at all. He wonders who authorized this for Dean and why he had never heard of it until now.

Cas sighs and returns to gazing out the window, thinking of his Dean and wondering what’s happened to him while he is stuck with this younger, insecure version. He can’t help but hope this Dean will surprise him and that his Dean is all right, wherever he is.

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Sam’s house isn’t what Dean thought it would be. In his mind’s eye, he had conjured up an image similar to the house they had lived in as children in Lawrence; the white clad house with the perfectly manicured lawn and the white picket fence. But is that Sam’s house is nothing like that. Instead, the house Sam’s monster SUV leads him to is a brown-stoned house with a yard full of trees and bushes, there’s a little yellow VW Beetle already parked in the driveway, and Dean has no doubt who it belongs to.

When Dean steps out of the car, he stares up at the house in awe. It’s nothing like he thought it would be, but it looks like home. Sam catches his gaze as he steps out of the truck and fails miserably at hiding a smug smile. He leads the way along a haphazard stone walkway around to the back of the house to a bright green door.

Sam clicks open the door and is immediately almost barreled over by a brown mound of fur. Dean almost lets out a yelp, but he just manages to hold it back. He does, however, stagger back and knock into Castiel. When he glances back, Cas is grinning. Dean looks back at Sam to see him baby talking a dog the size of a small horse and really, Dean shouldn’t be surprised that Sam has a dog, too.

‘Say hello to Maverick,’ Sam grins, putting the dog back on all fours and scratching behind his ears. The big brown dog looks at Dean with yellow eyes and tilts his head in a way that, disturbingly, reminds him of Cas before he lollops towards him and jumps up with enough force to knock the wind out of him.

‘Maverick?’ Dean wheezes, patting the dog tentatively in the hope it will jump back down. It’s not that he’s afraid of dogs; he’s just never had a pet. It’s Cas who rescues him, by grabbing Maverick’s paws and putting him back on all fours before he strokes behind his ears. Maverick seems to love him though, and rubs along Cas’ legs to get him to pet more of him.

‘Come on, Mav,’ Sam says, pushing the back door open farther. ‘Let’s go in.’ Sam leads the way into the house, the dog padding in ahead of him into the kitchen.

‘What the heck kind of dog is that?’ Dean asks.

‘Labradoodle,’ Sam grins at him. ‘We have a Jack Russell, too.’

As if on cue, a sharp yapping sound fills the air and Sam bends down to greet the little terrier that comes skidding into the kitchen with the same enthusiasm he had Maverick.

‘This is Meghan,’ Sam says, grinning up at his big brother.

‘Meghan and Maverick?’ Dean says. ‘I’m guessing each of you named a dog then.’

‘How could you tell?’ Sam says with a smirk, and he straightens up, lets Meghan go and have a good sniff at Dean and Castiel like she hasn’t seen them for months.

‘Sam?’ Sarah’s voice carries through the house, and Dean feels the butterflies swoop back into his stomach. He doesn’t even know why he feels nervous.

Sarah appears in the doorway just as they enter the kitchen and she looks just like Dean remembers her. Pale skin, those pretty green eyes and the long dark hair. She really is perfect for Sam, in Dean’s opinion. Sarah greets Sam with a hug and a kiss, then moves on to hug both Dean and Cas.

‘Sam told me all about your mind wipe thing,’ Sarah says as she let go of Castiel and looks back at Dean. Dean shoots a look at Sam.

‘What, it was a two hour journey,’ Sam says defensively, and he gives a loose shrug like Dean really shouldn’t have been surprised that he spent most of the journey

talking to his wife.

‘Bitch.’

‘Jerk.’

‘None of that when DeeJ can hear you,’ Sarah says, pointing her finger at Dean then Sam. She narrows her eyes at them, and Dean knows he would never cross this woman. Her strength was another reason he had liked her.

‘Where is the little man anyway?’ Sam asks.

‘DeeJ!’ Sarah calls as she leaves the kitchen. ‘Daddy’s home!’

Dean hears the pattering of feet and a yell as the toddler is lifted into the air. Sarah comes back into the kitchen carrying a little boy who is the spitting image of Sam when he was that age, all adorable baby fat and scruffy light brown hair. Dean likes him instantly.

‘Daddy!’ DeeJay grins, and Sarah passes him over to Sam. The boy clamps his arms around Sam’s neck and clings to him before he spots Dean over his Daddy’s shoulder.

‘Unca Dean!’

‘Ouch, don’t kick,’ Sam grumbles as he lets Dean take a hold of DeeJay. For a moment Dean isn’t sure how he should hold him, but DeeJay grabs onto him like he had Sam, like he knows exactly how to get comfortable.

‘Hey, my man,’ Dean grins. ‘You been being good?’ There’s an excited, nervous fluttering in Dean’s stomach. And he doesn’t know whether it means he’s nervous, anxious, or simply incredibly happy.

‘Always!’ DeeJ nods in a big exaggerated way.

‘Awesome,’ Dean says, and he glances over at Sam who is grinning from ear to ear.

At that moment DeeJ catches sight of Cas, and he starts squirming to be let down. Dean passes him over to Cas, who gathers the toddler up in his arms like he belongs there, like it’s a motion easy with familiarity. Giggling and shrieking quickly fills the air as Cas tickles DeeJay, and Dean feels a tug of something possessive in his heart as he watches Cas with this kid who looks so much like Sam.

‘I’m going to make lasagna for dinner,’ Sarah tells them. ‘You can go chill in the lounge until it’s ready. You mister,’ she says, taking a step towards Castiel and taking a hold of her son. ‘Are having your dinner just now.’

‘Momm-my,’ DeeJay whines, but Sarah easily wrestles him into his high chair while Sam ushers Dean and Cas from the kitchen and into the living room.

The living room is nice too. There are two comfy looking sofas and an armchair spread in a rough semi-circle around a big flat screen TV. Two boxes of toys stand in the corner—one for DeeJ and one for the dogs—that both have toys splayed about on the floor around them. Dean likes it. He sinks onto one of the comfy couches and feels himself starting to relax.

‘Make yourself at home,’ Sam grins as he tosses Dean the remote for the TV. ‘I’m going to change.’

Sam turns on his heels, leaving him alone with Castiel and this odd remote that he has no idea how to use. He stares at it for a moment until it is pulled from his hand. He looks up to see Cas sitting down next to him, pushing buttons on the remote like a pro. The television springs to life and *whoa* Dean’s never seen a TV like this. He’d wanted one, when he lived with Lisa, but there had never been any need for him to have one. But he could get used to this.

He can see Cas smirking out of the corner of his eye and he turns to look at him questioningly. Cas squeezes his knee and Dean jumps and grabs a hold of his hand. He means for the action to get Cas to stop, but once his hand is over Cas’ he can’t take it off. Cas’ fingers are warm and rough around the edges under his own, and he can’t explain it, but it just feels right.

‘What?’ he asks quietly.

‘It just amuses me how easily entertained you are,’ Cas says with a smile. It’s a knowing smile that Dean has never seen before, and it’s a little bit thrilling.

If anyone had asked Dean what is playing on the TV, he couldn’t say. He’s too busy staring at Castiel. How long has he wanted to see Cas this relaxed and easy? Dean likes this, but it’s unsettling to see it without knowing the path that took him there, the path that took them both here. Cas isn’t looking back at him, which is probably a blessing, to not be under that intense blue stare. He’s staring at the TV but Dean knows he can feel him watching him. Cas smiles softly at him, a barely there smile, and without even thinking about it, Dean tightens his grip on Castiel’s hand.

Dean quickly lets go of it when Sam comes back into the room and if Sam sees it, he

doesn't mention a thing. He hands both Cas and Dean a bottle of beer then sits in the armchair, stretching his long lanky legs in front of him.

'Nice house,' Dean says. Sam grins at him in response. 'How on earth do you afford it?'

'My wife's an auctioneer, remember,' Sam says. 'And a well paid one at that.'

'Does she still work for her dad?'

'*With* her dad,' Sam corrects, and he glances at the living room door as though expecting Sarah to come in and defend that herself.

'You're so whipped, Sammy.' Dean grins and he gets up from the couch, slapping Sam on the knee as he straightens up. 'I'll go see if she needs a hand with anything.'

'You're a braver man than I,' Sam says and takes a swig of his beer.

As Dean enters the kitchen, Sarah is just clearing DeeJay's highchair. She looks up as Dean enters, and smiles at him before she plops the plastic dishes into the sink.

'Need a hand?' he asks, and Sarah holds out a yogurt cup and a spoon to him.

'You fight with dessert,' she tells him. 'I'll get started on our dinner.'

'Okay...' Dean says, and he pulls out the chair nearest DeeJay's highchair and settles down on it. DeeJay squeals with delight at him and makes a grab for the spoon which Dean pulls just out of his reach. He watches Sarah pull pots and pans from a set of drawers as he pulls back the lid of the yogurt and turns his attention to his nephew.

DeeJay seems to prefer having yogurt all over his face and in his hair rather than in his stomach, as he bats at Dean's hand and pushes the spoon away every time Dean advances on him. When he finally does manage to get a spoonful into DeeJay's mouth, the toddler invariably tries to spit it out. It takes until he threatens not to give him a bedtime story for DeeJay to stop squirming and eat his yogurt.

'Well?' Sarah says after ten minutes when Dean is nearly at the bottom of the cup and there's the smell of cooking ground beef filling the air. Dean's stomach rumbles in interest.

'Well what?' Dean asks, scraping yogurt from around DeeJay's mouth with the spoon. DeeJay fidgets and hides behind his hands.

‘What do you think?’

‘Of Deejay?’

‘Of everything,’ Sarah says with a smile as she stirs tomato sauce into the beef.

‘It’s nice,’ Dean says truthfully. ‘Not what I expected at all.’

‘What were you expecting?’

‘The perfect house and the white picket fence,’ Dean says and Sarah lets out a laugh before she looks back at him.

‘I grew up with that,’ she tells him. ‘This feels like home.’

‘It does,’ Dean agrees.

‘Do you miss it?’ Sarah asks.

‘Having a home?’

‘Yeah...’ she says, and Dean knows that Sam has told her that for him, it has only been two weeks since he left Lisa and not five years. ‘This kind of life.’

‘Some of it,’ he admits, and he momentarily wonders just how close he and Sarah are. His gut tells him that they *are* close, and that his friendship with Sarah is on par with that of his brother and Cas.

‘The company, right?’ Sarah says. ‘Being close to someone.’

‘It felt like family while I was there,’ Dean says, sighing as he stands up from the chair and dumps the yogurt cup in the trash and throws the spoon in the sink. He leans against the counter near Sarah.

‘Then your real family came back,’ Sarah says. Dean frowns at that when Sarah looks back at him and she grins at him like she knows something he doesn’t—and he has to remind himself that she quite probably does.

‘Sam came back.’

‘Cas did, too,’ Sarah reminds him, and Dean doesn’t know what to say to that. He pushes off the counter and moves closer to DeeJay again.

‘So, how did DeeJay get his name?’ Dean asks, deliberately changing the subject.

Sarah gives him a knowing look, then smiles at him.

‘You gave him that name,’ she says. ‘Sam was mad about it for ages, but now we all call him that. Except for my Mom and Dad. It’s short for Daniel Jonathan, which is what my parents still call him.’

‘Deejay,’ Dean grinned. ‘I like it. After our dads huh?’

‘Yup,’ Sarah says. ‘My dad always wanted the family name carried on, and we figured that since he’s a Winchester he would have Daniel first, then John.’

‘Think you’ll have more?’ Dean asks as he scruffs Deejay’s hair and smirks at the squawk it causes. Deejay squirms around to look at him and holds up his hands.

‘Oh, yes,’ Sarah says. ‘Maybe in a year or two though, once he’s outgrown the terrible twos.’

‘Terrible twos?’ Dean repeats. He unclips Deejay from his highchair and lifts the toddler up into his arms. Deejay grabs a hold of him and starts babbling in his ear.

‘Every child goes through it,’ Sarah says. ‘I highly doubt Deej would be the exception.’

‘Doubtful,’ Dean agrees before he grabs a hold of the hand Deejay almost shoves up his nose and pulls it away. ‘I think he already gets away with too much...’

‘In my parents eyes he’s a tear away,’ Sarah says with a grin. ‘My dad thinks that he takes too much after you and can never be tamed. Sam says it’s just a phase.’

‘I’m a pretty awesome role model,’ Dean says, turning his attention to his nephew. ‘Listen to rock and everything will be just fine, kiddo.’

‘Take him through to the lounge,’ Sarah instructs him. ‘I want him to wear himself out a bit before bed time.’

‘Sure,’ Dean says, and he heads back through to the living room, feeling more confused than enlightened.

Dinner is served half an hour later, and the four adults sit around the dining room table with Deejay babbling from his playpen in the corner. The food smells absolutely heavenly, between the lasagna and the garlic bread, and Dean can’t even remember the last home cooked meal he had. Sarah gives him a large portion as if she knows this and dishes them all out enough to leave them full and lazy afterwards.

Dean sings her praises after his first forkful of delectable pasta and once again tells Sam that he made the right choice in marrying her. Sam rolls his eyes and Dean can tell he is trying hard not to roll his shoulders too. Sarah and Cas just grin at him.

It's unusual watching Cas eat. Before today Dean had only really seen Cas eat when he had been under the influence of Famine and had consumed enough burgers to turn even Dean's stomach. But Cas eats with the same enthusiasm Dean does. He seems to have a love of food that doesn't limit him to burgers and pie like Dean, and he clears his plate with the kind of speed that leaves Dean staring at him in awe. Dean can't help but think that it should feel so much scarier to see Cas fitting in so well. Right now, he seems to fit in even better than Dean does.

Dean feels a little stab of jealousy at the thought of Cas fitting in better with his brother and Sarah than he does at the moment. He can't help but think Cas is the king of awkwardness, and yet here Cas is, sitting at the dining room table laughing and conversing with people who are undeniably considered his family. And there's the flip side that Sam and Sarah seem to know this Cas better than Dean does, and a small, possessive part of him that he hasn't acknowledged until now had always been sure that he knew Cas best.

But just as Cas treats Sam and Sarah differently, he treats Dean in a way that's wholly reserved for Dean alone. This Cas is unabashedly affectionate with him, and Dean can't quite wrap his head around it. Cas' knee bumps Dean's his under the table several times—and Dean self-consciously moves his knee out of the way each time. He leans too close into Dean's personal space, and while that isn't anything new it's starting to mean something a little more intimate, a little more relaxed than what it'd been before. His hand grazes Dean's once when he reaches to get a slice of garlic bread and Dean flinches out of his way so abruptly that Cas looks at him in a mixture of curiosity and hurt. Dean thinks it is wholly unfair that he should feel so guilty at that look.

He knows that Sam and Sarah can sense the awkwardness, catches them sharing one of those silent, meaningful married-couple glances before Sam quickly distracts Cas by mentioning some TV show they both watch, one that Dean's never heard of. Sarah meanwhile starts to talk to Dean about their case. It's obvious what they are doing, but Dean's thankful anyway.

He knows that sooner or later he and Cas are going to be alone again. They are going to have to talk about things, and Dean is going to have to ask the awkward questions like how did they come to be, and why did Cas throw away everything for him, and how long they have been together. He knows, but he'll put it off for as long as he possibly can.



Once dinner is finished and the table is clear, Sarah announces that it is time for DeeJay to go to bed and Dean is surprised when Cas gets up and asks if he can take him. Sarah smiles and lets him. Dean watches as Cas lifts the toddler from his playpen and disappears upstairs. He tries to ignore the little tug at his heart at the image of Cas and his nephew, and fails miserably.

While Sarah busies herself in the kitchen, Sam ushers Dean into the living room again and hands him a beer. They laze on the couch in companionable silence, sipping their beers and occasionally making small talk until the conversation turns to more serious matters. To be honest, Dean has been expecting this; he had found it wholly suspicious that Sarah disappeared after Cas took DeeJay upstairs. He just *knows* that she has told Sam to speak with him.

‘So...’ Sam starts, and Dean tears his eyes away from the TV to look at his little brother. Sam’s attention is on the label of his beer bottle though, which he is picking at then pressing back down to the bottle.

‘Sarah told you to talk to me?’ Dean says.

‘Well, no,’ Sam says and he looks up to meet Dean’s gaze. ‘She asked me to, I said I would.’

‘Whipped, Sammy,’ Dean says affectionately and bumps his knee against his brother’s.

‘She’s just...concerned,’ Sam says, ignoring the comment.

‘About what?’

‘About Cas, I think,’ Sam says, and his eyes are on his beer again. ‘How you feel about him...’

‘How I feel about him?’ Dean echoes.

‘Yeah,’ Sam says. This time when he looks up at Dean he looks determined, like he isn’t going to back down and Dean needs to hear this. ‘I know you love him.’

Dean chokes on his beer, splutters as he tries to clear his lungs. He wipes off the beer he has managed to slosh down himself and gives Sam an incredulous look. ‘It—it’s not—’

‘Dean,’ Sam says imploringly. ‘I know you are trying to deny it, but trust me. I know. I’ve seen how you look at him, how he looks at you.’

‘Yeah, but that’s now,’ Dean protests.

‘No...’ Sam says quietly. His brow furrows before he decides to go on. ‘You remember the first time I met Cas?’

‘Sure,’ Dean says. He had mentioned it earlier, after all, but he can’t help but wonder where Sam is going with this.

‘Well, even then,’ Sam says carefully. ‘Didn’t you notice how much Cas *looked* at you? Still looks at you?’

‘Cas looks at everyone like that,’ Dean says, and he knows it’s a lie as soon as he’s said it. He can’t think of a single instance in which Cas has looked at anyone with the same intensity as he does him. It kind of makes his skin tingle in a way that isn’t wholly unpleasant.

‘Come on, Dean,’ Sam goes on, knowing that Dean is lying. ‘You do your fair share of staring right back.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Dean says hotly, and Sam gives him a look like he doesn’t believe him. ‘What are you getting at anyway?’

‘You like him,’ Sam says. He glares at Dean when he tries to interject. ‘And he likes you, he’s always liked you.’

‘I dunno, he was kind of an asshole at first,’ Dean mutters into his beer bottle.

‘Yeah, well, you were kind of an asshole to him, too,’ Sam says. ‘But that doesn’t change the fact that he has been doing things because of you ever since he met you. You influence him far more than you think you do.’

‘Yeah, well, it’s a lot to take in,’ Dean says quietly. He’s aware of everything Cas has done for him. There has been an ever present knot of guilt in knowing that Cas throws his life on the line for him time and time again. Dean has never once thanked him. He knows that’s wrong.

‘Look, Dean,’ Sam says. ‘I don’t know why, how or even for how long you’ll be here, but you could start being a little nicer to Cas.’

‘I am nice to him!’

‘You’ve been acting spooked and jerking out of his reach all evening,’ Sam points

out.

‘It ... it’s just—’

‘Think about how it feels for him, will you?’ Sam says. ‘You ... You’re his partner. Now you, then you... it looks, almost feels, the same. It hasn’t changed that much.’

‘So what do you want me to do huh, Sammy?’ Dean asks. ‘Do you want me to ignore how weird this feels to me?’

‘No,’ his little brother says, shaking his head so his ridiculous long hair flops over his eyes and he has to flip his head back to see again. ‘Compromise, Dean. That guy loves you, all right? Just don’t push him away.’

They lapse into an uncomfortable silence, eyes on the screen, but Dean isn’t paying attention at all. He’s thinking about Castiel and the conundrum of a man he has become. He is thinking about what kind of grand gesture his brother is wanting from him, and what the Dean from this time would do in his situation. He thinks that trying to get inside his own head is probably the weirdest thing he has ever done.

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Castiel had never understood the lure of children until Daniel Jonathan Winchester entered their lives. He understood their fundamental importance in the continuing of the human race, but DeeJay was the first child he had been attached to. The first one he loved without question.

It is strange, perhaps, but it wasn’t until this child, at only a few hours old, was laid in his arms that Cas had felt like a part of the family. A family he had undeniably been a part of for years, clinched the moment Sarah had entrusted her child to his caring hands.

Watching the child was like learning to be human. He finds the joy that DeeJay gets out of the simplest of things fascinating. He finds it nothing short of amazing the difference between childhood as a human and that of his own kin—angels are trained to be soldiers from the moment of their creation, but children are nurtured and cared for and made to feel a part of a family.

He whispers Enochian to DeeJay once he has him changed into pajamas and curled up against his chest. He stands by the window pointing up at stars and talking, just talking, as he rocks the child to sleep.

He has no doubt that DeeJay doesn’t understand what is being said to him, but he

feels happy and whole when the child falls asleep in his arms. He moves over to the cot and gently lays DeeJay down, bringing the sheet up around him and tucking him in. He brushes the hair away from the child's face and smiles down on him.

He knows that him and Dean having children is not only impossible, but is also impractical. It is a subject he had only broached the once, and the resulting argument had been so severe he hadn't approached it again. He still yearns for it, though.

He wants a child that is equal parts himself and Dean. He wants to see that little person grow up and learn from them. He wants to leave his mark on the world and a legacy behind that is more than just the fading memories of him and Dean and nothing else. He wants something he can't ever have.

Sarah calls it broodiness.

Cas thinks it is just part of being human.

He leans into the cot and presses a light kiss to DeeJay's forehead.

'Sweet dreams, DeeJ,' he whispers, then he turns on his heels and heads back downstairs.

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They spend another hour at Sam's house, and it's not until the clock in the hall chimes nine that Dean remembers that they are still supposed to be on a hunt. There had been no more uncomfortable talks since Castiel had come downstairs. The four adults had just watched TV shows that Dean's never seen in his life and occasionally chatted. By the time Dean announces that they really should get going, Sam is dozing with his head on his wife's lap and Sarah looks tired and happy.

'Come on, Cas,' Dean says as he straightens up, batting Cas on the knee. Cas stretches as he stands up, lets out a groan as pulls his arms over his head, and Dean gets a glimpse of pale stomach and dark haired happy trail. He quickly looks away.

'Phone in the morning, okay?' Sarah says as Dean leans over and kisses the top of her head. For some reason, it feels like the normal thing to be doing, and Sarah smiles affectionately at him when he pulls away. 'Put his mind at ease.'

'Sure thing,' Dean says. He watches as Cas steps around him and leans in to press a kiss to Sarah's cheek. She squeezes his hand and smiles up at him.

'Thank you for dinner,' he says.

‘I’m glad you liked it,’ she says. ‘You better come back soon. Next time I’ll make curry.’

‘Curry?’ Dean asks, smiling at Sarah as Cas moves to stand beside him. ‘You doing a cooking class or something?’

‘I am experimenting.’ Sarah grins at him. ‘And you all are my lab rats.’

‘Reassuring.’

‘She’s not poisoned any of us yet,’ Cas tells him. He takes a hold of Dean’s elbow, leading him out of the living room. They call their last goodbyes and Dean doesn’t jerk his arm out of Cas’ grip as they make their way out to the car.

### ***Things that Hide in the Woodwork***

The drive is more uncomfortable than Dean thinks it has any right to be. He puts Metallica on as soon as he fires up the engine, but even that can’t chase away the feeling that something big and messy is simmering under the surface of Cas’ calm demeanor. He knows they’ll have to talk soon. Knows he’ll have to address all the thoughts and feelings Sam has managed to dredge up, but he really doesn’t want to.

By the time they get back to the motel, it is half past eleven and Dean feels tired and on edge. He just wants to sleep, and maybe tomorrow he’ll wake up in his own bed and all this will have been some crazy dream.

They still have work to do, though, which is no less obvious than when Cas starts changing the moment the motel room door is closed. Dean sinks down on the bed, wishing it would just swallow him whole. He buries his face in his hands and lets out a long breath.

‘Dean,’ Cas says, sounding far away. Dean jolts when a hand comes down on his shoulder, shaking him lightly. He looks up to meet questioning dark blue eyes. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘No,’ Dean says quietly, honestly. He immediately wishes he could take it back. An instantaneous black cloud passes over Castiel’s face and he looks defeated and angry all at once, like he knows they are going to talk about an issue that has been carefully skirted around all day.

‘Dean,’ he says more forcibly, and sits down beside him. He’s fiddling with the cuffs of his shirt, and Dean has to swallow the ridiculous urge to reach out and do them up for him. ‘We don’t have to talk about this.’

‘We do.’

‘What is there to talk about?’ Cas asks.

‘There’s a giant elephant in the room, Cas,’ Dean huffs out, leaning his elbows on his knees, resting his forehead on the palm of his hand. ‘There always is.’

‘Always?’ Cas echoes. He lets his hand slip from Dean’s shoulder into to his own lap. He looks confused when Dean gives him a sidelong glance. ‘I don’t remember any particularly awkward moments before...’

‘We always have awkward moments, Cas!’ Dean says, pushing off the bed and out of Castiel’s reach. He paces in front of the door; each time he looks at Cas, Cas is following him with his eyes. Cas is too quiet and looks just as bemused as the Cas he knows. Dean knows he shouldn’t feel so pleased with himself for finally getting the Cas he recognizes to surface.

The silence is too much. He wants Cas to jump to the defense of whatever their relationship is. He wants Cas to give him reasons as to why, how, they became a couple. Cas just watches him though, as he always does. But right now Dean has no time for staring contests.

‘It isn’t fair!’ Dean eventually spits out. He stops pacing and looks at Cas. Castiel looks back at him with those intense blue eyes and that confused look on his face and his head canted slightly to the left.

‘What isn’t fair?’ Castiel asks, and he sounds tired.

‘This...’ Dean says, gesticulating his arms in a wide general motion between the two of them. Cas frowns at that, watching Dean’s hands as they wave through the air then fall to his sides and ball into fists. ‘What the hell is this anyway?’

‘Dean...’ but Dean cuts him off with a glare and begins pacing again.

‘What about Lisa and Ben?’ Dean asks. ‘Did I just put them behind me and forget about them? They were my family, Cas. Like Sam and Sarah and DeeJay. Don’t I deserve a chance at happiness, too?’

He watches as Cas’ lips form a tight line and he knows he has taken a step too far.

‘Dean,’ he says stiffly. His posture is rigid, his whole being giving off a bristling aura that Dean really thinks he should be afraid of but he honestly isn’t.

‘This is a sore spot for you.’ It’s a statement, not a question.

‘Running away and pretending to be someone you’re not isn’t a family, Dean,’ Castiel says and his voice is deep, angry, and Dean resists the urge to back down. It’s too late for that now anyway. ‘You shouldn’t have to deny who you are to be happy.’

‘I didn’t!’ Dean protests, but he knows that’s a lie—the Impala had lived under a tarp and he’d worked construction and driven a truck and he’d pushed Bobby out of his life. He’d done normal, and he’d known it wasn’t him but he’d done it anyway, because he had *promised*. ‘I love them!’

If looks could kill, Dean would be a dead man.

‘You spent a year with them, Dean,’ Cas says, crossing his arms across his chest. ‘You barely knew them and they barely knew you.’

‘And what, you do?’

‘Yes,’ Castiel hisses. ‘I know you better than anyone, even Sam. I pulled you out of *Hell*, Dean!’

There’s an awkward, heated silence, and for a long moment they just glare at one another. Dean has stopped in his pacing, standing in front of the door, anger clouding his features. Cas doesn’t take his eyes off him. His jaw is stiff, and he breathes like he is trying to calm himself down, like he is trying to remind himself that this isn’t *his* Dean. It makes Dean want to hit him.

‘You left,’ Dean says. It’s barely a breath it’s so quiet, but hurt and confusion pass over Cas’ face, leaving no doubt that he had heard him.

‘There was no point in me staying,’ Cas says honestly. ‘You wouldn’t let me help.’

‘You left, and Lisa was there,’ Dean says firmly, and he looks away from the crushed look behind Castiel’s eyes—he couldn’t look more hurt if Dean ripped his heart out of chest and stomped on it. ‘Don’t tell me what I feel.’

‘I’m there when it matters,’ Cas says quietly. ‘You think that one year with a pretty girl and her son is happiness?’

He's up off the bed and in Dean's face in seconds, and this is something Dean is used to, too. Cas is angry and intimidating in a way Dean had thought came from his angel powers, but it turns out is all *Cas*.

Dean still doesn't back down. He stares back at him, cold and hard.

'And you and me, we're happy?' Dean asks. 'How the hell does that work? Is everything just sunshine and daisies?'

'It's not difficult,' Castiel says. 'It doesn't have to be. Why do you think you have to lie to yourself to be happy?'

'Because in my experience, we weren't happy. The hunting life isn't happy. It's the freaking opposite,' Dean shouts. 'It's blood and pain and death in a never ending cycle!'

'We're happy,' Cas says, so damned quietly that Dean just glares at him for a long moment, his breath coming too heavy. 'We're best friends. It comes easy if you just ... stop this.'

'Doesn't feel like it,' Dean snaps, and he grabs his leather jacket from the nearby chair and turns on his heels. He's out of the door before Cas can stop him.

He storms across the parking lot, completely ignoring his car. He needs time to think, time to breathe, and the cool night air pressing in close to him on all sides should do that. He stuffs his hands in his pocket and walks. He doesn't look over his shoulder to see if Cas has followed.

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Castiel sinks back down on the bed; his shoulders slumped in defeat and his breathing slowly evening out after fighting the urge to shake sense into Dean. He raises his face to the ceiling in silent prayer, and it's been too long since he's done this, far too long.

A single tear tracks its way down his cheek and he roughly brushes it away with the cuff of his shirt. There's no one to listen to him up there.

Castiel indulges, for just a moment, in thinking that if his Dean were here there wouldn't be fighting like this. No doubt and no worry. But he knows that's a lie. Dean's never really allowed meaningful talks, and there are some things that don't change, because this is Dean Winchester. The topic of Dean's time with Lisa has remained a sore spot for both of them.



He flops back on the bed, drawing his legs up and curling into a ball. He doesn't cry, he just stares at the door until the wetness blurs his vision and he closes his eyes and succumbs to darkness.

It's times like these that he regrets his decision.

~\*~

Dean walks without knowing where he is headed for half an hour. It's only when he sees the neon sign of the bar they had stopped at earlier that he remembers he and Cas had come back to question the waitress who was supposed to be on duty. He really doesn't feel like hunting, though. He feels like drinking until unconsciousness wins out.

He walks into the bar, ignoring that he is in a minority age-wise, and takes a seat on one of the vacant stools at the bar. He runs a hand over his face before catching his pale reflection in the mirrored wall. He quickly looks away, and catches the eye of the bartender. She smiles at him, and after handing a twenty-something boy three beers and taking his money, she heads over his way.

'What can I get for you?' she asks. She sounds kind, like she knows Dean is troubled about something. Dean should know better, but it does comfort him in knowing that anonymity can sometimes serve him so much better than those who know him.

'Just a beer,' he says, and he fishes his wallet from his pocket.

'This one's on me,' the bartender says, placing her hand on Dean's to stop him handing her money before she pulls him a pint and puts it down in front of him.

'Thanks,' Dean says, and takes a long gulp. It's bitter, not a beer he's used to, but it's good.

'It'll cost you, though,' she teases, grinning wide. Dean raises an eyebrow at her and she gives him a loose shrug. 'You look like you have a lot on your mind. You can tell me if you like. Or you can pay for your next beer.'

'I'm not going to bother you with my problems,' Dean says with a smile he only hopes is half as charming as the ones he used to shoot women before he had settled down with Lisa.

'Shame,' she says, turning to serve another customer. She glances over her shoulder at him. 'I'm a good listener.'

‘Maybe after a drink or three, huh?’ Dean says, and she laughs. Dean thinks it’s really quite a beautiful sound. He downs his beer and buys another.

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Castiel wakes up just after midnight feeling cold and slightly sore from his fetal position. He glances at the clock on the nightstand before glancing around the room. No sign of Dean. He frowns as he pushes himself off the bed. He still feels a little anger towards Dean, but there’s a worried knot in the pit of his stomach now.

It’s only midnight, though, and even when Dean is mad about things he usually returns an hour or two later once he has calmed down. Cas knows better than to go chasing after Dean when he is in a mood like this. In the past it had only escalated their arguments, and driven them apart for days.

He pulls off his shirt and strips down to his boxers before he climbs back into the bed. The bed feels much too empty without Dean taking up his usual three quarters of it, and though he often hogs the covers in a bid of gleeful retaliation, it now feels like there is too much blanket to hold onto.

He misses Dean’s snoring—though Dean would insist he does nothing of the sort—and he misses the warm body he has become all too used to sharing a bed with. But mostly he misses the peace of mind he gets knowing that Dean is safe and sound beside him.

Firmly telling himself that Dean will be alright—Dean is a Winchester, after all, infamously stubborn and entirely capable of looking after himself—Castiel watches the red numerals of the alarm clock anyway, thinking Dean will come in at any moment.

He couldn’t even tell you when he fell asleep again.

~\*~

Dean is doing what he does best, aside from hunting; drowning his sorrows in alcohol. He isn’t sure how many beers he has had, or even how long he has been sitting at the bar. The cute bartender, the same one as earlier, has been dutifully refilling his glass and trying to spark up conversation with him, but his mind is too busy reliving the argument with Castiel.

The problem with Castiel is that all his arguments stick with Dean. He might pretend to shrug it off, but Cas’ words always hit home. No amount of drink has ever made

him forget, but instead only makes him dwell on what a colossal assbutt he has been. Castiel constantly makes sacrifices—Dean struggles to think of a time when Cas *didn't* do what he asked—where Dean is concerned, and Dean has repaid him with harsh words and rejection.

He has definitely had one too many by the time a curly haired brunette sits down at his side. He's moved on from beer to whiskey by this point, and the bartender refills his glass. She flicks a look at the woman before giving Dean a look that he interprets as "okay?" He waves her off and smiles. He can handle some chick.

On his third shot, he starts pouring his heart out.

Chrissie—he is sure that is her name, certainly he has been calling her that for a good ten minutes—is proving to be a good listener. He is pretty sure he must sound like a whiny little bitch, muttering on about his woes (he carefully tiptoes the line on clarifying whether 'Cas' is male or female), but Chrissie hangs on to his every word. It isn't long before he has his arm draped around her shoulders and is slurring in her ear.

'I dunno what to do anymore,' he says, flailing his hands about. Chrissie gives an awkward laugh, clamping her hand down on his before attempting to get Dean up.

'I think you need your bed, champ.' She grins, pulling Dean into a standing position. He sags against her, his legs feeling heavy and sluggish like they don't belong to him. The world tilts and spins around him. He can't remember ever being this drunk before. He hasn't had *that* many, surely.

'Think I should get a taxi,' he mumbles. The effort to drag one foot in front of the other is almost too much and he staggers into Chrissie, who manages to hold him up by bracing her hand on his chest, her other looped around his middle. 'Wow, you're strong.'

'You're drunk,' Chrissie points out. 'Let me give you a run home.'

'Nah, it's fine,' Dean says. The words come out thick and jumbled.

'I insist,' Chrissie says, and she helps Dean out of the bar and into the cold night.

The night air is biting; nipping his cheeks and slicing across his lungs on each inhale. It should be enough to sober him up a bit, but he still feels slow and weighed down. There is no way he can make his way across town back to the motel.

'Can you drop me at the Claymore Inn?' Dean asks, and he leans against Chrissie all

the way up to a little red car. She lets him slump against the side of it as she opens the door.

‘Sure thing,’ she says as she grips his arm and pulls him off the car. She really is very strong. Dean he drops himself into the passenger seat. ‘You got your key?’

Dean nods, then rocks with the car as she shuts the door. His head feels full and foggy and he is vaguely aware of Chrissie getting into the driver’s seat and firing the car to life. The heater is on, blowing out hot air that lulls him into a stupor, and he can feel himself slipping. There’s not a damn thing he can do.

Sleep comes far too easy.

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The next time Castiel wakes up it is half past seven and the low winter sun is peeking through the blinds, slanting dull blue light across the room. It takes him a moment to wake up properly, to realize that the bed is still half empty and the sheets on the other side are cool and untouched. He jerks his head up from the pillow, glancing quickly around the room. There’s still no sign of Dean having returned.

He jumps out of bed in panic, stumbling over his own shoes that he had kicked off and abandoned when he had undressed. He wastes no time pulling the first t-shirt he finds over his head and shoving on the jeans he had discarded the night before. He grabs his phone from the table and pauses when he sees the keys to the Impala. He picks those up too, holding them too tightly in his hand; he closes his eyes and wonders where on earth Dean could have gone on foot.

He opens his eyes and hits one on the speed dial on his phone. The dial tone sounds before Dean’s voicemail message tells him he can’t come to the phone right now. Cas tries three more times for good measure, to no avail. The fifth time Cas dials out, he calls Sam.

Sam answers on the fourth ring, and the first thing Cas hears is a yell that tells him Sam has DeeJay in his arms and is currently wrestling a toddler. If he were any less panicked he would probably feel amused that Sam seems to be losing.

‘Don’t do that,’ Sam says distractedly, and there’s a clatter followed by a rustle. ‘Hello?’

‘Sam...’

‘Cas, are you all right?’ Sam asks, he sounds concerned, his worry reflecting Cas’.

‘It’s Dean,’ Cas says quietly. It takes all his willpower to not let his voice quiver. The knuckles of the hand clutching the keys are white and the metal is biting into his palm. He barely notices.

‘What?’ Sam exhales, the sound magnifying down the line making Cas wince. ‘What happened?’

‘We had a fight,’ Cas explains. ‘He ... he stormed off. I thought he would come back, he usually does. But he isn’t here and he isn’t answering his phone. Sam, I have no idea where he could be.’

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line, and Cas hears Sarah’s voice in the background, no doubt asking what is going on, but Cas is too numb to listen. He strides over to the window and pulls the blind down with a finger, looking out at the Impala. The car is undisturbed. He lets the blind ping back into place.

‘Cas?’ Sam’s voice snaps his attention back to the phone and he runs a hand through his hair.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m coming to the motel now,’ Sam says, and Cas hears the rumble of an engine being fired to life. ‘Don’t go anywhere. Wait for me.’

‘Sam.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Hurry,’ Cas breathes, closing his eyes as he swallows hard. ‘Please.’

‘I’ll be there as soon as I can,’ Sam promises just before the line goes dead.

Cas paces the room, following the same path Dean had the night before. He taps the phone against his lips and thinks of phoning Dean a few more times even though he knows he won’t get an answer. His heart won’t stop pounding hard in his chest, his mind won’t stop racing and he can’t just sit still and wait. He can’t help but think he should be out there looking for Dean, and how he will never be able to forgive himself if anything happens to him.

It would be the end of everything. It would be like none of this—none of the rebellion and the choices and the humanity—had ever happened at all.

Dean wakes up in a cellar. The room is small, dank, with green moss growing up grey stone walls. There's a crescent window carved high up on the wall, letting weak white sunlight and nipping winter air filter through. The light only makes the room seem greyer. The cold makes Dean's skin flare to life with goosebumps, and he jerks his arms only to find himself tied down.

His body feels stiff, aching all over as though he has just run a marathon without stopping. His throat is dry and scratchy, his tongue stuck to the top of his mouth in thirst. His feet and hands are bound by thick rope to a wooden chair that has been bolted to the floor—he tries not to think too much about why. His neck aches when he moves it, and he lets out a cracked groan before letting his chin fall to his chest.

He can't for the life of him remember how he ended up here or, in fact, where he is. This is a hundred times worse than yesterday. At least yesterday he had woken up in a bed and there had been someone familiar—though not ordinarily under such circumstances—next to him. This is completely different. This should be scaring the ever loving shit out of him, but all it does is make him feel angry.

He can't believe how *stupid* he has been. He can't believe he went out and got drunk and let his guard down. He can't believe he ran out on Castiel and rather than go home and apologize for harsh words, he had drowned his sorrows and whined at some random chick.

He can't remember much after his third whiskey. He can vaguely picture the bartender if he really thinks hard, and a little voice nags at him that there was more, that there was someone else. His actions feel only more idiotic knowing that there is a succubus around these parts, and Dean has absolutely no doubt that he is currently in her clutches. He doesn't feel violated, yet. He's pretty sure that nothing has happened. She probably doesn't like her prey unconscious and unresponsive.

He only wishes he knew how much time has passed. Time is everything.

His head feels like it's filled with cotton wool, foggy, and he slips into unconsciousness again.

The next time Dean wakes, it is to the sound of the click clicking of high heels echoing down the corridor outside. It suddenly hits him that he has no idea how big this building is, but he seems to be in the very bowels of it. The light in the room is brighter now, walls pale grey and alive with green and damp. He still has no idea how much time has passed.

Dean steels himself when the footsteps slow as they approach the door. He listens to the clunk of the latch and then the door swings open. He really hadn't known what to expect, but the doorway reveals an undoubtedly attractive woman with dark curly hair and a slim body. It is Chrissie from the night before. He hadn't noticed the cruel curve of her smile or the knowing look in her eyes last night, but now, stone-cold sober, it's easy to see. It makes Dean's skin crawl.

'You,' he grunts out, straining against the binds, but it's useless; he is tied expertly.

'Dean,' Chrissie says with a smile, tilting her head in a way that is nothing nearly as adorable as when Cas does it—and Dean can't believe he is thinking that at a time like *this*. 'Have some water,' she goes on, stepping into the room now, a clear tumbler half-filled with water in her hands.

She walks up to him and tips the glass against his lips. Dean doesn't want to drink, he knows nothing good can come from it, but Chrissie grabs his jaw and pulls it open, tipping the water into his mouth. He tries to spit it out, but she clamps his mouth shut, and Dean has no choice but to swallow. He gasps once he finishes, his stomach cramping, and he glowers up at the woman before him.

'Better?' she asks.

'Peachy,' he deadpans. 'Let me guess, you're not going to let me go any time soon?'

'I think you know me better than that, Dean,' Chrissie smirks, she takes a step back from Dean, bends down to put the glass on the concrete floor before she straightens to look at Dean once more.

'They'll find me,' Dean says, and he knows it's the truth. He knows that no matter how severe an argument he and Cas have had, the angel will always come and save his ass if he needs it, and Sam wouldn't leave a stone unturned until he found him.

'Oh, probably,' Chrissie says with a nonchalant shrug. 'But it'll be too late.'

Dean glowers at her—there really isn't much else he can do in his current position—as she moves to close the door and begins slowly circling his chair. Her hand falls to his shoulder, nails deliberately digging into the soft skin as she drags her hand across them. She stops and looks down on him, even as she puts a hand beneath his chin and tilts his head up to look at her.

'See, I have the power here,' she tells him. 'You will be helpless to my plans...'

'Don't be so sure,' Dean says, and he resists the urge to roll his eyes at the clichéd

villainy of her words.

‘Oh, of course,’ she says, and gives him a mock-pitying look. Her hand tightens on his shoulder as she swings one leg over his knees and plops herself down on his lap. Dean grunts in discomfort, leaning away as far as he possibly can so the back of the chair digs into him. The laugh she emits is purely mocking. ‘Are you above the whiles of the feminine form now?’

‘No, I’m just not interested,’ he says, and it’s the honest to god truth. Even last night he had been too hung up on Cas to even think of sleeping with some random chick from a bar.

‘Ohhhh,’ Chrissie says, elongating the word like she’s finally grasping something. She nods her head as she drapes her arms loosely around Dean’s neck. Dean tries to squirm out of her hold, but he is going nowhere. ‘My apologies, I forgot...’

Dean’s about to ask what she has forgotten when she suddenly drops her head and her whole body starts vibrating. It’s the most uncomfortable sensation in the world, Dean thinks, and he is nothing short of horrified when the girl in front of him starts to change.

Hair shrinks back, the shoulders and torso widen, define, and the bust shrinks to flat chest. The arms get slightly longer and the muscle shifts beneath roughening skin. He isn’t even paying attention to what is going on below the waist. He closes his eyes, hoping this is all a nightmare.

The vibrating stops and there’s a sharp, masculine groan of discomfort before Dean opens his eyes. If he had been horrified before, it was nothing in comparison to now. Sitting on his knees is a young man with the same dark hair and dark eyes Chrissie had, the features similar but obviously male with sharp cheekbones and a light dusting of stubble. Dean is so sure he has seen this dude somewhere, so sure.

‘This is more what you’re into these days, no?’ Chrissie—though Dean is sure it’s Chris now, and that name rings a bell, too—says and that smirk is the same.

‘What?’ Dean says and his voice is an octave too high. Chris is heavier than his female counterpart, heavy enough to press Dean’s legs into the chair so the seat bites into him and starts cutting off his circulation.

‘Come on, Dean,’ Chris taunts, and he tilts his head in the same way he had as a woman. It’s creepy, Dean decides. ‘Castiel ... Cas, whatever you are calling him these days. He’s your ... I don’t know what you call him...soul mate probably. You haven’t been a woman’s man for some time now.’



‘I don’t know what you are talking about,’ Dean says hotly, though it’s a lie, and he knows that the incubus knows that. It’s nothing short of uncomfortable for someone to point out your inclinations before you really get the chance to wrap your head around them, though.

‘Please,’ Chris says, shaking his head. ‘Never mind yesterday...’

‘Yesterday?’ Dean echoes and the puzzle finally clicks into place. Slick that hair back and put glasses on him and he has the pathologist sitting on his lap. And things slowly click into place. The succubus’ name isn’t Chrissie, it’s Christa and the reason they couldn’t find her yesterday had been because she had been Dr. Christopher Ryan. ‘Fuck...’

‘We’ll get to that,’ Chris says with a wink. ‘Nice of you to finally get with the program, by the way.’

‘Screw you,’ Dean growls out with all the hate he can muster.

‘But as I was saying...’ Chris says, that grin growing lewd and knowing now as he pushes off Dean’s knees and stands above him. ‘Even five years ago I knew ... I knew about your feelings ... it’s kind of my job to know people’s desires, after all.’

‘Five years ago?’ Dean says, scowling up at the incubus and suddenly everything hits him like a ton of bricks. This isn’t a different incubus at all. He had merely gone into hiding and kept his old hunting ground after Dean and Sam and Castiel left. He had waited and he had watched and then Dean had walked right into his trap. ‘You...’ Dean breathes.

‘Me,’ the incubus agrees and he grabs a handful of Dean’s hair, yanking his head back before he leans in to whisper against Dean’s ear. ‘I’ve waited a *long* time for this.’

‘Eat me...’ Dean grunts out, wincing as the hand tightens in his hair. ‘No wait...you actually might.’

He can feel the smirk against his ear before Chris pulls away. The hand loosens from his hair and Chris disappears from view and starts undoing the rope tying Dean to the chair. Dean’s legs are free, but they still feel slow, sluggish, tingly from pins and needles and aching from disuse and sleeping in the stupid chair in the first place.

Dean lurches up from the chair, every intention of fighting this demon *again*, even though he knows he can’t win. Chris is smiling wide at him, watching Dean with

amusement rather than fear as Dean trips over his own feet as he careens towards the door. Chris covers the ground between them in two easy strides and grabs the rope still binding Dean's wrists with one hand while the other supports Dean with a hand under his armpit.

'Come on,' Chris says in a silky smooth voice that is meant to be seductive. 'This kind of thing always goes down better in a bed...'

'If you think I'll go easy, you've got another thing coming,' Dean says, and his words feel sluggish as they spill from his mouth. What...

'You didn't think that was just water in that glass did you?' Chris asks, clicking his tongue quietly as he leads Dean out of the cellar. 'Really ... I am surprised it took me five years to get my hands on you again.'

Dean can feel himself passing out, and for the second time in as many days, Dean watches the silhouette of Chris fade into the black of unconsciousness once again.

## Part Four

### *Danger Is My Middle Name*

Sam arrives at the motel a little before ten, and by that time Cas has nearly worn a hole in the carpet he has been pacing so long. Cas had left the motel shortly after he had hung up on Sam, and checked out the bar only to belatedly realize it was shut. He had cursed thought about breaking in, before deciding waiting for Sam might be a better option. Still, Cas looks startled when Sam shoulders open the door and nearly barrels into him.

‘Sam,’ he greets, and he pockets his phone and the keys to the Impala.

‘I half expected you to go without me,’ Sam says with a grin and, Cas manages a small smile back despite the guilt and nerves eating at his stomach. Sam looks around the room in that cautious hunter way that he has developed over the years.

Cas grabs his jacket from the back of a chair, pulling it on as he leads the way back out of the motel room. ‘We have to find Dean.’

‘Where do you want to start?’ Sam asks, closing the motel door behind him and following Cas over to the Impala. ‘The bar...?’

‘The bar doesn’t open until noon, remember? And...I already double-checked.’ Cas stops in his tracks, twirls the Impala’s keys around his finger before he looks back over at Sam. ‘The waitress you spoke to yesterday,’ he says. ‘Was she supposed to be working last night?’

‘Yeah, she does nine ‘til midnight every night,’ Sam says, and then sucks in a breath as he takes in what he’s said. ‘She might have seen Dean.’

‘Let’s go,’ Cas says and he pulls open the driver’s door of the Impala and slides into the seat. He has the car started and reversing before Sam even has the passenger door shut.

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Dean passes out long enough to wake up and find himself tied to a bed this time around. He is, thankfully, still fully clothed, and he lets out a sigh of relief. Whatever drug had been in the water is slowly wearing off, Dean’s strength returning, and he jerks his hands against the binds, trying to wriggle free.

He would have to break his thumbs, though, to break the knots, and even then he isn't convinced he would get free.

Dean hears the click, click, click of high heels again and the echoing isn't the same. They are in some other part of the building. He pulls once more on the ropes for good measure but stills when it is just as fruitless as the previous attempt, and he waits for the inevitable.

He's scared now. Actually scared, and Dean can't remember the last time he was afraid of something that wasn't commitment-related. This scares the crap out of him, though. He *knows* he's screwed, and he's never in his life prayed so damn hard that Sam and Cas will bust down the door and save his ass. Gone are the days of thinking the pair of them fret over him too much; right now, he needs them.

His palms are sweating, his heart rate is double what it normally is and his breathing is panicked. His eyes flicker around the room as though hoping to find an out, a reprieve but there's nothing besides the bed.

It's Christa who comes to stand in the doorway, not Chris, and she has changed clothes since the last time he saw her. There was a time where women in sexy lingerie would stop him in his tracks and have him gladly dropping his pants. Now, he wants the hell out of here. He wants the safety of home, and he should be thinking of Lisa, that was the last person he was with, after all. But that's not the first person he thinks of, not the person he has wanted for years but thought he could never have. He wants Cas.

There's no denying it now. He buried those thoughts and feelings for too long, too cowardly to accept that he'd fallen for someone, *something*, he couldn't—shouldn't—have. Cas is human now, and Dean isn't even sure how long he's been human, but it fits now where it didn't the last time Dean had experienced the future. Cas is his, he's said as much in this time period and Dean wonders if he just never noticed it in his Cas, and a large part of Dean doesn't want to die before he can see their relationship grow, however terrifying that idea truly is. It's sappy as all hell, but Cas fills a void that Lisa never could.

'Fuck,' he curses, and pinches his eyes shut. 'Cas, you sonofabitch, if ever there was a bad time for you not to be angeled-up, this is it...'

There's a crash somewhere below, deeper inside the house, and Christa frowns, staring at Dean for a long hard minute like she thinks he is to blame for it. Then she promptly turns around and Dean hears the rapid clicking of her heels receding down the hallway. He lets out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding.

The resulting silence doesn't last for long though; he can hear yelling downstairs now, and there's a bolt of fear stabbing at his chest. He pulls against his restraints, but all that accomplishes is deepening bruises and chafing his wrists. Then he hears his name called from somewhere not that far away.

'Sam!' he yells. 'Sammy!'

'Dean?' he hears Sam shouting, and it's closer now, Dean can feel relief flooding through him. His brother is here, everything will be all right.

Sam's head pops around the door a minute later and he wastes no time at all in striding across the room, pulling a knife from his belt and cutting Dean free. He passes Dean the knife and then a wooden stake that Dean ogles before looking questioningly at his brother.

'Going with the old vampire mythology on this one,' Sam says with a grin as he helps Dean to his feet. Dean brushes his fussing hands off and rubs at his sore wrist with the back of his other hand.

'Where's Cas?' Dean asks, leading the way out of the room only to realize he has no idea where he is going. He's about to let Sam step ahead of him when he hears an agonized roar from below.

He doesn't stop to think. He bolts down the hall and down the stairs, his heart thundering in his ears and his eyes searching for the source of the noise. It had sounded like Cas. He reaches the bottom of the spiral staircase, the narrow passage opening up into a vast hallway, and his breath leaves him all in one go.

Time slows down. Nothing seems real. The sounds of his breathing and his heart beating sound a million miles away and each footstep sounds a slow, dull echo as he rushes forward. Cas is lying beneath the stairwell; his legs at odd angles, his arms splayed out and his head turned to one side. A trickle of blood smears the floor under his head.

'Cas...' he breathes in, and time catches up with him. He falls to his knees beside the former angel and pushes his fingers up against the pulse point of Cas' neck. There's nothing. 'Oh for fuck's...Cas...come on...'

He shifts Cas' head, tilting his head up the way his dad had taught him many years ago, and starts compressions on Castiel's chest. He pushes ten times, then breathes air into Cas' mouth before going back to compressions.

Dean can't think of anything but Cas. He can't lose him, not when it actually *counts*. Losing Cas now would be to lose him forever. There's no coming back when you're human.

'Come on, Cas,' Dean whispers, blowing air into his mouth again. 'Don't you dare die on me...'

He puts his hands on Cas' chest once more, about to compress again out of desperation, when Cas' chest suddenly rises beneath Dean's palm. Cas gasps and coughs and his eyes open as he meets Dean's gaze for a shocked second before turning on his side and breathing heavily.

'Son of a bitch,' Cas croaks, and Dean rubs his back. He's never felt so glad to hear Cas say anything, never mind that he's repeating something Dean knows he says far too often. It's a little nice to know he is rubbing off on the angel, after all.

'Welcome back,' Dean says, and he smiles as Cas looks up at him from the corner of his eye. Cas' hand grasps for his and Dean lets him take it, holds on tight.

'Dean!' Sam's voice jolts him, and Dean looks up just in time to see Sam throwing one of the wooden stakes in the direction of Christa, who had been feet away from Dean. She dodges it and leaps into one of the other rooms. Sam bolts after her.

'Stay here,' Dean instructs Cas. 'You better be alive when I get back here.'

'Promise,' Cas says, and Dean squeezes his hand one more time before he lets it go and runs after his brother.

Sam is losing the tussle to a girl, Dean would point out if they were in less perilous circumstances. As it is, Sam currently being wrestled to the ground by a succubus gives Dean the chance to run up behind her and smack her over the head with the first thing that comes to hand—it turns out to be a dictionary of all things—because he had dropped his stake at the staircase.

Christa turns on him with a growl and jumps on him. Dean sweeps her legs from under her, but she already has a hold of him and he goes down heavily with her. She rolls them over in milliseconds, and her hands wrap tightly around Dean's throat, constricting.

'Haven't you got it in that thick skull of yours yet, Dean,' she snarls. 'You can't beat me!'

'No,' comes Sam's voice, and Chrissie doesn't have the time to react before there is a

wooden stake rammed through her back and Dean is spattered with blood. He shuts his eyes. 'But I can,' Sam adds triumphantly.

Dean groans and shoves the dead succubus off him. Chrissie has turned to shriveled flesh, and Dean wants nothing more than to salt and burn the body for extra measure. He gets to his feet and lets out a long breath before looking at Sam.

'That was close,' he says, wiping his face on his sleeve.

'I'm glad the stake thing worked,' Sam says, and Dean glowers at him. Sam laughs and claps Dean on the back. 'I'm kidding...I'll go get the salt...'

'You do that,' Dean says, shaking his head at him. 'I am going to get Cas to the car...'

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Cas has managed to prop himself up against the foot of the stair by the time Dean comes out of the room. He smiles when he sees Dean. One hand is tucked carefully in at his ribs, and Dean can see that the gash on Cas' head is actually a vertical cut across his eyebrow. Dean steps closer to him, pulling him carefully to his feet before letting Cas lean against him.

'You need the hospital,' Dean says when Cas winces at the contact. He helps Cas out of the house.

'I'll be fine,' Cas breathes.

'That arm is broken,' Dean points to the hand held close to his stomach. 'You probably have cracked ribs. You are going to a hospital, and that's that.'

'Concerned for me now, are we?' Cas teases. Dean doesn't dignify that with an answer and just gives him a look like he is being particularly exasperating. Cas gives him a lopsided smile.

'Y'all right?' Sam asks from the trunk of the Impala when they come outside, and Cas nods before Sam closes the trunk and heads back inside with salt, gasoline and matches. 'I'll be back in a minute'

Dean watches Sam retreat before he walks Cas around to the passenger side and deposits him into the car. He shuts the door then rounds his baby to get in the driver's side. Cas sinks back heavily against the leather, his head rolling back against the headrest. He looks over at Dean.

‘What?’ he asks.

‘Why’d Sam bring my car?’ Dean asks in return.

‘He didn’t, I did,’ Cas says, raising his head from the headrest and giving Dean an amused look.

‘Y—you drove my car?’

‘Of course I drove your car, Dean,’ Cas replies, a smirk pulling at the corner of his lip. ‘Who else’s car would I drive?’

‘Of course...’ Dean says, returning the smirk. He doesn’t even like it when Sam drives his baby; he can’t really imagine letting an angel drive his car unsupervised, but he finds himself thinking that he might be okay with it. The Impala doesn’t seem to be any worse off for it. ‘You take care of my baby?’

‘What is important to you is important to me,’ Cas says.

‘Yeah...’ Dean says quietly. Cas smiles at him and lets his good hand fall to the seat between them. Dean looks at it, and then reaches down, twining their fingers together and clasping Cas’ hand before he looks up. The former angel is smiling at him, his whole face warm with a kind of affection Dean so rarely sees.

When Sam returns five minutes later, smelling like burnt flesh and ash, Dean reluctantly lets go of Cas’ hand and starts up the car, telling Sam to roll down the windows in the back. Sam throws what is left of their supplies into the trunk then flops across the back seat of the Impala like he is exhausted. He rolls down the window as an afterthought, but Dean just thinks he caught his glare in the rearview mirror.

‘Long day,’ Sam says with a grin.

‘It’s noon,’ Dean says pointedly, and he shifts the car in reverse before getting the hell out of dodge and putting the big eerie house behind them in a cloud of dust.

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Cas has had scrapes with death before. He’s a hunter after all, and life with Dean Winchester is nothing if not dangerous at times. It’s the first time that he has properly died for a few minutes, though.



He wishes he could say he had seen white light and pearly white gates, but all he remembers is darkness. A plain black nothing, until Dean had breathed life back into him and sudden shooting pain reminded him that he was alive, he still had something to live for. It isn't time to go back Home yet.

He can't remember ever being so relieved to see Dean alive as at that moment. It wasn't his Dean, but it was close enough; it was a Dean who was desperate to keep him alive. A Dean who held his hand for that brief moment before he took care of the demon that had done this to him. That had done this to both of them.

They had gotten the address from Christa's coworker—the succubus had threatened the woman's son, they found out, and Cas and Sam had promised to take care of everything— and when he and Sam had reached the house, Cas had been worried that he and Sam might be too late. The succubus had been holding Dean for nearly twelve hours and previous victims hadn't been so lucky to even get that. It was in times like this Cas regretted that he couldn't just zap in wherever he felt like and save Dean from the clutches of death.

Things turned sour quickly, too quickly, when Sam accidentally knocked into a ridiculously large ornamental pot just inside the front door. The clatter had been enough to bring the succubus out, and things had moved quickly from there.

'Get Dean,' Cas had told him. 'I'll take care of the succubus.'

Sam had nodded in reply and as the succubus approached the top of the stairs, steeling herself then starting to vibrate and Sam had barreled past before she could catch him. There's a moment of stunned realization as it dawned on him that the incubus and succubus were never separate creatures at all. It's the incubus that attacks Cas.

The rest is a blur, before the intolerable blackness. Then *Dean*.

He lets Dean fuss because it is so rare to see Dean Winchester doing so. It does get old quickly, but he figures that letting Dean take care of him really isn't such a bad idea after all, especially if it lets this Dean realize that there is something there between them. That there always was and there always will be. Dean cares, and Cas doesn't think he has ever properly realized that before.

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The house where the succubus/incubus had been dwelling is a good half hour outside of Syracuse, and a further ten minutes away from the nearest hospital. Despite Cas' protests that he is, in fact, fine, Dean speeds to the hospital and bodily drags him into

the ER once he makes a parking spot for himself near the front door.

‘You aren’t going to win any awards for bravery by refusing treatment and painkillers, y’know,’ Dean says once they are sitting in the waiting room and Sam has disappeared off to get what he calls a decent cup of coffee.

‘I’d still heal,’ Cas says, and his head flops onto Dean’s shoulder as he slinks down in his seat. Dean doesn’t shrug it off.

There’s a long moment of silence between them, just listening to other waiting patients and machine noises and the receptionist’s voice carrying from her booth. It’s companionable, rather than awkward—which Dean thinks it has every right to be—but still Dean eventually feels the need to break the silence.

‘What happened?’ he asks. Cas doesn’t move his head from Dean’s shoulder, but Dean feels him grunt as though he was almost asleep and there is a long breath before he replies.

‘Incubus blindsided me,’ he says quietly. ‘I was on my way up the stairs when he got to me, knocked me down the stairs ... kept the beating going once I landed at the bottom ... not sure I was conscious for all of it.’

‘Jesus...’ Dean breathes, twisting his head to try and get a better look at Cas’ face. He resorts to putting his fingers on Castiel’s chin and tilting it so he can see him properly. Cas shifts, raising his head, and their eyes meet. Dean thinks they are really too close, and in much too public a place, for this. Cas brings up his hand to Dean’s, pulls his fingers away from his chin, but he keeps a hold of his hand, brushing his fingers over Dean’s knuckles.

‘I’m fine, Dean,’ he whispers. ‘I’m alive, aren’t I?’

‘You very nearly weren’t,’ Dean says softly.

‘Well, then,’ Cas says, and he slinks back down on his chair and rests his head on Dean’s shoulder again. ‘You merely repaid the favor.’

Dean can’t think of anything to reply to that and just tightens his grip on Castiel’s hand. He isn’t giving him up so easily this time around. He isn’t so quick to let go this time when Sam comes back.

Sam returns ten minutes later with three cups of coffee and three chocolate bars, and Dean’s stomach gives a thankful growl as he tears into the chocolate.

‘I can’t believe I am going to say this, but you two should eat more often,’ Sam tells them as he drops himself into a chair opposite them and stretches his long legs out just enough that Dean can kick him if he so chooses. He does, and Sam frowns at him.

‘I was kind of tied up,’ Dean says.

‘I was too worried to eat,’ Cas says at the same time, and he and Dean share a look worth a thousand words. Sam doesn’t appear to think this is anything new at all, though, and merely shakes his head at them.

‘When we’re done here, we’re getting lunch,’ Sam says before taking a long drink of his coffee.

‘Sounds like a good idea,’ Dean says as his stomach gives a rather loud rumble, which makes Cas jerk his head off Dean’s shoulder and give him an amused look. ‘Nothing a bacon double cheeseburger won’t solve.’

‘Castiel Winchester?’ calls a voice, and the three of them look over to a doctor.

‘That’s our cue,’ Dean says, and he helps Cas to his feet and tries not to think about how weird it is to hear his own surname attached to Cas. But there’s a tiny, traitorous, part of him that isn’t freaked out, that thinks it has a nice ring to it.

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Its two hours before they get out of the ER and crawl back into the safety of Dean’s Impala. Cas had been a model patient, except for trying to refuse painkillers until Dean had nearly had to force them down his throat. He did indeed have a broken arm, as well as cracked ribs and a sprained ankle.

Other than that, he is the picture of health and insisting on lunch.

They stop at the same diner they had eaten breakfast in before, and Dean watches in nothing short of awe as Cas orders the same as him and tucks in like he hasn’t eaten his whole life. It is both slightly disgusting and weirdly fascinating. Sam seems to be completely of the mind that it’s the former.

‘You two were made for one another,’ Sam mutters under his breath as he spears a tomato on his fork. Cas just grins at him and continues shoveling fries into his mouth. Dean just shakes his head. They eat in silence for a few minutes before Sam speaks again. ‘Seeing as you have to take it easy for a few days,’ he says, looking at Cas. ‘You can come and stay at my house for a bit ... if you want.’

‘For a bit?’ Dean asks. He’s not sure exactly how long this means, he doesn’t even know how much longer he is going to be stuck here.

‘Well, yeah,’ Sam says, scowling at his brother. ‘Until his leg is better, it won’t hurt for you to just chill out for a bit too.’

‘Not to rain on your parade or anything, Sammy,’ Dean says, licking mayo and tomato juice from his finger before he goes on. ‘But I don’t belong here.’

Sam frowns at that, and he and Cas share a silent look that Dean thinks is veiled annoyance.

‘I don’t know how you got here, Dean,’ Sam says. ‘Maybe we can do some research into that, too.’

‘Wouldn’t Bobby’s be a better place for that?’ Dean asks. It feels like forever since he has seen Bobby, and he can’t help but feel curious as to how Bobby might have changed—the last time he had gone to the future Bobby had been dead, after all.

‘Bobby’s in Washington at the moment,’ Sam tells him. ‘Said he’d pop in on his way through the state, bring any books that might be of use.’

‘Hmph,’ Dean says. ‘Did you phone him at the hospital?’

Sam squirmed in his seat. ‘I might have,’ he says. ‘And Sarah would love to have you guys. DeeJay too.’

Dean rolls his eyes and lets out a little chuckle before he nods his head. ‘Fine. Okay with you, Cas?’

‘I really am fine, you know,’ he says. ‘There’s no need for the fussing.’

‘Sometimes it’s good to just let people take care of you,’ Sam says.

‘You’ll be useless on a hunt until you can walk properly on that ankle and those ribs are healed,’ Dean points out. ‘We’ll get our stuff and head up to Sam’s house this evening.’

‘Good,’ Sam grins. ‘I’ll tell Sarah to set up the spare bedroom.’

‘You already did,’ Cas calls him out before Dean can.

Dean feels very much like asking if he and Cas will have to share a bed, because while he is slowly accepting his feelings for Cas, the idea of sharing a bed with him is just a little bit terrifying. He lets it drop though, as he watches Cas dig into his food again. He'll worry about it later.

### ***It's she Smaller Pieces of a Bigger Puzzle I Just Can't Work Out***

The first night they spend at Sam and Sarah's is awkward, though Dean considers that it only feels awkward on his part. He helps Cas into bed, and the former angel winces and holds back whimpers of pain as Dean helps him change out of his clothes. After that Cas, completely exhausted and aided by painkillers, falls quickly asleep.

Dean crawls into the other side of the bed, turns his back to Castiel and tries his damndest to get some sleep. He can't help but wonder how they usually sleep next to one another, and how much it freaks him out that the future him is probably comfortable with it. What if he rolls into Cas in his sleep or something? What if he accidentally hurts him while he's sleeping? What if...? It eventually takes berating himself for his schoolgirl behavior for his brain to give in to exhaustion and allows him to fall asleep.

When he wakes up that first morning it is to the whispers of a voice he half-knows telling him, *"It isn't as simple as that, kiddo,"* and he then he is completely distracted by the fact that he has his face pressed into Castiel's shoulder.

The voice comes back the second night they are at Sam's, and Dean is arguing with darkness.

*'Did you honestly think it would be that easy, bucko?'* the voice in his dream taunts. *'It's going to take more than saving his life ... there's a lesson to be learned here.'*

*'What...?'*

*'If I told you, you wouldn't learn,'* the voice says. *'This one you have to figure out for yourself.'*

Dean wakes with a jolt, feeling annoyed. The words linger in his mind and he knows that voice. He thinks he's heard it somewhere before, but it slips away from him too quickly, the voice fading and leaving burning white cryptic words in its wake. He quickly realizes his face is pressed into Cas' shoulder again, and Cas' nose is tucked into his hair and he thinks that maybe, just maybe, his sleeping body is a traitor to his own worrying. He quickly forgets about the dream.

He gets up before Cas is even awake and steals downstairs. It's early, but not early enough to avoid Sam and Sarah who are sitting at the breakfast table when he pads downstairs. Somehow he doesn't notice them until he has gathered a bowl, glass of apple juice, a box of cereal, and is looking for a tray. His knees just about give when he notices Sarah smirking at him out of the corner of his eye.

'Jeez...' he mutters, turning around to look at Sarah and her significant other.

'Morning sleepyhead,' Sam grins.

'Looking for something?' Sarah asks, smiling at him before eating another spoonful of cereal.

'A tray,' Dean mutters, turning his back on them and finally unearthing a tray from under a pile of pots and pans in a drawer. He starts laying out the bowl and glass and cereal on the tray before he goes hunting for milk.

'Breakfast in bed?' Sarah says. Dean resists the urge to roll his eyes. It's like having a second Sam. 'Can't remember last time we had breakfast in bed. He must really like this one, dear.'

'He always has,' Sam pipes in, and Dean turns around to glare at them both.

'You're fussing,' Sarah says, pointing her spoon at him before sharing a glance with Sam. Sam nods in agreement.

'No I'm not,' Dean argues and his voice is that annoying octave higher again. He reaches over and snatches the milk from the table and plonks it down on his tray.

There's a yell from upstairs that causes all three adults to look at the ceiling. Sarah is the first to look away, her gaze falling on Sam.

'It's your turn,' she says, and Sam sighs before he picks himself up out of his chair and disappears off to tend to their just-woken son. 'Don't smother him,' Sarah says, her attention on Dean once more.

'I'm not—' Dean protests.

'I'm just telling you not to,' she says. 'Cas can look after himself. He's very much like you, you know. He just gets aggravated if you smother him.'

'Noted.'

‘I’m the little sister you never had,’ Sarah grins at him before he turns on his heels and grabs the tray.

He is nearly out of the room when he replies, ‘Or wanted.’

Sarah’s laugh follows him out of the kitchen.

When he gets upstairs, Cas is rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Dean pauses in the doorway with his tray before Cas catches sight of him. Cas lets out a wide yawn and pushes himself up the bed a bit, wincing slightly as he catches his foot.

‘What’s this in aid of?’ Cas asks when Dean puts the tray down on his lap.

‘Nothing, really,’ Dean says, and he begins pouring him out some cereal before smothering it in milk. Cas watches him as he does so, a bemused look on his face.

‘Right,’ he says, and picks up his spoon quickly as though he thinks Dean is about to start spoon-feeding him. ‘Look, Dean—’

‘I just—’ Dean starts but he realizes Sarah is right; he is fussing, he has been fussing since the moment they got here. He tries not to think too much on how he had helped Cas from the car despite his protests, or how he’d rushed to Cas’ side when he got up to go to the toilet or when he was ready to go upstairs at the end of the night. He had even insisted on getting Cas food and drink whenever he needed it, and sometimes when he didn’t. He’s been like a mother hen. It’s a little embarrassing to admit to.

‘You don’t need to fuss over me, Dean,’ Castiel says, and he’s smiling at Dean in an appeasing sort of way. ‘I won’t break.’

‘I know, I just...’ he falters, because it’s a difficult thing to admit to. ‘I feel like this is my responsibility.’

‘Why?’ Cas asks, frowning as he eats his first spoonful of breakfast.

‘It’s my fault you can’t heal like you used to,’ he says quietly. ‘My fault you were even near that demon in the first place...if I hadn’t stormed off—’

‘Dean,’ Cas says, and he reaches over the tray and grasps at Dean’s wrist, lightly brushing his thumb over the darkening bruises that have blossomed there. ‘It wasn’t your fault. We all would have ended up fighting that demon, anyway...sometimes fights turn sour, that’s all there is too it. And I’m not your responsibility just because I chose you over heaven. Please don’t ever think that.’

‘But—’

‘No buts,’ Cas says. ‘It was *my* choice. I’ll pay the consequences.’

‘Cas...’

‘Dean,’ Castiel says firmly and he takes his hand away from Dean’s wrist and starts eating again. ‘I’m fine. Stop it.’

‘Will you at least—’

‘Dean,’ he interrupts. ‘Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to go and eat, then shower and go downstairs and annoy Sam and DeeJay. I’ll hobble to the bathroom all by myself, shower all by myself, and then hobble downstairs. The world won’t end, I won’t hurt myself and nothing will happen purely because I am not under your watchful gaze. All right?’

‘Right,’ Dean replies, and he feels his cheeks growing hot.

‘We can start doing some research today if you like.’

‘Research?’

‘Yeah,’ Cas says, munching through another spoonful of cereal. ‘Try and see if there is anything on how you got sent here or how you can get back.’

‘I don’t think research is going to get me back somehow,’ Dean says and he pinches a flake of cereal from Cas’ bowl.

‘Probably not,’ Castiel admits. Dean looks up at him, studying Cas’ face as he chews. Cas looks back at him patiently.

‘You think this could have been angels?’

‘I think there are very few things that have control over the manipulation of time,’ Cas says. ‘Angels are probably the simplest of explanations. Though *why* is much more troublesome.’

‘You don’t remember any orders from then?’ Dean asks, and he knows it’s a long shot. Five years is a long time and Dean has no idea of all the things that have transpired in that time. Going by his and Sam’s track record alone he thinks it would be enough to fill several books.



Cas appears deep in thought for a moment, spoon dripping with cereal and milk where it is held in midair. He frowns after a bit then shakes his head, dropping his gaze back to his breakfast.

‘There were no orders as far as I can recall,’ he says. ‘But even as an archangel there was certain information I was neither privy to, nor trusted with.’

‘They didn’t trust you?’

‘Certain members of the host did not, no.’

‘Is that part of why you chose earth over heaven?’

‘There were many reasons,’ Castiel says, meeting Dean’s gaze. ‘But the greatest one is currently making my leg fall asleep.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ Dean says, blushing as he shifts on the bed, letting Castiel move his good foot from underneath him. Cas is grinning at him when he finally looks back at him.

‘I’d quite like to go for a walk today, if you feel I am allowed outside,’ Cas teases, and Dean shakes his head at him. He has a feeling this is going to continue.

‘You can go walking,’ Dean says. ‘If you’re lucky, I might stand back and let you fall all on your own.’

‘It’s a sprain, you overdramatic oaf,’ Cas says affectionately, and Dean can feel him flexing his ankle under the sheets as though testing that theory. ‘I think it might be healed.’

‘The face says otherwise,’ Dean says. ‘Take it easy.’

‘Says Dean Winchester, the man for whom self-flagellation was invented,’ Cas says dryly before spooning the last of his cereal into his mouth and slurping the dregs of milk from the bowl.

Dean takes the bowl from him once he is done and fills it up again, helping himself to more milk than he had given Cas. He snatches the spoon from Cas’ grip when Cas holds it out to him and starts scarfing down his breakfast. Cas folds his hands in his lap and watches Dean eat, and it’s with the same kind of curiosity *his* Cas does it that Dean starts to think this Cas isn’t very much different at all.

‘When exactly was it when you got sent here?’ Cas asks, his head tilted in that

familiar way.

‘I already told you. Sam and I went to a bar, I got in a fight with the incubus, I lost...’

‘No...how long after I first left?’

‘You mean Heaven? You came to Lisa’s about two weeks before that happened.’

‘Did I go to Heaven that day?’ Cas asks. ‘The day of the fight?’

‘Yeah ... I mean I think so,’ Dean says. ‘You phoned me and said you had some things to sort out before you could come back, but that was it.’

‘Interesting...’

‘You lost me,’ Dean says between mouthfuls.

‘No...if I was in Heaven that day, it is curious that I didn’t hear anything,’ he says. ‘Perhaps it isn’t angels after all.’

‘What else could it be?’ Dean asks, and he knows he is missing something. He feels like something has slipped away from him, and if only he thinks harder he might be able to dig it out.

‘I’m not sure,’ Cas says quietly.

‘Djinn?’

‘Djinn create worlds in your mind, going by your heart’s desires,’ Castiel answers automatically. ‘They have no control over time.’

‘A demon?’

‘No demon I have ever heard of has been able to bend time,’ he says, watching as Dean finishes off his glass of apple juice and wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. ‘Lucifer is obviously still in the pit.’

‘And we’re back to angels...’ Dean mutters, putting the bowl back on the tray. ‘Or a god.’

‘It’s possible, I suppose,’ Cas says, but he is staring blankly past Dean, his brow furrowed in thought. Dean picks up the tray from Cas’ knees and begins to stand up, when he cuts across Cas’ eye line, the other man looks at him.

‘We’ll figure it out,’ Dean says.

‘Are you in a hurry to leave?’ Cas asks. Dean can see a flicker of something hard and hurt behind his bright blue eyes.

‘No...’ Dean says honestly. ‘Not really.’

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It has been a long time since Castiel has stopped and looked at his and Dean’s relationship. It has been one that had crossed the line of companionable affection for some time. But this younger Dean makes Cas stop and think.

While it makes him appreciate the closeness he *does* have with his Dean, it also makes him see the difference between who Dean was and who he has become, who he will become. They aren’t drastic differences, but this younger version seems to be handling the shift in their relationship rather well.

Cas can remember his Dean having difficulty with his feelings towards Cas back before they had got together. Dean had taken time. There had been episodes where Dean had imagined the gesture Cas was making by choosing him was far too much, that it was somehow unfair and Dean didn’t know how to deal with that. Didn’t know how to deal with his feelings.

The younger version trapped in *his* Dean’s body—he knows it’s his Dean’s body because Dean has that still pink scar running up the side of his knee that he acquired six months prior on a hunt and there still seems to be some ingrained muscle memory that has Dean waking up snuggled into Cas’ side—seems to be accepting things quicker than his Dean had.

This easier slide into acceptance is curious though, as Dean is still *Dean*. Cas wonders if Dean being given the opportunity to see this future is helping him to accept his feelings faster. He wonders the implications of that, how it will change things between them.

Cas likes this Dean, though. They may have bickered and fought at first, but there have been moments when it’s obvious that Dean genuinely cares for him. The fussing is telling in itself; it’s similar to how bad Dean had been when Cas had first become human, when Dean had blamed himself for every time something happened to him. It touched something in Cas to see this younger version doing the same, even if it is completely unnecessary.

He knows that Dean will have to go back, that this isn't permanent. It is likely Dean has a lesson to learn, and Cas has a part to play in that. But part of him isn't quite ready to let go of this Dean yet. Part of him wants to see more, watch the change happen, even if it isn't his to have.

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They do go for a walk later that morning, with Dean managing not to fret over Cas, and it is perfectly enjoyable. Dean can't remember the last time he just walked for the sake of walking. He has Maverick and Meghan—Sam told them that the dogs liked any and all opportunities to go walking and had thrust their leashes in his direction—pulling on ahead of him, sniffing at everything, and Cas limping beside him. It's more comfortable and relaxing than Dean thinks it has any right to be.

'Meghan is pooping,' Cas says eventually, breaking the silence. Dean frowns at her, then at Castiel.

'And?'

'And you need to pick it up,' Cas says.

'I'm not picking it up!'

'Dean.' The look Cas gives him is the one that could kill men at a single glance if he had such a power at his disposal.

'Fine...with what?' Dean asks, and Cas pulls a poop bag from his coat pocket, hands it to him with a triumphant look on his face.

'Look at you, the responsible dog-owner.'

'Screw you.'

The laugh Cas lets out as Dean bends down to pick up the poop is completely worth it. He thinks Sam owes him big time, nevertheless.

Dean had expected Cas to be fascinated with nature. For him to be as interested in all of earth's contents as well as him, for him to stare at all things that he finds curious. He's just like everyone else though. He walks beside Dean with the collar of his coat turned up against the cold and his hands stuffed in his pockets and he watches the dogs as they walk off as far as their leads will let them before Dean pulls them back in.

Occasionally they catch one another's gaze, and Cas smiles before he looks away and Dean finds himself watching Cas for just a little bit longer every time their gaze meets. He can't get it out of his head; this Cas is different, but in many ways quite the same. There isn't a need to fill every silence when Cas is around, they can just walk and enjoy one another's company without Dean beginning to think things are awkward. He can't ever remember spending this much time with Cas and things just being...peaceful. But then the world around them had never really allowed for that.

At some point on their way back to the house, Cas casually takes Dean's free hand, wrapping his warm fingers around Dean's cool ones. It frightens Dean a little bit, and he sucks in a breath before he glances up at Cas. Cas is smiling at him, one of those little fond smiles he has so rarely seen. He can get used to that one.

'How's the ankle?'

'Not too bad.'

'You don't miss crashing on Sam's couch and me tending to your every need?'

The smile is sly now and his eyes alight with amusement. 'Desperately,' he deadpans.

'We need to get you watching Dr. Sexy,' Dean says. 'That way you won't complain.'

Cas rolls his eyes. 'I have never understood your dedication to that show.'

Dean shrugs. 'Easy viewing,' he answers.

'Nothing to do with having a crush on Dr. Sexy at all,' Cas says with a low sarcastic drawl that Dean knows he picked up from Sam, and he chuckles when Dean shoots a glare at him. 'Sam told me. Though I guessed as much myself after many viewings of reruns.'

'Sam needs to keep his mouth shut if he knows what's good for him.'

'I believe it is customary for little brothers to tell on their older siblings at any given opportunity.'

'Doesn't mean they *have* to.'

'No, but Sam has to find his fun somewhere,' Cas grins.

They lapse into silence again, Maverick pulling Dean slightly ahead as he suddenly decides one of the neighbor's walls is in need of a good sniff. Cas' hand tightens on

Dean's in a way that is almost reflexive. Dean glances back at him and sees a thoughtful look on his face.

'What?'

'Did you and I talk?' he asks, his mouth twitching a little before he goes on. 'After I came back?'

'No,' Dean says, rather taken aback by the question. In all honesty, from the moment Dean had left Lisa's everything had been busy and violent, and Dean had done very little except for drive, fight things, and sleep. Cas had always disappeared as soon as Dean was out of harm's way. 'What about?'

'About how we left things.'

'Left things ... after Sam?'

'Yeah ... after we went our separate ways.'

'No ...' Dean says, and he frowns as he meets Cas' gaze. 'It's only been two weeks. You're still busy upstairs, and there's so much going on...'

'Right...' Cas says quietly. They walk in silence for a few steps more, pause at the end of Sam and Sarah's driveway despite the two dogs straining towards their own back garden.

'Do we? Talk?'

'We fight,' Cas says carefully. 'Things get messy for a while.'

'That's hardly anything new for us,' Dean tells him and he wonders what Cas isn't saying, what he is remembering that Dean hasn't encountered yet.

'No,' Cas says and he leads the way up the path. 'I don't suppose it is...'

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They spend the afternoon reading through the small selection of books Sam has in his den, but it is nothing compared to Bobby's years-old collection. Dean can't find anything of interest or significance, and it takes until the words start blurring into one another for him to announce that he is giving up and flops down on the old sofa that has taken residence along one wall.

Cas jolts as Dean flops down beside him, and hisses when the motion disturbs his foot. Dean apologizes and starts fluffing at the pillow Cas has his foot elevated on. He stops when Cas pulls him back by the back of his shirt, and gives him a look that says he is fussing again.

‘Any luck?’ Dean asks, looking at the book Cas has lying open on his lap. Cas flips the page, continuing on his reading as though Dean has never interrupted him in the first place.

‘Nothing related to the manipulation of time,’ he says, and it’s then that Dean realizes the whole book Cas is reading is in ancient Greek; it’s all symbols and gobbledygook to him. ‘Interesting though.’

‘Dare I even ask?’

‘Most of this is ancient Greek rituals,’ Cas tells him, that smile slipping onto his face again. ‘Summoning forth gods for whatever purpose humans need them. It’s all very selfish, really.’

‘Aren’t all humans selfish when they do rituals?’

‘Not always ... sometimes people do rituals for others ... sometimes the rituals are for the greater good of a whole community,’ Cas says. ‘But most of the time people want what is best for themselves.’

‘And this?’

‘I hardly think you sent yourself forward in time,’ Cas says in that sarcastic tone Dean can’t get used to. ‘Unless you are harboring some secret power or dedication that I don’t know about.’

‘Wow, smartass.’

‘I very much doubt someone would ask for that to happen to you, either,’ Cas says, sighing as he closes his book and leans forward to drop it on the coffee table. ‘And I doubt you have any enemies who are dedicated enough to brush up on Ancient Greek, just to send you to the future.’

‘I think we’re stuck on angels,’ Dean says, and he unconsciously moves his arm along the back of the couch. Cas leans his head back against it, rolling his head to look Dean in the eye.

‘Then I guess they have a lesson they want you to learn.’

‘What kind of lesson?’

‘The kind you have to learn yourself,’ Cas says with a teasing smile, and Dean frowns. He’s heard something like that before. He just can’t pinpoint it.

‘Hey.’ Dean and Cas both look up to see Sam standing in the doorway. ‘I’m going to take DeeJ to the park, want to come?’

Dean glances at Cas, who gives him a little nod. ‘Go, I think I am long overdue a nap anyway.’

‘You nap now?’ Dean asks, taking his arm back and standing up.

‘Now that I’m on strong painkillers, yes.’ Cas grins, and he shuffles along on the couch, lying himself across it. ‘Don’t wind him up too much.’

‘DeeJ?’ Dean asks.

‘I was talking to Sam, actually,’ Cas says teasingly. ‘But sure, don’t wind DeeJ up either.’

‘Come on, let’s go,’ Sam says, steering his brother out of the room.

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Cas has barely had his eyes shut for ten minutes before there is a tap against his foot. He frowns and cracks an eye open to see Sarah standing at the end of the couch with two mugs in her hands. She is grinning at him in that dorky adorable way that he knows means she wants to talk.

‘Coffee,’ she says, handing one to him as she moves his feet off the other half off the couch. He sits up as he takes it, moving to give her room.

‘This will keep me awake,’ he says, but there is no bite to his words. He smiles at Sarah as she sinks back on the couch, and looks at him out of the corner of her eye.

‘That’s the whole point,’ she says. Cas takes a sip of his coffee; it’s black and bitter the way he knew Dean had been drinking it for years before he tried it himself. He’s he’d never liked it any other way. ‘How is the foot anyway?’

‘Almost back to normal,’ he replies, flexing his toes as though testing his theory. ‘Not really worth all the fuss.’



‘Good,’ Sarah says. ‘A repeat of last time would be no fun at all.’

‘Last time?’

‘You broke your foot.’

‘Ah...yes, well,’ Cas says, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘That was unfortunate.’

‘I love you guys,’ Sarah says. ‘But dealing with Dean fussing over you and DeeJ not sleeping through a night was trying.’

‘You know we would have stayed at Bobby’s—’

‘And you know Sam would never let that happen,’ Sarah points out. ‘It’s in the past now, we are all closer because of it. Just promise me that the next time I have a kid you won’t do yourself in three months in?’

‘I’ll try my best.’

‘Whatever will we do with you two,’ Sarah grins, before taking a sip of coffee.

‘Did you deliberately send Sam off with Dean?’ Cas asks after a moment of companionable silence. He likes Sarah. He hadn’t known any of the women in Sam’s life other than Ruby and as far as Cas is concerned Ruby couldn’t even begin to be compared to Sarah. He also knows that Sarah likes to talk common sense into him from time to time.

‘Would I do that?’ Sarah says, shooting Cas a knowing grin. He smiles back and shakes his head.

‘You should be careful,’ he warns, meeting her gaze. ‘He isn’t our Dean.’

‘But you like him.’

‘Of course,’ Cas says. ‘He’s the Dean I fell in love with. It is curious, seeing him as he was five years ago...odd seeing his doubt when in the past I was too consumed by my own.’

‘Perhaps you both have a lesson to learn, then?’ Sarah says, wrapping her hands around her mug. Cas tilts his head at that, contemplating her words.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Sam told me that angels have done this to Dean before to show him something,’ Sarah says, as though making sure they are on the same page. ‘Well, maybe this time he was sent here to learn something...but maybe you were, too.’

‘Like what?’ he asks, and Sarah gives a shrug in reply.

‘Maybe they want you to understand something,’ she says. ‘Maybe something related to whatever it is that Dean has to learn?’

Cas frowns at that, contemplating. He looks back at Sarah to find her watching him curiously.

‘What do you suppose happened to our Dean?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cas says quietly, his brow furrowing once more as he stares at his coffee. ‘Not that I don’t like this Dean...but we grew together, we changed and adapted to the life we have. This Dean needs to do that with the younger version of myself.’

‘Perhaps that’s what he needs to learn?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘You’ll get him back,’ Sarah says quietly, and she drops one hand from her mug to squeeze Cas’ knee. He smiles back at her softly, then takes her hand in his own. ‘You know...if you and Dean want some alone time together, me and Sam will be happy to leave you to it.’

‘I know,’ Cas says quietly. ‘But let’s not push Dean, we’ll leave it to him to make the first step.’

‘If it takes too long I am going to play interfering little sister,’ Sarah says with a smirk.

‘Oh, I have no doubt of that,’ Cas replies, grinning back at her.

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Dean knows even before they are out the door that Sam really wants him alone so he could talk to him. It’s the Sam he’d been used to before everything got messy between them, the Sam who was all about happy endings, but he’s different this time around. The world has changed him, Hell has changed him and now he has the balance of his life just right. It’s a Sam who thinks he knows better and that he’s the

one to start talking sense into Dean. A small, reluctant part of Dean thinks he might be right.

‘It’s nice here, no?’ Sam says once they are off Sam’s street and following a dirt path to a park Dean and Cas had wandered past earlier. Dean has the dogs again while Sam pushes DeeJay in his stroller, the latter pointing and babbling at things whenever he feels Dean and Sam need informing.

‘It’s something I thought neither of us would really have,’ Dean says, looking at his feet as he kicks a stray stone as far as he can. It’s as close to baring all that Dean’s ever come to.

‘Yeah,’ Sam agrees. ‘I never saw it coming either.’

If Dean didn’t have the dog leashes in his hands, he would have stuffed his fists in his pockets, and hunched down inside his jacket for good measure. Instead, he flexes his hands around the leashes, and raises his head to see the dogs sniffing intently at the same tree.

‘Why do you still hunt?’ Dean asks, looking over at his little brother. Sam looks back at him and smiles, and it suddenly hits him that this Sam is older than him, this Sam knows things about him that haven’t even happened yet. Dean thinks that is way too much leverage to even resemble fair.

‘Because I can’t run away from who I am just because I have a wife and a kid,’ Sam says. He stares pointedly at Dean. ‘And truth be told, I like it too much to give it up now.’

‘You *like* it?’

‘Come on, man,’ Sam says, steering the stroller into the park and wheeling it over to a nearby bench. ‘We save people from things that go bump in the night. It might not pay well, but we do good.’

‘Yeah ...’ Dean says quietly as he watches Sam bend down and unclip his son from his stroller. DeeJay wastes no time bounding up from the stroller, and Sam grabs him just in time before he scampers off. Dean wraps the leashes around the park bench in a knot, and the dogs settle down rather resignedly. ‘I guess I kind of forgot that...’

‘You just got lost, is all,’ Sam says, and he leads DeeJay over to the swings and lifts him up to sit him safely in harness. Dean comes over to lean against the pole of the swing set, watching as Sam pushes his son and smiling at the giggles that erupt from the toddler. ‘We were both going through a lot five years ago.’

‘Understatement,’ Dean says, scratching at the side of his neck.

‘It gets easier,’ Sam says. He shrugs. ‘It sounds lame...’

Dean snorts. ‘Yeah, it does.’

‘Hey, Deej, tell Uncle Dean he’s a jerk.’ Sam grins, pulling Deejay backwards then pushing him forward. The only reply is a squeal of glee.

‘Sarah will kill you if he repeats that,’ Dean says.

‘Yeah,’ Sam says with a laugh.

‘Are you going to tell him what you do when he’s older?’ Dean asks.

‘Yeah ... when he’s old enough to understand,’ Sam says. ‘I’m not going to lie to him. I don’t want him to live the life we do, but he deserves the truth.’

‘Bet his granddad wants him to be an auctioneer, eh?’

Sam grins at that. ‘Definitely.’

‘Can’t be a bad thing if it lets you live like this.’

‘Deej can do whatever he wants,’ Sam says, slowing down the swing once Deej turns to him and says “off!” ‘Sarah and I won’t force him to be anything he doesn’t want to be.’

Dean shakes his head. ‘Dad really did a number on you, huh?’

Sam’s jaw stiffens, and he shoots Dean a glare as he lifts Deejay up and carries him over to the little slide.

‘Look, Dean,’ Sam starts, but Dean frowns at him and waves him off, cutting his sentence short.

‘I’m not judging, man,’ he says. ‘Mom didn’t want us to turn out this way; I don’t blame you for being the same way. Deej deserves to make his own choices.’

‘Thanks,’ Sam says, and they look at one another for a long moment before Deejay suddenly reminds his Dad that they are in a park by a swift kick to his midriff. ‘Ouch, dude...’

Dean watches as Sam slides DeeJay down the slide a couple of times, smiling every time his nephew lets out a noise of pure unadulterated joy. It's weird and heartwarming all at once, watching Sam with this kid who is like a miniature clone. It takes him back to when he used to distract Sam from the real world by letting him be a kid while he dealt with the truth.

Sam's the kind of guy Dean had no doubt would be a good father if only he had the chance, and seeing Sam with his son just proves that. There's an air of joy and happiness that Dean doesn't think they ever got with their own father purely because their dad had been too broken to take time out for the little things. Sam takes the scary things and the hurtful things and pushes them away when he is with DeeJay, and Dean doesn't think John ever quite managed that. He doesn't doubt that their father loved them, he knows he did, but John just had never afforded the liberty of being at ease with his sons as Sam is with his.

Sam is chasing DeeJay under the climbing frame after the toddler has run off after his last slide before Dean decides to speak up again. He hides a smirk when Sam discovers he is really too tall to try and duck under the climbing frame, and Dean walks to the other side of it and grabs DeeJay. He lifts his nephew up, grinning at the boy's giggles.

'I take it you didn't bring me here just to talk family and nice surroundings?' Dean says, perching DeeJay on his hip.

'I didn't *bring* you here for anything,' Sam protests, scowling at his brother but Dean grins at him. He can still see through that façade, whether Sam has five years on him or not. Dean gives him a look that says "Please...", and Sam frowns all the more.

'Whipped, Sammy.' Dean smirks.

'Shut up, dude,' Sam mutters, walking over to the park bench and flopping down on it. Maverick raises his head and plops it down on Sam's knee, fully expecting the hand that Sam lowers to scratch behind his ears. Dean joins him, sitting a squirming DeeJay on his knees.

'So?'

'So...?' Sam echoes, patting Meghan now, too, as she makes interested noises at Maverick getting attention.

'What did the little lady want you to talk to me about?'

‘Cas.’

‘Huh,’ Dean says, grabbing the hand DeeJay was waving in his face, wondering why his nephew had an affinity for sticking his fingers up other people’s noses. ‘Somehow not surprised.’

‘She just wants to make sure you’re alright,’ Sam says a bit defensively. ‘That you’re *both* alright.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re fine?’ Sam repeats, and Dean is beginning to feel like he is sitting between a parrot and a monkey. DeeJay wrestles against him for good measure, singing something that mostly consists of “Unca Dean” and involves hands going places Dean would rather they didn’t. ‘Dean, I know this is a lot to take in.’

‘Sam, come on...’

‘No, Dean,’ Sam says, and he looks up at Dean now, determination behind those hazel eyes. ‘Look, I love you man. I love Cas, too. You’ve been through too much together for you to freak out about this or something.’

‘I’m not freaking out,’ Dean says, exasperated.

‘Not right now,’ Sam says. ‘But I know you. I know how you were before...right now things are easy because you are treating him like a friend.’

‘So?’

‘He isn’t *just* your friend, Dean,’ he says. ‘He’s more than that.’

‘One step at a time, Sam,’ Dean says quietly.

Sam goes quiet for a moment before rescuing Dean from DeeJay. He pulls the stroller closer to him with his foot, then leans over to fasten DeeJay back into it. Maverick suddenly decides DeeJay is a good source of petting too and pushes his nose into the boy’s face. DeeJay giggles and grabs a hold of Maverick’s beard.

‘Don’t do that,’ Sam says, loosening DeeJay’s grip before looking back up at Dean. ‘Y’know, me and Sarah will clear out the house if you and Cas want some quiet time together.’

Dean gives Sam a mildly horrified look. ‘I think we’re good.’

‘Okay,’ Sam smirks. ‘Don’t say I didn’t offer.’

‘I really don’t think there is any danger of that,’ Dean grumbles, getting up from the bench and untangling the dogs.

‘It might do you some good,’ Sam says.

‘Sure.’ Dean suddenly feels like there is entirely too much pressure on him to follow a path that he isn’t even sure how he got on in the first place.

## Part Five

### *In Which Sam & Sarah Winchester Are Convinced That They Know Best*

It's another three days before Sam and Sarah announce that they are going Christmas shopping. Dean and Cas are left to look after DeeJay, and Dean thinks it was really all on purpose. He has a feeling Cas suspects as much, too, if the look he had given Sarah when she had tried to hide a grin behind her husband's shoulder had been anything to go by.

The house seems quieter and more awkward when they are pointedly on their own. It's not like they haven't spent time alone together or that they don't sleep in the same bed—Dean still can't fathom how he falls asleep with his back turned and wakes up practically lying on top of Cas—but a whole day with just DeeJay is a new boundary Dean hadn't foreseen them crossing quite so quickly.

'So...' Dean says, once Sarah has handed her son off to him and disappeared off after Sam. DeeJay is still in his pajamas, and is looking at his Uncles with the same kind of curiosity Sam had done when Dad had gone disappearing for days on end and left them with Bobby.

'So,' Cas echoes with a small smile. He takes a hold of DeeJay and lifts him from Dean's knees onto his own.

'What's the plan?'

'The plan?'

'Repeating everything I say isn't helping.'

There's a smirk on Cas' face as he stands up and perches DeeJay on his hip. 'Why does there have to be a plan? Not everything has to be carefully thought out.'

'I can't believe *you* are saying that to *me*,' Dean mutters, and he watches as Cas leaves with DeeJay, probably to get him dressed. Being on his own only makes him think about how much he would really, really like to smack Sam upside the head right now.

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Dean had never really given much thought as to how much work a two year old is. He only really had experience with children where Ben had been concerned, but Ben had been ten. While he had liked spending time with his mom and Dean, he had been independent too.

Deejay is the opposite. He needs dressing and feeding and changing and constant attention, even when sitting ignoring his Uncles. Dean fusses and panics so often that Cas eventually remarks that Dean is like one of those mothers who thinks every germ is out to get her child. It earns Cas a glare and the cold shoulder for half an hour until Dean needs his help changing Deej's diaper.

Dean learns, very quickly, that the 'terrible twos' are aptly named after he has pulled numerous items Deejay shouldn't have out of his grip and chased after him every time he disappears from eye-view because he just *knows* that isn't a good thing.

Cas just seems amused by it all. He watches Dean with an odd, affectionate curiosity and any time Dean looks up at him he quickly hides a small smile and does whatever is asked of him. It is slightly disconcerting, and Dean wonders how many times he and Cas have been left in sole custody of Deejay in the past.

They get a small reprieve just after lunch when Deejay has a nap in his playpen. Dean spends most of it lying across the couch until he begins to wonder where Cas is. He had heard the sounds of tidying earlier, but now everything is relatively quiet. Feeling rather guilty for letting Cas tidy up whilst he wound down, he heads off in the direction he left him.

He finds Cas in the kitchen doing the dishes, and for a moment Dean stops in the doorway and stares. He hasn't ever really paused to appreciate Cas. He might be human now, but there is still something odd about the way he holds himself, something still undeniably *Cas* about him. He's humming a tune to himself softly, a tune Dean doesn't think he knows but at the same time instantly likes. He watches the shift in Cas' shoulders and arms as he goes about his task, and not for the first time Dean wonders how they are with each other normally.

He wonders how he is in this future, if he is greatly different or just more of the same. He wonders if he's affectionate with Cas, or whether it's all a behind closed doors thing. He wonders how close he and Cas really have become, or if they were already close and Dean had just never noticed. He wonders if what he has with Cas really is his own version of domestic, a million miles from the life he had forced himself to live when Sam was gone.

Dean pushes off the doorway and steps into the kitchen, boots echoing against the stone floor announcing his presence. Cas looks over his shoulder at him and smiles,

though he looks surprised when Dean comes to stand next to him and offers to dry the dishes he has stacked up on the drainer.

‘I don’t normally help, huh?’ Dean asks. Cas chuckles. He looks at him out of the corner of his eye and Dean takes that as a “no.”

‘When the feeling takes you,’ Cas says, and he looks back at the sink as he fishes the last of the cutlery from the basin. ‘I just...find it therapeutic.’

‘Housework?’

‘We are on the road a lot. I have no need to tidy normally.’

‘You just like to when you’re here?’

‘I have to earn my keep somehow,’ Cas says, shooting Dean a grin.

‘They’re family,’ Dean says. ‘We don’t need to earn our keep.’

Cas’ eyes roam over Dean’s face before they settle on his eyes, and he smiles softly, looking grateful if nothing else. Dean gets the feeling he has just said something that makes Cas feel happy and accepted. He tries to bury the possessive stab he feels to his gut. He wants Castiel, *his* Castiel, to get the opportunity to become this—for them both to become this—but it just feels like far too much to ask.

Dean wonders how he would ever get to this moment with his Cas. There has been mention of fights and Dean doesn’t think he has it in him to fight with Cas any more. He doesn’t want things to be messy and convoluted. He wants to see his Cas relaxed and easy like this but the grandness of the gesture, asking Cas to pick him over Heaven, seems selfish, even if the Cas of now is a testament to the happiness they could have together.

He wonders how much he shut off with this Cas, it seems like the Cas of now is constantly surprised by the little things he does, like there’s a difference in what he is doing. Did he not talk to Cas as he does now? Did he push Cas away, like he had before? Had he made Castiel’s choice a difficult one that had taken time to overcome? Dean doesn’t want his Cas to go through that at all. It’s scary, but he’d rather Castiel felt accepted rather than alienated in his presence.

The rest of their day passes companionably. They take DeeJ and the dogs for a walk to the park and spend their afternoon talking—Dean doesn’t think he has spent so long just talking about nothing and everything, ever—and entertaining their nephew. It’s comfortable, and he’s perfectly happy to listen to Cas when he isn’t being all

doom and gloom and telling Dean he has to do something he knows Dean isn't happy about. Dean wonders if removed from the Apocalypse and Heaven's archangel duties his Cas would be just as willing to talk about everything and nothing as this Cas is. He wonders if he'd welcome the opportunity.

He finds that Cas is very similar to him. He has many of the same likes and dislikes, but Dean figures that's mostly because he learned from and emulated Dean when he was finding his legs as a human. He's different in many ways, though.

Cas is smarter than Dean could ever imagine, smarter even than Sammy. He has that adorable curiosity when Dean or DeeJay say or do something that he finds interesting or amusing or even upsetting. He never quite lets go of that alien element that there has always been to him and Dean finds himself glad of that. He would hate for Cas to lose everything that makes him *Cas*.

Dean feels the possessive little worm unfurl low in his gut when he watches Cas with DeeJay. There is something heartwarming and heart-wrenching all at once, like both of them are equally as fascinated with one another. There's a part of Dean that feels genuinely sorry that Cas will probably never get the opportunity to have his own children, make his own impact upon someone and leave his mark behind on the Earth. Dean had accepted that for himself, but for someone else it always seemed such a severe sentence.

They don't really get a moment alone until after DeeJay is tucked into bed and Cas has told him a bedtime story—Dean had watched from the doorway, just out of sight, but couldn't understand a word. The tale was in Enochian and while Dean knew DeeJ didn't understand a word, the words were soothing and DeeJ fell asleep quickly.

They have dinner, an everything omelet that Dean rescues from Cas' clutches after he almost burns the bottom of the pan, and then they collapse on a heap on the couch. Dean pulls the footstool closer with the toe of a shoe and rests his feet on top of it, kicking his boots off. He heaves out a great big sigh just as Cas flops down beside him. He is sitting way too close, but Dean doesn't tell him to move over; he just rests his head on Cas' shoulder and closes his eyes. He feels Cas put his feet up next to his own, followed by the clunk of his shoes being kicked off, too.

'It wasn't so bad,' Cas says, his voice a deep rumble against Dean's cheek. He can tell Cas is grinning without even looking at him. It really should worry him more than it does that he can *tell* when Cas is smiling without even looking at him.

'I'm not used to it...' Dean grumbles, his voice muffled by Cas' t-shirt. 'Do we do this often?'

‘It is often inevitable when we spend time here,’ Cas says. ‘I don’t know if Sam and Sarah get much alone time unless Sarah’s parents take DeeJay.’

‘Her Dad still as stuck up as ever?’

‘I have only met him a handful of times,’ Cas tells him, and Dean can feel his eyes getting genuinely heavy, sleep pulling him in. He lets his weight sink against Cas. Cas is comfy. ‘I don’t think he very much approves of us.’

‘Because we’re ...’ Dean doesn’t want to say it, he can’t bring himself to, but Cas seems to know the rest of that sentence.

‘No...’ Cas says. ‘I don’t believe he’s homophobic...I think he is just very traditional, and he imagines Sam to be a bad influence on his daughter, and you even more so.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you,’ Cas says with a small laugh, and Dean feels Cas’ arm going around him, the solid weight of his cast leaning across his shoulder and down his bicep. ‘And me... he imagines me to be as bad as you.’

‘Well...you did learn from the best.’

‘I did,’ Cas says softly, and Dean knows Cas is smiling fondly at him.

He feels the brush of lips against his hairline, and then there’s just darkness. Blissful, welcoming darkness.

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Cas wakes up just as the grandfather clock in the hallway chimes nine o’clock and finds Dean still sleeping on him, arms wrapped around him possessively. Cas smiles, runs a hand through Dean’s hair and then looks up at the TV. He can’t even remember if they had been watching anything prior to dozing off, but it’s now showing Dean’s favorite show.

He smiles to himself and glances down at Dean again—he is still dead to the world, snuffling occasionally against him—and keeps on watching. One of these days he might understand what it is Dean enjoys so much about this show. As it is Cas absently watches the doctors who yell at one another and storm off and make out in closets every five minutes.

Doctor Piccolo is just telling Dr. Sexy how disappointed she is in him when Cas hears the front door open. He looks over the back of the couch as Sam and Sarah enter the living room, both of them grinning at him. He knows they think that whatever plan they had up their sleeve has worked. He knows better than to ask what the plan was. He has a feeling he won't like the answer.

'Aww—'

'Sarah,' Sam says quickly and he elbows her in the ribs. Cas looks at them curiously.

'Sorry.'

'How's your day been?' Sam asks Cas instead, giving his sleeping brother a funny look that Cas can't interpret.

'Fine.'

'How's Deej?' Sarah asks, sitting down on the armchair, Sam sits down on the arm of it next to her.

'He's been fine. He's sleeping now.'

'He misses you two, you know, when you're gone,' Sarah says quietly. 'You are two of his favorite people.'

'We try to come here as often as possible,' Cas says. It's a conversation they have had many times, but he knows that Dean still isn't ready to settle down again; he needs something to do. He needs to hunt, because it is ingrained in him to do so, and Cas wouldn't dare to change that about him. He likes that part of Dean too much.

'Yeah, I know,' Sarah says and she squeezes her husband's knee.

'Did you tire Dean out?' Sam asks, and Cas frowns at the identical looks on Sam and Sarah's faces, like this is the most adorable thing they have ever seen. Dean would be cursing them to the heavens by now if he were awake.

'Deejay did,' Cas says. 'I don't think I had very much to do with it.'

'You'll get your turn.'

'Sarah!'

‘Sorry,’ Sarah says, smiling sheepishly, hugging into Sam.

‘Did you have much luck with your shopping?’ Cas asks.

‘Yup,’ Sarah says. ‘Next week Sam is going to get a big tree and you are going to help me decorate it.’

‘The last time that didn’t turn out so well,’ Cas says, flicking a look at Dean who had just shifted against his shoulder. He doesn’t seem to be waking up any time soon, and Cas vaguely wonders if he will have to carry him up the stairs.

‘This time you will follow directions,’ Sarah says in a warning voice, pointing her finger at him.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Cas grins at her.

‘Right,’ Sarah says, clapping Sam’s knee as she looks up at him. Sam looks back at her, smiling as he leans in to peck a kiss to her lips. An ache settles into the center of Cas’ chest. He misses that closeness he had with Dean. ‘We’re going to go to bed, you staying up?’

‘Yeah, for a little while,’ Cas says. ‘Dean will wake up soon, I think.’

‘Okay. Turn all the lights off,’ Sarah says, standing up from the armchair. ‘Sammy, will you lock the doors while I take all the stuff upstairs?’

‘Sure,’ Sam says, watching Sarah as she leaves. He looks back at Cas once she has gone. ‘How’s he been today?’

‘Dean?’ Cas asks. ‘Fine...a bit quiet at times perhaps, but otherwise he is just Dean.’

‘It’s a lot for him to take in,’ Sam says. ‘Five years ago our lives were still a mess.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m thinking of going on a hunt in a few days,’ Sam says. ‘Dean might want to go with me.’

‘I think he’d like that,’ Cas says. ‘I think I’d still be a little useless, I’m afraid.’

‘Your services will be needed for tree-decorating,’ Sam grins.

‘You don’t have a me-shaped angel for the tree anymore do you?’

Sam gives him a sheepish look rather like his wife's. 'No...'

'Just keep it out of reach of Dean, won't you?' Cas asks, and Sam lets out a bark of laughter.

'Yeah...' Sam says as he stands up from the armchair. 'Night, Cas.'

'Goodnight, Sam.'

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It is nearly eleven when Dean wakes up from his doze, and his body aches from the position he had forced himself into on the couch. Cas is looking at him fondly again when their eyes meet. He gives a low, sleepy 'hey,' when Dean blinks at him and pushes himself up into a sitting position.

'Hey...' Dean says. "'time's it?'

'Almost eleven.'

'Ugh...' Dean says, getting up and stretching. He grabs the remote and turns the TV off before holding his hand out to Cas. 'Come on, let's go upstairs.'

Cas looks at his hand curiously for a moment, and then takes it. He reaches his hand out to turn off the last remaining light on the side table, and it is only once the room is bathed in darkness that he allows Dean to pull him to his feet and follows him out of the room.

They head upstairs, and Dean feels himself falling asleep again as soon as he is under the duvet. Half asleep, he's aware of Cas climbing into bed and shuffling close to him, wrapping Dean in his arms. And Dean doesn't mind it, finds he kind of likes it and for the first time in five days Dean doesn't dream of strange disembodied voices telling him he has a lesson to learn.

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They have been at Sam's just shy of two weeks when Sam corners Dean and asks if he wants to go on a hunt. Bobby's hunt has taken longer than anticipated, and he needs help tracking down a particularly vexing shapeshifter. For a moment Dean is hesitant, still feels like he is getting his legs back after too long in domesticity, and leaving Cas behind actually bothers him now. It feels like something is missing when Cas isn't there.

Sam is eager though, and determined and even insists that they will be back in plenty of time for Christmas. Dean honestly hadn't been thinking much of Christmas; it was another holiday he and Sam occasionally celebrated together if there was down time. Being here, sharing it with them now, feels a whole lot weirder than some of the other things he has had to wrap his head around.

He finally agrees once Cas says that everything is fine, he isn't quite fit enough to go back into hunting himself but it's about time he and Sam got some time to themselves anyway. Furthermore, he has a tree to help decorate because Sarah seems intent on showing him the right way to decorate a tree. Dean tells him there is no right way, and Cas just smirks at him like he knew that already.

Dean and Sam are packed up and on their way—in the Impala, thank you very much; Dean hasn't had nearly enough time with his pride and joy lately—just after lunch with all the intention of reaching Bobby in the next state over by late evening. The three and a half hour drive to Warwick, Massachusetts is a relatively short one for them by comparison to their ordinary journeys, but it is enjoyable nonetheless. Dean has missed chatting pointlessly and winding up his little brother.

By the time darkness falls, though, they are slowly running out of things to say that won't be touching on subjects Dean would rather avoid. Bobby is staying in a cabin way up in the back of nowhere, and Dean grumbles about the uneven stone road and his suspension. He cuts off Sam's point that his car may have been more practical with a glare, and Sam returns to watching the scenery pass by.

It's another fifteen minutes before they reach a little copse in the trees that has five little cabins and a sign that reads "Colfer's Hideaway." Dean parks the Impala beside an old patched up truck that he takes to be Bobby's and kills the engine.

He feels apprehensive when he follows Sam up the steps to the cabin. Even before he had been thrown into the future things between him and Bobby hadn't been quite right—he'd pushed him away for a year, it took time for these things to heal—and he isn't quite sure what to expect when he sees him now. From the look Sam shoots him when he stops at the top of the steps, he thinks that maybe things had been patched up in this timeline, that now he is being foolish.

Sam knocks on the door and moments later both Dean and Sam find themselves enveloped in a bear hug as if Bobby hasn't seen them in years. Dean notices that his hug seems to last longer, and when Bobby finally pulls away he is still holding onto Dean's shoulders and scrutinizing him.

'Alright, Bobby?'



Bobby claps Dean on the shoulder and lets the brothers into the cabin. It has a homey feel to it. There's an armchair and a little couch near the fireplace. The couch is strewn with books, and his gun is lying on the arm of the chair, just within reach. There are two twin beds, tidily made, with patchwork quilts and there's a bathroom just off from a tiny kitchenette.

Dean clears himself a space on the end of the couch and flops down on it, letting out a long sigh as he looks around the room. Bobby and Sam are still standing, looking at him in that odd way that tells him they are going to start talking about him in a minute.

'So, this is "Past Dean"?' Bobby asks, glancing at Sam as he makes his way over to the fridge.

'Past Dean?' Dean says, frowning at Sam. Sam gives him a little defensive shrug of his shoulders and a look that says "What, I had to think of *something*." Dean shakes his head.

'He doesn't seem much different if you ask me,' Bobby says, and Dean hears the clink of beer bottles before Bobby comes back over. He hands Dean one of the bottles before he sits down on the armchair and holds another beer aloft for Sam. Sam takes it with a quiet thank you and pushes the books onto the middle cushion of the couch to sit down.

'He isn't that different,' Sam says.

'I'm right here,' Dean says, taking a swig of his beer before glowering at his brother.

'Figure it's an angel thing?' Bobby asks him.

'Can't think of much else it could be,' Dean says. 'Cas can't think of anything else either.'

'Well, not many things can question his knowledge,' Bobby says, sitting back and stretching a leg out onto the coffee table. 'How is he anyway?'

'He's fine,' Dean says, and wonders at the look Bobby is giving him, like he knows something Dean doesn't. 'Why?'

Bobby makes a face. 'No reason.'

'Is this about me and Cas...?'

‘Just wonderin’ if it freaked you out and all,’ Bobby says. Both of them glance at Sam, who is pointedly staring at the label of his beer.

‘Wouldn’t it freak you out?’ Dean asks, suddenly defensive. This really is a personal question, something he’d rather not share, especially when the idea of him and Cas really isn’t scaring him so much now he’s been spending so much time with him. It is beginning to feel like the natural progression, and it’s that that scares Dean more than he’d like to admit to.

‘Yeah, I suppose it would,’ Bobby says, and he smiles as he shakes his head. ‘Honestly, boy, you got tossed through time so many damn times, it’s a wonder you know which way is up any more.’

Dean laughs and smiles and wonders why he felt so anxious in the first place.

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Dean has been gone two days when Sarah decides it is time to decorate the tree. Sam had got one before he had left and stored it in the shed to give Sarah time to clear space for it. It had been Cas’ job to lug it back inside. Sarah helped deposit it in the right place in the living room, and the remainder of their afternoon was spent decorating the tree to Sarah’s specifications.

Cas had made the mistake, on the first year that he and Dean had joined them for Christmas, of pointing out that Christ’s birthday was actually in March, and Christmas was in fact originally the pagan festival of Yule. It had earned him a nudge to the ribs from Dean and a glare from Sarah before he had been quickly told that kind of talk wasn’t allowed.

Castiel doesn’t mind Christmas. He has learned to accept that it as another holiday that humans enjoy, even though he knows Dean and Sam hadn’t celebrated it much prior to Sarah being in their lives again. If anything, he appreciates it simply because it brings them all together.

This year DeeJay seems to be more aware of what is happening. Sarah does her best to include him, and the toddler finds great glee in playing with the plastic ornament that Sarah had told him is his. DeeJay watches with the same kind of captivation Cas once had as Cas and Sarah wind lights and tinsel around the tree. It’s another thing that Cas finds fascinating about the youngest Winchester.

Cas likes spending time with Sarah. He hadn’t really known her until after Sam had married her—his allegiance to Heaven had mostly kept him out of touch with them

until he had made his decision to stay with Dean—but she is kind and accepting and fits in with the Winchesters and the patchwork family they’ve created for themselves. The moments they have spent together alone have been few and far between, though, but she still seems to have an incorrigible knack for getting under his skin.

‘Heard from Dean?’ she asks once they have finished the tree and they are sitting in the den, drinking coffee. DeeJay is ensconced between them with a sippy-cup of juice, and the dogs are at their feet, paying close attention to the cookies Sarah’s eating.

‘No.’

‘Oh.’

‘We don’t need to know one another’s every move,’ Cas says with a smile. ‘I’m giving him space. He needs it.’

‘Men,’ Sarah mutters into her coffee and Cas tilts his head curiously at her, wondering what that really has to do with anything.

‘I—’

‘You always dance around the issue, you two,’ Sarah says, waving a hand as she brushes off Cas’ protest. ‘And it doesn’t matter that he isn’t the Dean of now. You still don’t notice what’s staring you in the face.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘That he likes you.’

‘Why wouldn’t he like me?’

Sarah rolls her eyes. ‘I love you, but sometimes you are just as bad as he is. He likes you, he’s just scared.’

‘This isn’t his life, Sarah.’

‘Not yet.’

‘He’s not going to be here forever.’ At least, he doesn’t think so. ‘What would you have me do?’

He loves Sarah but he doesn’t know why she is pushing him with this younger

version of Dean. He appreciates her earlier words that perhaps they both have a lesson to learn, and while he's curious about the grander role in whatever it is that brought Dean here, a part of him is still sure Dean needs to embark on that journey with his own Cas. He misses his Dean, but he doesn't know how long the younger version will be here and how long he will have to keep his distance in fear of scaring Dean off. And if that's the case, if his continued distance from Dean serves to alienate Dean so that it carries over into Dean's timeline whenever he returns to it, Cas wonders if maybe Sarah is right, maybe he needs to reach out to this Dean more, finally cross that line between friendship and intimacy.

It's scary, and he doesn't know how he should feel about altering the relationship he and Dean have.

'You should have a date,' Sarah grins at him and Cas frowns in a dubious manner.

'A date?' Cas echoes. 'Dean and I don't date...'

'Which is why you should!' Sarah says. 'Whether it's this Dean or your Dean, you should let him know you still love him and want to be seen with him.'

'I do that, though...'

'Oh for goodness sake,' Sarah breathes. 'The day Sam and Dean come back, you should make dinner for him. Have a nice candlelit dinner.'

Cas makes a face that he learned from Dean, one that comes with the mention of sappy chick-flick moments. 'I don't know...'

'You're having it, and it will be nice,' Sarah tells him. 'And you'll both enjoy it. I'll make sure of it.'

'And you?'

'I'll get Sam and DeeJ out of the way,' Sarah grins at him. 'You two can have the evening to yourselves.'

'You aren't going to let me fight this, are you?'

'Nope,' Sarah grins at him, and Cas reluctantly admits defeat.

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It takes the three of them two days to track down the shapeshifter, and by the end of it Dean is tired out but happy that he has managed to make it through a whole hunt without someone saving his ass. They get back to the cabin at some ungodly hour after midnight and crack open three beers.

Bobby is asleep within half an hour, after complaining that he really is getting too old to chase monsters through the trees. His snores fill the little cabin, and for a moment Sam and Dean watch him in mutual amusement. It's been a good two days with Sam and Bobby. Dean has missed this.

He has, in particular, missed hunting with Sam. It's comfortable and familiar and easy. When he had spent that year with Lisa he had tried to push that all away in a desperate attempt not to think of Sammy too much. It had hurt. This, though, just him and Sam and Bobby and another monster taken care of, felt right, felt like he is right where he is supposed to be. Except ...

'You miss him, don't you?' Sam interrupts his thoughts as he passes Dean another beer. Dean hadn't even noticed him get up.

'Sam,' Dean says in a warning voice as he unscrews the top off his beer. Sam just looks at him like he really doesn't care about Dean's hatred of talking about his feelings, he's going to plough on anyway.

'Dean,' Sam says pointedly. It's that voice that says "We're talking about this whether you like it or not" and Dean gives a short sigh, shaking his head as he takes a deep swallow of his beer. 'It doesn't make you weak to admit to things. You miss him, it's obvious.'

'What's not to miss,' Dean says defensively. 'Get kind of used to him being around.'

'I mean...' Sam looks at Dean for a long moment that Dean learned years ago isn't a good thing. It's that face he makes when he knows Dean isn't going to like what he says. 'You miss *your* Cas...'

Dean doesn't answer for a long moment, nor does he look at Sam. He stares ahead, watching the dying embers of the fire Bobby had lit when they had got back. Things have been so easy and comfortable here that he has been putting off thinking about the Castiel from his present, it's complicated and messy and it's easier to watch the Cas of now rather than to think of what he had to get through to get here.

'Look, Sam,' Dean says when the silence gets to that heavy, pregnant stage that borders on awkward. 'I pushed Cas away. I pushed you and Bobby away. And yeah, I miss him. I missed you and Bobby, too, but I deserved that.'

‘Dean...’

‘I get you and Bobby, you guys have been there my whole life,’ Dean carries on like Sam hasn’t interrupted. ‘But Cas? Cas had no reason to come back. He’d dealt with enough shit from me that I would have fully accepted it if he hadn’t come back.’

‘And it scares you that he did?’ Sam says quietly.

‘He shouldn’t pick me, he has no reason to,’ Dean says, staring at his beer bottle.

‘You don’t get it do you?’

‘What?’

‘Cas,’ Sam says, and he holds Dean’s gaze when he looks up. ‘He was always fighting for you. It doesn’t matter how much you push him away, he’ll always come back. He’s that one person you’re just lucky to find in your lifetime.’

‘I don’t deserve this,’ Dean says, voice barely above a whisper. ‘I don’t deserve *him*.’

‘You’d rather he had just walked away and never come back?’ Sam asks.

Dean sighs and downs the last of his beer. ‘It’d be fair...’

‘Don’t you think he made the choice for himself as well as you?’

‘Choice?’ Dean echoes. ‘What kind of choice is it picking me over Heaven?’

‘The *right* one,’ Sam says heatedly, and Dean frowns at him.

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘One day,’ Sam says, plonking his half-finished beer bottle down on the coffee table, ‘you are going to have to get over this self-torture thing and realize that half of the sacrifice was made by you.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You let him in instead of pushing him away,’ Sam says. ‘It’s not as hard as you think it is.’

‘Sam...’

‘I’m going to sleep,’ Sam interrupts. ‘I want to get home to my family at a reasonable hour if that’s all right by you.’

‘Yeah,’ Dean says, and he watches Sam as he wanders to the nearest bed, stripping to his boxers and t-shirt before he crawls under the covers.

His snores soon join Bobby’s, and Dean is left staring at the last embers of the fire, contemplating.

### ***Revelations Come in All Shapes and Sizes***

Dean is dreaming. He is dreaming of the last time he had seen Lisa and Ben, of the routine that had become his life. He’d wake up next to her, shower, and then head downstairs to make breakfast. He’d kiss Lisa goodbye before getting in his truck and heading off to work. He’d come home from work, he’d kiss Lisa, and the three of them would have dinner and chill out until it was time to sleep and—

The images come to a stuttering stop and Dean doesn’t have to wonder what happens next. Sam and Cas come crashing back into his life and—

‘*Wondering why they managed to persuade you away so easily?*’ the now familiar voice from his dreams asks. Dean groans inwardly and looks around the darkness for some sign of someone else. He’s standing in a spotlight. Outside of that, there’s nothing.

‘I was happy...’ Dean says.

‘*We both know that isn’t true. Not really.*’

‘I was putting them in danger,’ he says. It’s an argument he’s told himself a hundred times to try and console himself that it had been all right to leave.

‘*That’s not the only reason why you let them take you out of that life.*’

‘What, then?’

‘*Come on, kid...*’

‘Have to learn myself?’ Dean asks. ‘They weren’t meant for me...my happiness lies

elsewhere?’

*‘Got it in one.’*

‘You don’t know shit,’ Dean says.

*‘I know more than you can comprehend.’*

‘So what, then...Sam, Sarah, Cas, that’s where I belong? Newsflash asshole; we can’t always get what we want.’

*‘Says who?’*

‘You think it’s Cas I want?’

*‘Dean—’* the tone of voice is bored and familiar and sounds a whole lot like Dean is trying its patience.

‘Cas?’

*‘It’s like talking to sea monkeys,’* the voice says, underlined with exasperation.

‘I don’t know what you want from me...’

*‘Common sense.’*

*Click.*

Dean wakes up to find Bobby and Sam already packed up and tidying the cabin. He briefly wonders why they both let him sleep so long, and when he had gone from the sofa to the other bed, but he lurches to his feet and stumbles off in the direction of the bathroom without so much as a hello.

He stares sleepily at his reflection in the cloudy bathroom mirror for a minute, still trying to shake the words of his dream away. His hair is a sleepy mess and his green eyes look tired as though he has barely slept at all. As he turns his back on his reflection and turns on the shower, he tries not to think about the implications of the fact he’s only started having these dreams again when Cas isn’t beside him.

They say their goodbyes to Bobby—Bobby promises to come to Sam’s for Christmas, he just needs to go back to the house first—and then head on their way. Sam takes a phone call from Sarah about an hour into the journey and is very quiet for a long while, so much so that Dean begins to feel suspicious. Sam eventually ends



the call with a soft “bye” and a small smile, and when Dean gives him a questioning look, Sam ignores him.

~\*~

When Cas makes it downstairs after his shower Sarah is coming into the kitchen laden down with grocery bags. He frees her from her weight with a questioning look, but she just grins at him before going back to the car to get DeeJay. Cas peers inside the bag nearest him and frowns when he sees wine stowed in amongst the beer.

He raises an eyebrow at Sarah when she comes back in, and she grins at him sheepishly as she hands him DeeJay and starts unpacking bags.

‘Wine?’ Cas asks.

‘Thought you might like it for tonight,’ Sarah says.

‘Neither Dean nor I drink wine...’

‘I know, which is why I got you guys beer,’ she smirks, snatching the wine from his hand and sticking it in the fridge. ‘Sam and I will have this.’

‘Did you just go shopping for tonight?’ Cas asks, sitting DeeJay on his hip and smiling at his nephew. DeeJay grins back up at him and pulls at the chain around his neck. Cas quickly takes it out of DeeJay’s grip and stuffs it back down his t-shirt.

‘What was that?’ Sarah asks suspiciously, moving past him to grab the bag with things for the fridge.

‘What?’

‘That necklace...’ she says, pausing to look at him now.

‘Nothing,’ Cas says quickly, too quickly if the narrowing of Sarah’s eyes is anything to go by. She takes a step closer to him and before he can protest, pulls the chain free from his shirt. She gives him a questioning look, then shakes her head, and goes back to putting things away.

‘Have you been wearing that around your neck the whole time?’

‘I thought he might freak out,’ Cas says defensively, tucking the chain away again.

‘It’s not like it’s a wedding ring,’ Sarah says, and she looks up to see Cas’ pinched expression.

‘No, but it’s his,’ Cas says, and he knows Dean well enough to know that he would ask for it back without knowing what the promise was behind it.

‘Right,’ Sarah says, apparently knowing when not to push after all. ‘Do you want to know what you will be having for dinner?’

‘Lunch!’ DeeJay says, nodding against Cas. Cas grins at him and Sarah shakes her head.

‘Close, but no,’ she says, packing away the last of the groceries. ‘You’ll get lunch in a minute boy-o.’

‘Is this really necessary?’ Cas asks. He had let Sarah plan and get excited, but he really does think she is making a big fuss over nothing. He and Dean have always been about the simple, quiet moments. He hasn’t had any need for any big gestures since they’ve been together. The big gestures had already been done.

‘It’ll be nice,’ Sarah says.

‘A burger and a beer is really all you need to keep Dean happy.’

‘Exactly,’ Sarah replies with a grin and Cas looks at her curiously.

~\*~

They make it back to the house later than Dean thought they would due to Sam insisting that they make a pit stop in Springfield—Dean points out that this is actually out of their way, but Sam brushes him off—to get some toy Sarah wants him to get for DeeJ. It takes Sam an hour for some reason, and by the time he returns Dean feels annoyed and convinced that the big white box Sam shoves into the back seat of the Impala completely isn’t worth it.

Sam looks pleased with himself, though, and he makes another lengthy phone call to his wife as they head back onto the highway. When Sam finally hangs up he denies acting weird and tells Dean he is being paranoid. This only makes Dean more convinced that his brother is up to something.

They pull up at the house just after four. Dean feels like they have just arrived home—not just Sam’s home, but *his* home—and he tries to ignore the sense of peace that washes over him knowing that Cas is inside. He gets out of the car and takes his

duffle bag from the trunk, and it is only once he has closed it that he realizes Sam hasn't got out of the car yet.

Frowning, he walks around to the passenger side and bends down to window level, leaning his elbow on the doorframe. Sam has slid over to the driver's side and looks over at Dean with a would-be innocent expression. Dean narrows his eyes at him.

'Sarah wants me to run over to the store and get milk,' Sam says—Dean wonders why Sam couldn't have got that at their last gas stop an hour ago when he had insisted he needed the bathroom. 'You don't mind if I borrow your car?'

'Uh, no, go ahead,' he says, straightening as Sam throws the car into reverse and starts backing out of the driveway.

As Dean makes his way up the path towards the back door, he is still wondering why Sam is acting so weird. It's only once he's through the back gate that he realizes Sarah's car isn't in the driveway, either. Things are beginning to feel horribly like a set up.

When he opens the back door, his worries are quickly dispelled by the smell of the most amazing food Dean can remember. The absence of the clatter-clack of claws across linoleum should be a warning sign, but Dean just follows the scent of food.

He comes to a stop in the doorway of the kitchen when he sees Cas setting the table; knives, forks, spoons, napkins, wine glasses, and Dean realizes he had been right about the set up. Cas looks up at him once he is done laying the last of the cutlery, and a clearly embarrassed look flits over his face before he grins at Dean.

Dean drops his bag and closes the five steps between them, and before he really thinks about what he is doing he has his arms wrapped around Cas in a bear hug and is holding him like he hasn't seen him in a year. Cas stands stock still against him for brief second, then he seems to lose all the tension in his body and returns the embrace, burying his face in Dean's neck.

Dean isn't sure how long they stand there. All he knows is that hugging Cas is really kind of nice. Cas is warm and being this close to him feels like he has just come *home*. The idea should terrify him. Instead it makes him feel content. They part when the timer on the oven goes off, and Cas pulls away from him, the smile on his face softer and more intimate than ones Dean has seen before.

'Hey,' he says quietly.

'Hey,' Dean replies, and Cas untangles himself from Dean's hold to step over to the

oven and turn it off. 'Guess we have the house to ourselves tonight?'

Cas lets out a chuckle that Dean can only just hear over the fan and looks over at Dean as he opens the oven door a crack. 'Sarah took DeeJ and the dogs to her parents for tonight.'

'I guessed as much,' Dean says. His hands are beginning to sweat and his heart is pumping just a little bit too fast and, yeah, now he's a little bit scared.

'Masters of subtlety, are they not?' Cas asks with a grin as he pulls a tray from the oven and places it on top of the stove. He turns back to Dean, who finds the image of Cas wearing oven gloves more amusing than he dare admit. It's cute, and Dean doesn't often think things like that.

'Did you make dinner?' Dean asks, ogling the two burgers that are on top of the stove. They look succulent and delicious and appear to be gently oozing cheese from the middle of them. Dean's mouth is watering.

'I had help,' Cas grins, like Dean should know he isn't a culinary master. 'Sarah left me instructions, and I followed them to a T so everything should be fine.'

'Should be?' Dean repeats, quirking an eyebrow at him.

'It's difficult to mess up burgers,' Cas says pointedly. He pulls off the oven gloves and sets them aside before opening the fridge. 'We're having shrimp cocktail to start with.'

'Can't we just skip it and go to the burgers?' Dean asks.

'We could, but Sarah would probably get cross with me,' Cas says as he brings two dishes out of the fridge, pushes the door shut with a foot, and places the dishes down on each place setting.

'Has Sarah been bossing you about the kitchen all afternoon?' Dean asks, amusement in his voice as they sit down opposite one another. Cas smiles back at him as he unrolls his napkin and tidily lays it on his lap. Dean echoes his movements.

'Pretty much,' Cas admits. 'You don't mess with a Winchester woman on a mission.'

~\*~

The meal is one of the best Dean can ever remember having. The shrimp cocktail is good, the burgers utterly heavenly along with the homemade fries and coleslaw. By

the end of it, Dean is so full he isn't even entirely sure he can fit in dessert, but when Cas uncovers a blueberry pie and cuts him a slice, Dean finds himself digging in anyway. The wine glasses go unused. Cas hadn't even offered wine; he had just handed Dean a beer and that had been that. Dean had been relieved.

They talk about what each of them had been doing in one another's absence—which Dean had always thought would be a really boring thing to do with someone every day. But to his surprise, it was fun. Dean likes listening to Cas talk and make the occasional joke—which he does in such a deadpan manner that Dean *knows* he is really the only one that gets it—and when he talks about DeeJay his whole face lights up in a way that only their nephew can compel.

'That was amazing,' Dean sighs after the last of his pie is gone. He slumps down on his chair, stretching his legs out in front of him and not minding when they bump up against one of Cas'. Cas gives him a pleased look as he finishes off the rest of his own pie.

'I will pass the compliment onto the chef,' he says depreciatingly.

'As far as I'm concerned, you made it,' Dean says. 'And it was good.'

'Thank you.'

'You aren't sick of burgers, though?' Dean asks, and he grins when Cas tilts his head at him and frowns in thought.

'I tolerate them,' Cas says. 'For you. Though this body still craves red meat.'

'That body is yours now,' Dean says, an unnamable stab in his chest at the reference that Cas' body started out as a vessel.

'Yes,' Cas says, staring at his own fingers as he flexes them as though he is making sure that still holds true. Dean reaches a hand out and takes his hand, closing his fingers around Cas' knuckles.

'Hey.'

'I know, Dean,' Cas says, and there is something hard and hurt in those blue eyes. 'Jimmy knew what he was giving up,' Dean says. 'This,' he adds, squeezing Cas' hand, 'is all yours now, it has been for years.'

'I know,' Cas repeats in a whisper, and he rubs his thumb along the palm of Dean's hand.

The air feels electric and heavy between them when Dean meets Cas' gaze. His skin feels like it is on fire where he is touching Cas, and he suddenly feels horribly aware of the fact that they are very alone.

Dean could get lost in those blue eyes, and that isn't a new thing at all. From the moment they met Cas had been able to look at him like he was gazing right through him and seeing all that he is. He just doesn't know when it changed from being unsettling to being comforting to being something *more*.

Dean clears his throat, drops his gaze and breaks the spell as he pushes his chair back. The wood screeches across the floor, making Dean wince as he reaches to pick up the last of their dishes. Cas blinks and watches Dean as he drops the dishes in the sink and starts to wash them.

'Leave those,' he says quietly, and Dean turns around to look at him.

'But...'

'They can wait,' Cas says more firmly this time. He gets up from his seat with more grace than Dean had, drops his napkin on the table before crossing the kitchen towards Dean. 'We can do that tomorrow. Tonight we relax.'

'Relax?' Dean repeats, and it sounds higher pitched than normal. Cas smiles in what Dean takes to be a reassuring manner, takes his hand and leads him through to the living room.

~\*~

Dean can't concentrate on the movie that Cas puts on. He couldn't even tell you what movie it *is*, though it does involve flashes of light and color, which he can tell purely by it reflecting off Cas' face. Dean is sitting on the couch, feet resting on the footstool. He should be comfortable but he is hyper aware of Cas. Cas is curled up on the couch beside him, his knees drawn up towards his chest and he is watching the TV with rapt attention, which is probably in Dean's favor.

Dean has been staring at him for at least ten minutes. His heart is pounding loudly in his ears, his hands are clammy and he is pretty sure he has forgotten how to breathe like a normal human being.

The thing is, Cas is close, so close, and though he should be used to that by now, this is different. This time he can't just give a stern "personal space?" and go about pushing away the feelings it raises. This time, it's his turn to make a move.

If he could just stop thinking about things it would make life so much easier.

Dean finally stops thinking when Cas looks his way another five minutes later, and there is puzzlement behind his big blue eyes. Dean leans in, getting way up in Cas' space. Cas jerks back at first, and Dean pauses as he meets his gaze. Cas blinks and Dean takes that as his okay.

He closes the space between them, Cas' breath hot on his lips for a second before their mouths meet. It's slow, careful at first as Dean gets used to the press of their lips, but then Cas kisses him back.

Cas kisses in a way that makes Dean's head spin. He teases at Dean's lower lip with his teeth before he slides his tongue inside Dean's mouth, brushing their tongues together. Dean gains confidence, hard and frantic now as he pushes up closer to Cas, bracketing Cas in against the couch as he unfolds his legs and lets Dean's chest press against his own.

~\*~

Cas quickly forgets the movie. By the time the credits roll their kisses have slowed to long, lingering presses. Dean's body is warm and familiar and heavy over his. Castiel sighs as Dean's hand slips beneath him and presses beneath his shoulder blade, bringing him closer. Dean is slow now, but sure, and it's been so long since he's had this, had Dean. Dean deepens the next kiss, lingering and drawing the moment out, and Castiel holds back a moan, one hand coming up and tangling in Dean's hair, dragging Dean in close as his hips shift up in an unconscious motion. Dean stills above him, and Castiel freezes, the semblance of intimacy shattered.

For a moment they are pressed together, simply breathing. The Dean pulls back, pushing up to place a few inches between them, and for the first time since all this started Dean stares at him, his green eyes wide with shock, and Cas can feel a blush rising on his cheeks.

Dean looks down at Cas' crotch and Cas follows his gaze. He gulps because, yeah, he's hard and Dean had been pressed up against him and those kisses had been the kind of kisses he has spent the last two weeks missing. He *wants* Dean, but caught in the moment he'd forgotten that this Dean might not be ready for that just yet.

Dean blinks at him for a breath before tentatively leaning in again. But Cas can see the sudden fear in his eyes. He doesn't want Dean to be afraid. Cas puts a hand on Dean's chest, maintaining their distance.

‘Dean.’

‘What?’ Dean’s voice is hoarse, wrecked coming from kiss-swollen lips.

‘We don’t have to do this.’

‘Cas...’

Cas pushes Dean away further now, moving so as he can sit on the edge of the couch. He looks over his shoulder to see Dean pulling back, a hurt look on his face as he meets Cas’ gaze and Cas now feels like an asshole. He doesn’t want to force Dean into anything, but he can’t deal with that hurt look knowing he put it there either. He resists the urge to take Dean’s face in his hands and kiss him until they forget about everything.

‘I thought...’ Dean starts, but he trails off, appearing to think better of whatever he had to say.

‘Dean, I don’t need your pity,’ Cas says, his stomach dropping like lead as he says it.

‘Cas,’ Dean sighs.

‘We don’t have to do anything, honestly,’ Cas says more firmly. ‘Sarah just wanted us to have a nice time together and talk. It doesn’t have to become anything else.’

He gets up from the couch, turns off the TV and looks at Dean. Dean is staring back at him like Cas has just slapped him. Cas frowns, lips forming a tight line before he turns and storms out of the room.

He isn’t sleeping when Dean finally comes upstairs. Cas lies in the dark with his back to the door. He closes his eyes tight when Dean moves closer to the bed and says his name. He listens as Dean undresses and feels the bed dip as Dean gets in, the gust of cold air he brings with him as he lifts the blankets making him shiver.

Cas hears Dean sigh, and he can feel those green eyes boring into the back of his head. But the distance between them remains. He doesn’t think he’s ever wanted to console Dean so much in his life. But he doesn’t turn over and he doesn’t sleep a wink.



## Part Six

### *Taking the Bull by the Horns*

Dean doesn't remember falling asleep, but he blinks awake a little after two and looks over to see the other half of the bed is empty. When he stretches his hand out over the vacated space, the sheets are cool, empty like Cas hadn't even been there. He sits upright with a bolt of fear, wondering where Cas has gone and he throws back the covers.

He is halfway down the stairs when he realizes it is freezing and he really should have thrown on a pair of pants. He tiptoes down the stairs, noticing a shaft of light illuminating the hallway at the bottom. He follows the light, blinking against the glare when he opens the kitchen door.

Cas is standing with his back to him, head tipped back as he downs a glass of milk. He looks over when he hears the pad of Dean's feet on the stone floor and he wipes off a milk moustache. Cas frowns at him then rinses out his glass, adding it to the pile of newly washed dishes on the draining board.

'What are you doing up?' Cas asks, his voice low and accusing and Dean *knows* he shouldn't push. He walks up behind Cas anyway, wrapping his arms around Cas' middle and hugging him.

'Couldn't sleep,' he replies, and he presses a kiss to the back of Cas' ear. Cas squirms, turning his head to try and look at Dean. He tries to loosen Dean's hold on him, but Dean fights off his hands, bringing one hand up Cas' shirt.

'Dean.'

'Cas...' and Dean *hates* how needy his voice sounds right now, but he needs this. He wants to understand, he wants *Cas*. He knows that now.

'Dean, we don't have to do this.'

'What if I want to?' Dean asks, and Cas stiffens beneath him for the second time that night. Dean steps back enough to let Cas turn around and lean his butt against the counter. Cas shakes his head, and Dean knows he has to take the bull by the horns here. This is his chance. He's on the verge of something here, something like understanding, and he doesn't want it to slip away.

'Dean...' Cas protests, but he's cut off with a kiss.

Dean kisses Cas like his life depends on it. It's hungry and desperate, and after a moment a sound escapes Cas, half-moan, half something Dean can't identify, and all the resistance seems to flow out of him. Cas kisses back with equal fervor and whatever argument he had been about to spout goes unsaid as Dean trails his hands up Cas' t-shirt, bunching the fabric up and pulling it over his head. It momentarily gets caught on Cas' cast, and the pair of them share a chuckle before Dean frees him and tosses the shirt to the floor.

Cas pushes off from the sink, grabbing Dean by the hips and pushing him backwards. Dean isn't sure where they are headed until his butt bites into the table and Cas lifts him up and pushes him back on it. There's a *thunk* as something falls over and rolls off the table, landing with a clatter but neither of them pay attention to what it is.

Dean is breathless when Cas pulls away to look at him, blue eyes searching green like Cas is expecting to see something that tells him to stop. Dean grips the back of Cas' neck and pulls him in for another kiss, letting that be his answer.

Cas pushes Dean's t-shirt up, parting their kiss to trail kisses up Dean's torso, following the edge of the t-shirt with his lips. He pauses to lavish attention on one of Dean's nipples and Dean swallows a moan. The shirt is off and on the floor seconds later, and Cas' lips are on his collarbone, sucking lightly. It hits Dean that it seems like Cas really knows him, but then Cas has always known him. Cas knows his quirks and his fears, his likes and dislikes, and now apparently, what turns him on. He realizes that this Cas really isn't that different from the Cas he knows, that this is the natural progression, and all of a sudden time doesn't matter. This is *Cas* and Dean has never wanted anything so much in all his life.

Dean's hands are everywhere on Cas that he can reach. Trailing up his back and over his torso, tangling up into his hair as he brings Cas in for another kiss. Dean arches his hips, looking for friction and finding it when his dick grazes against Cas' hip.

He lets out a sound that is almost a whine when Cas breaks the kiss and backs off, crawling backwards off the table. Dean watches as Cas kisses down the line of hair leading to his boxers, and he pinches his eyes shut when Cas nuzzles against his cock.

'Cas...'

'Lift,' Cas orders, and Dean's eyes snap open again as he plants his feet on the edge of the table and lifts his hips. Cas pulls off his boxers, pressing a kiss to the inside of Dean's thigh as he tosses the garment aside.

Cas drops his own boxers and kicks them off in the general direction of the rest of their clothes. He's leaning over Dean again in seconds, looking at him with the same kind of devotion *his* Cas does, and pulling at Dean's hips so that he is nearer the edge of the table. Dean grunts, just wanting skin on skin as he brings Cas in for another kiss. Gone are the reservations of this Cas and his Cas not being alike at all. He can see it now, feel that same determination, reverence, faith in the way Cas looks at him, touches him. It's everything Cas has ever been, but taking physical form his Cas has never been allowed to express. Their next kiss is softer, tender as Dean licks his way into Cas' mouth.

Cas pulls away from the kiss, staring down at Dean with a smile Dean *knows* without ever seeing it before is left for moments like this. Dean doesn't think he could ever get used to seeing that bare affection in Cas' eyes; it's overwhelming, and he doesn't think he can ever live up to it.

'Come on, Cas,' Dean pants, desperate to have Cas now he has figured all this out. '*Please.*'

'Are you sure?' It's barely more than a whisper, but Dean nods his head and Cas pulls back completely.

Dean watches in confusion as Cas goes rummaging in cupboards, but he gets a nice view of Cas' ass when he bends over, so he really isn't complaining. When Cas comes back over, brandishing a plastic bottle of vegetable oil, Dean frowns.

'Cas?'

'We need some kind of lube,' Cas tells him, and he flips the cap open, pouring oil liberally over his hand. Dean can't do anything but watch in fascination.

He doesn't have time to worry about what's going to happen next. Cas brings Dean's knees up and brackets himself in between them. There's suddenly a finger pressed against Dean's hole and he lets out a gasp as white-hot pain ripples through him.

Cas pauses, leaning over Dean and kissing him softly, and it's the same care and devotion Dean's always seen in Cas—his Cas and this Cas—that Dean brings a hand up and grips Cas' shoulder, trying to bring him closer. Cas keeps his finger where it is though, letting Dean get used to the sensation.

'You're going to have to relax,' Cas tells him and Dean lets out a long breath. He grabs a hold of the arm Cas is leaning on the table, his fingernails digging into the cast almost painfully, and nods.

‘I’m good.’

The second finger brings more pleasure than it does pain. Cas wriggles his fingers, curling them up against Dean’s prostate, and Dean flails a hand outwards, smacking it off the tabletop before he grabs a hold of the edge.

‘Son of a bitch,’ he mutters to no one in particular. Cas smirks at him, bending down and kissing the inside of Dean’s thigh again, closer to his balls this time, and Dean feels his cock twitch in interest. Cas pulls free to add more oil. ‘Will you just get on with it?’ he almost whines.

‘So bossy,’ Cas whispers, grinning at him. Dean watches as Cas slicks up his own cock and then pulls at Dean’s hips again, leaving oily fingerprints where bruises are probably going to raise tomorrow.

When Cas slides into him, Dean is pretty sure he utters a stream of profanities. Cas stills against him, leaning in to kiss Dean’s jaw as he hooks an arm around Dean’s hips and pulls him in closer. Dean gropes about for something to hold onto, his hand finding Cas’ bicep and squeezing as Cas begins to thrust into him.

It’s nothing like Dean imagined. Cas is gentle and keeps whispering things to him that Dean really isn’t paying attention to but soothe him nonetheless. Dean bucks his hips, opening his eyes to stare up at Cas. Cas meets his gaze and Dean doesn’t think he’s ever seen Cas looked this wrecked before.

His eyes are wide and nearly all pupil, his hair even more unruly than ever before, and there’s a sheen of sweat over his body that Dean can feel as well as see. And the two images of Cas that Dean has had in his mind, angel and redeemed man, finally click, because in this moment Cas is power and strength and might and human. It’s quite probably the hottest thing Dean has seen in his life.

Dean grunts at a particularly deep thrust, Cas’ dick rubbing pleurably against his prostate.

‘Harder,’ Dean says.

‘Dean—’

‘Harder!’

Cas does as he is told and starts thrusting harder and faster, pulling almost all the way out before slamming back in. Dean can feel Cas’ balls slapping against his ass on every inward stroke, and he moans when Cas wraps a hand around his cock.

Dean's toes curl against the tabletop and he knows he really won't last much longer. He drops the hand that had been holding Cas' bicep, brings his hand over Cas' and starts guiding him as he strokes. He resorts to unintelligible muttering as he comes, Cas' name on his tongue as he clenches around him, coming hard.

Cas tumbles over the edge with him, riding out his orgasm as he slows his strokes on Dean's softening cock. He stills against Dean once he's done, and Dean raises his hand to Cas' neck, stroking the wet curls at the nape. Dean tilts Cas' head up and kisses him more tenderly than he has before.

They lie there for a long moment, catching their breath until Dean figures that it is actually really uncomfortable lying on top of the table, with the edge biting into the backs of his thighs. He groans and starts to sit up, forcing Cas up with him. Cas pulls free from Dean, standing back to let Dean get to his feet. Dean winces and looks around the kitchen.

It's a mess, but a salvageable mess, and he and Cas do a quick clean up before Dean reaches out his hand for Cas to take. Cas takes it, smiling warmly, looking more content than Dean has ever seen him, as Dean leads him out of the kitchen.

'Come on,' Dean whispers and he hits the lights before he leads the way back upstairs.

This time they fall asleep together, Dean wrapped around Cas as the darkness wins out. He feels satisfied and satiated. He feels like he's finally home.

Dean wakes up a few hours later to Cas lying across his back with his cast pressed awkwardly between them. He extricates Cas' arm from between them—ignoring the sleepy whine from Cas—and drapes it over his middle. The nose tucked in at Dean's hair nuzzles in closer, and Dean falls asleep again.

~\*~

Castiel wakes early. He had been half-aware of Dean moving his arm from where it had been trapped between them and had woken properly when dawn broke. Dean is lying sprawled out on his stomach beside him, face turned towards him as he sleeps. A shaft of weak, white sunlight cuts across Dean's face, highlighting the smattering of freckles over his nose. Dean looks peaceful, happy in sleep, the frown Cas has seen too often is gone. Here's Dean with his guard let down, and he's beautiful.

Cas settles on his back, shifting closer to Dean and running his hands through Dean's

hair. He still has no idea how long this Dean will be here, but he thinks after last night he isn't nearly as afraid of what he might miss. He still doesn't know what lesson Dean—and possibly himself—is meant to learn. He knows that Dean *has* learned things, he knows that Dean has accepted their relationship faster than his Dean had in the past, he knows that Dean has made the first step in realizing he doesn't have to run away from his feelings.

He also knows that the past version of himself needs this Dean. He knows that if ever they are to have moments like this together, Dean and the younger Castiel need to make the rest of that journey together. Last night had been like getting his Dean back again, but there had been something new, different. This was Dean being with Cas for the first time, and Castiel remembers back to when they had first explored the physical aspects of what it meant to be together, partners in more than the hunting sense. It had been overwhelming, exploring that aspect of his humanity, and he had needed Dean as much as Dean had needed him in those moments. It had been uncertain and unexplored territory for them both, and Castiel realizes the younger versions of himself and Dean need that together, too. That physicality had been just as important in forming the bond between them as any of Dean's worrying over Castiel's newly acquired mortality or reassuring Castiel of his choice to relinquish his powers.

Cas wants the younger version of himself to have that, though. He wants for him to feel this sense of complete happiness that he does. He wants him to have Dean and not worry about whether he made the right choice. And he wonders if there is anything he can do to influence that for once and for all.

~\*~

The next time Dean wakes, Cas is lying on his back staring up at the ceiling. One hand is idly playing with Dean's hair and it tickles. Cas looks over when he feels Dean raise his head, smiles when Dean rolls onto his back and rests his head on Cas' shoulder. Cas wraps his arm around Dean, pulling him in closer.

'I hurt,' Dean grumbles against Cas' shoulder.

'In a good way, I hope,' Cas teases, and he kisses Dean's forehead. Dean grunts at that and shifts onto his side, lying flush against Cas.

They lie like that for a while, Dean breathing in Cas' scent, finding comfort in the solid warmth of him pressed against him. It's quiet for so long that Dean begins to wonder if Cas has fallen back to sleep, but then fingers start playing with his hair again, compelling a shiver. Cas slows his hand, looking down at Dean. The angle's awkward but Dean finds himself looking up into blue eyes anyway.

‘What if I can’t ever get back?’ Dean asks. It’s not really the question he wanted to ask, but it feels less dangerous. It still feels like this life isn’t his to keep, despite what has happened between them. Not yet.

‘I guess we take things in our stride,’ Cas says.

‘Do you miss him ... me?’

Cas grins at that, and it makes something squirm low in Dean’s gut. ‘You really don’t change as much as you think you do,’ he says, but gives a small sigh and his arm tightens around Dean. ‘Until last night I missed the closeness.’

‘Oh...’ Dean says, and he feels a traitorous heat flood to his cheeks. Dean hears Cas swallow, and thinks that it had been stupid question to ask in the first place. There had been signs from the beginning that he had missed the closeness he quite obviously had with the Dean from now.

‘Dean,’ Cas says. He moves the hand that had been in Dean’s hair to cup his chin, and he pulls Dean in to kiss him softly. ‘Promise me something.’

‘What?’ Dean asks, voice barely above a whisper. He is staring into Cas’ wide eyes, trying to interpret the emotion behind them. It looks a whole lot like sadness.

‘Ask me to stay.’

‘Okay...’ and Dean leans in to kiss him again. He knows it isn’t going to be like this if he ever gets back. Not at first. It takes time and change for them to get here. ‘How long?’ Dean asks, pushing himself up on his elbow to look down at Cas.

Cas tilts his head at him—an impressive feat when he still has his head pressed into the pillow—and looks at him questioningly.

‘How long for what?’

‘How long have we been together?’

‘Ah.’ Cas bites his lip and looks down at their hands as he twines them together.

‘Cas.’

Cas meets Dean’s gaze again, and Dean doesn’t back down; he wants to know the answer. ‘Three years.’

‘Three years?’ Dean repeats, eyebrows rising towards his hairline.

‘And two weeks, if you want to be nice and accurate,’ Cas points out. Dean frowns at that, doing the math in his head.

‘The day I came here,’ he says eventually. ‘I came here the day of your anniversary and acted like an asshole.’

‘They day after our anniversary,’ Cas points out.

‘Still...’

‘You can make it up to me,’ Cas grins.

‘How’s that?’

‘You can make breakfast,’ Cas tells him, and Dean thinks that is an all right forfeit.

Dean does make breakfast. He’s good at breakfast, since he got plenty of practice while he had been staying with Lisa. He makes scrambled eggs and pancakes and some bacon, too, and if there is one meal Dean likes more than cheeseburgers, it’s this.

Cas comes into the kitchen fresh from his shower just as Dean is finishing doling their food onto plates. Dean catches a flash of silver in the light of the kitchen on Cas’ chest, and he narrows his eyes, trying to see better. Cas pauses on his way to the table and looks down. He seems to stiffen for a minute, and then tucks whatever is hanging from his neck into his shirt. Dean crooks an eyebrow at that, and gets up in Cas’ space.

‘What?’ Cas asks.

Dean’s answer is to dip his finger past the neckline of Cas’ shirt and pull out the chain. His silver ring is on the end of it, the one he has worn for more years than he can remember. He blinks at the ring, rubbing his thumb over it. Relief floods through him, he hadn’t lost it after all; he’d given it to Cas. When he meets Cas’ gaze, Cas is watching him as if he is half afraid of Dean’s reaction.

‘You should wear that on your finger,’ Dean says, and he backs up, turning his back on Cas as he puts the frying pan in the sink.



When he turns back, Cas is undoing the clasp of the necklace and sliding the ring onto his ring finger. Dean thinks it looks much better there than it did on him. Cas gives him a look that is half affection and half respect as he sits down at the table and starts eating.

Dean watches Cas eat for a moment before he starts his own, thinking how much he is going to miss this when and if he ever gets back to his own life. He wonders how long it will take him and Cas to get to this stage. He thinks that maybe it could be sooner, if he could get Cas to spend more time with him. This feels like too much to lose.

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Sam and Sarah come back after noon in a cacophony of noise as the dogs charge into the house and DeeJay throws himself at Dean the moment he sees him. Dean makes things worse by tickling DeeJay, and soon the house is filled with the noise that makes it come alive. As much as Dean had enjoyed Cas' company, he had still missed his family surrounding him.

Sarah and Sam have identical grins on their faces when Dean catches their eye after things have calmed down a bit, and a part of him dreads the conversation to come. Sarah corners him in the kitchen once DeeJay has decided to attack Cas instead, and Dean resists the urge to roll his eyes.

'So...' she grins at him.

'So?'

'Nice dinner?' she asks, trying and failing to hide a knowing smile. Dean narrows his eyes at her.

'It was great, thank you,' Dean says, folding his arms across his chest. Sarah grins at him.

'And?'

'And?' Dean echoes.

'What about after?'

Dean does roll his eyes at that and quickly glances at the kitchen table before he looks back at Sarah. She raises an eyebrow at him and gives him a look that says she isn't going to back down. Dean thinks it's wholly unfair that Sam managed to find a

girl version of himself for his wife.

‘I’m not telling you!’

‘Ah ha!’ Sarah says triumphantly. ‘That means something happened!’

‘No it doesn’t!’

‘It does.’ Sarah grins and she bounces up to him and envelopes him in a hug. Dean frowns and tentatively hugs her back. ‘I’m so proud of you!’

‘Jeez...’ Dean mutters and he pulls Sarah away, holding onto her shoulders as he looks her in the eyes. ‘Do not make a big deal out of this.’

‘Fine,’ she says, but Dean doesn’t trust that glint in her eye. She ducks out of his grip and dashes out of the kitchen.

‘Don’t tell Sam anything, either!’ he calls after her, but he knows it is utterly pointless.

Dean sighs as Cas comes into the kitchen, DeeJay perched on his hip and babbling happily. Cas glances down the hallway as Sarah disappears, then looks back at Dean and grins.

‘Did you just get the third degree?’

‘I just got attacked,’ Dean says with a frown. He smiles as his attention turns to his nephew, though, and he lifts his arms to take DeeJay from Cas. Cas hands him over, smiling as Dean lifts the toddler into the air. ‘Please promise me you won’t be a gossip queen like your parents, huh?’

DeeJay giggles at him and squeals as Dean spins them around.

‘I think two years old is a little young to be making promises like that,’ Cas says, meeting Dean’s gaze when Dean turns back to face him and holds DeeJay close.

‘Yeah?’ Dean says, draping an arm over Castiel’s shoulder and pressing a kiss to his temple. Cas makes an amused face at that and leans away to look at him. ‘Well, I guess we’ll just have to come around here more often and make sure we rub off on him.’ Right then, he makes a promise to himself that when he gets here, whether it’s now or he has to wait five more years when he goes back to his own time, he’s going to make that happen.

‘I think I can live with that.’

Dean and Cas spend a relaxed afternoon together. They take the dogs for a walk down to the park. It’s a hundred miles away from the life Dean is used to, but he thinks he can get too used to this. The thing that makes this future, this version of a life that isn’t his yet so much different from the others is that this one fits him. He doesn’t have to change who he is to fit this odd version of domesticity he has with Cas. Cas knows everything about him; his weaknesses, his strengths and he’s stayed beside him in spite of those. He knows that at the end of the day, once the holiday is out of the way, he and Cas will be back on the road and they’ll be hunting again and things will just *fit*.

He knows that if he ever does get back, things will be difficult; *his* Cas isn’t like this yet. In the present, Cas is still torn. There’s another two years before he and Cas finally become *something* He doesn’t know if he can keep them on this path, but he knows he’s going to try and screw things up completely. He had once told Cas to never change, but this time he wants him to; this time he can see the good that comes out of the future, instead of all the bad if only he stands by Castiel.

They are halfway back to the house when Dean decides to break the companionable silence between them.

‘Do we ever...’ Dean starts, looking intently at their entwined fingers as though they fascinate him. He is actually surprised that he has managed to hold Cas’ hand the whole time they’ve been walking without feeling weird about things. He can feel Cas looking at him in that curious way he knows too well.

‘What?’

‘Do we ever talk about having a family...kids? However we’d do that?’ Dean asks, looking up to meet Cas’ gaze. Cas gives him a small smile that answers his question.

‘It would mean giving up this life,’ Cas says and Dean *knows* it’s because he has said the same thing to Cas in the past.

‘Sam didn’t have to,’ Dean argues.

‘Sam has Sarah to come home to,’ Cas says carefully. ‘You and me? We’re all about the hunting lifestyle.’ Dean is quiet, and Cas tightens his grip on Dean’s hand. ‘You’d give all that up?’ and there’s a flicker of something behind his eyes that Dean momentarily thinks is hope.

‘For you and a kid like Deej? I think I could.’

Cas looks slightly torn, which surprises Dean—isn’t this Cas all about their weird hunter-style domesticity and being an awesome uncle to a kid who dotes on him?

‘You know what you said to me when I asked you this, the first time it was ever brought up?’ Cas says, and Dean shakes his head, though he has a feeling it isn’t good. ‘You said, “the only way out of this lifestyle for a hunter is you die.”’

‘I think we’ve both died enough, don’t you?’ Dean asks quietly, and Cas stares at him for a long moment. Dean can see the sadness there, like Cas is seeing that he isn’t as much like *his* Dean as he originally thought.

‘Dean ...’ Cas sighs. He looks past Dean to watch the dogs for a few steps, before he looks back at Dean. ‘I didn’t think that *now*, in this time, you would ever hear of it. We argued over this, you were adamant about not bringing a child up in this world of ours.’

‘I get it,’ Dean says, feeling a little defeated, but he knows it sounds more like himself to not want children, to not want his legacy to be about the hunt. ‘I just feel like we should leave our mark on the world in some way.’

Cas smiles his warm, fond smile that *does things* to Dean.

‘Maybe we make our mark some other way?’ But Cas’ voice sounds thick, and Dean thinks he may be trying to convince himself more than Dean.

They end up in the den just before dinner. Despite Dean’s insistence that he doesn’t like chick flick moments, he finds himself snuggled up with Cas on the couch, kissing him. He feels like they are in that early stage of a relationship where he can’t keep his hands off Cas, but Cas doesn’t seem to mind. He kisses Dean back, smiling warmly at him before Dean sighs and deepens the kiss.

‘Hey.’

They pull apart at the interruption and Dean feels a blush rising from his toes right up to his hairline. He gulps as he looks up at his brother standing in the doorway and shoots him one of those “alright, you caught me” smiles. He coughs and disentangles himself from Cas as Sam grins at him like the cat that got the cream.

‘I’m going to help Sarah with the dinner,’ Cas says and he leans in to kiss Dean again before he stands up. Dean watches in mild horror as Cas winks at Sam and says. ‘I

like past-Dean.'

'Yeah,' Sam smirks, and he claps Cas on the shoulder as he walks past him. Sam steps into the room and flops down on the couch beside Dean. 'Looks like you two are hitting things off.'

'Sam,' Dean says gruffly, he really doesn't want to talk about this, especially not knowing that Sarah has already filled Sam in.

'Come on, Dean,' Sam grins, clapping his brother on the knee. Dean frowns at him. 'It's nice to see you relax. You're too uptight, sometimes.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' Dean says, but Sam's smile doesn't falter.

'Things were different back then,' he tells him. 'We've changed.'

'When Sarah came along?'

'When we met Sarah that second time,' Sam says. 'I started thinking how unlikely it was that I would meet someone twice on this job that isn't a hunter themselves, or a demon.'

'Yeah.'

'Sarah accepts me for who I am. She knows everything I've done—*everything*—and she understands my choices and the need to hunt,' Sam goes on. 'And she grins like an idiot every time I come home, and who doesn't want to come back to that?'

'She's a good woman, Sam,' Dean says. 'I always thought that.'

'She's my best friend as well as my wife,' Sam says and Dean suddenly realizes where this conversation is going. 'I think that's important, y'know?'

'Because me and Cas were friends before...' Dean trails off, waving a hand in the air as though that will be enough explanation. Sam smiles at him.

'It makes things easier,' Sam says. 'You just need to let things happen and stop pushing him away.'

'You're such a girl sometimes, Sam,' Dean says, shaking his head at him. Sam smiles and does one of those annoying shoulder rolls.

'Jerk.'

‘Bitch.’

~\*~

The evening passes without much event and, thankfully, without any more Meaningful Talks. Dean thinks that, finally, everyone has had enough of worrying over him and telling that he just needs to let things happen and stop throwing up roadblocks.

When he sinks down on the bed later that night, it is with a mixture of exhaustion and awkwardness. He feels slightly nervous as he listens to Cas moving, undressing behind him on the other side of the bed. He can’t help but wonder if things are different now, if there’s something expected of him. He jostles with the bed when it dips as Cas puts his weight on it.

‘Dean?’

Dean glances over his shoulder at him, and then runs a hand over his face. ‘I...er...’

‘Dean.’ It’s said much more affectionately this time around, and he feels the bed shift as Cas moves closer. He gives a jolt of surprise as Cas comes up behind him. Cas’ thighs frame Dean’s butt, his chest presses against Dean’s back as Cas wraps his arms around him and rests his chin on Dean’s shoulder.

‘Not everything has to be about sex,’ he says quietly, his lips brushing the shell of Dean’s ear. It compels a shiver, and Dean is pretty sure Cas is teasing him.

Cas brushes his lips against Dean’s neck, kissing a slow trail up behind his ear. Dean knows he learned that from him, because he used to do that to Lisa and Cassie and here’s the proof that he has done it to Cas, too. He tries not to think too much about the implications of him teaching Cas everything he knows.

Dean has to bite back a groan, but if the curl of Cas’ lips against his neck is anything to go by, the attempt was probably unsuccessful. Cas runs his hands up Dean’s chest for a moment before he grabs the edges of Dean’s over shirt. He pulls away from Dean as he removes the garment and tosses it over towards the pile of their clothes on the other side of the room.

Cas presses his chest into Dean’s back again, wraps an arm loosely around Dean’s waist. Dean tilts his body to the side, twisting to look up at Cas. He sees affection and mischief behind those eyes before Cas leans in to kiss him. It’s a look Dean wants to see more of.

Dean kisses back, the angle slightly awkward but he slides his tongue in against Cas' and deepens the kiss. He twines his fingers with the hand Cas still has wrapped in plaster cast while he feels the arm around his waist move, fingers tickling a hot trail along his middle. Cas stops at Dean's fly and pops the buttons with practiced ease. Dean breaks the kiss.

'This feels a whole lot like sex to me,' he says quietly, and Cas grins at him in a devious way Dean has never seen before. He likes it a lot.

'Down boy,' Cas whispers in his ear and he presses a kiss to Dean's temple before he pulls away. 'Jeans off.'

Dean raises his eyebrows at Cas, and he stands up to pull his jeans off. Cas watches him with a smirk, then pulls the covers back, patting the bed beside him. Dean crawls in, lying in the middle of the bed. Cas pulls the covers over them and lies face to face with Dean, smiling as he drapes his arm over Dean's middle.

Cas leans in to kiss Dean softly. Dean closes his eyes and leans his forehead against Cas'. He can feel Cas' breath warm, and minty on his face, and he presses in closer. He could get used to this.

'Dean...'

'Shhh...'

Dean thinks he hears Cas whisper "I love you" and the press of lips to the corner of his mouth. He thinks he might have murmured a reply, but he's suddenly so sleepy. All he sees is darkness.

### ***The Space Between***

The pain is the first thing Dean is aware of. It starts somewhere right in the middle of his cranium and pushes out in white-hot waves. He groans as he opens his eyes and he finds himself alone. He is lying sprawled out on the floor, darkness the only thing he can see beyond the spotlight centering on him.

He's dreaming.

'Well, you finally worked it out,' comes the familiar drawl that now accompanies his dreams. Dean knows that voice; he thinks he almost has it.

‘What?’ Dean says. He picks himself up off the ground, swaying a little as his head spins. He blinks out at the darkness. ‘Y’know, you could be a hell of a lot less cryptic and show yourself.’

He didn’t know who he had been expecting, but it is the last person who steps into the spotlight. The archangel is shorter than him, brown hair flopping down to hazel eyes that are filled with mischief. He has a knowing smile on his face that Dean has, for too long, associated with—

‘Gabriel?’

‘Me,’ Gabriel grins, holding out his hands in a “you got me” gesture.

‘But...but you’re dead,’ Dean splutters, brow furrowed in confusion, and he just can’t shake the headache.

‘Obviously not,’ Gabriel says dryly. ‘You think God only favors Castiel?’

‘God...’

‘Sent you here to get you to learn something,’ Gabriel says. ‘I have to say, you learned it quicker than I thought you would.’

‘Screw you.’

‘Maybe later, big boy,’ Gabriel smirks. ‘This was about Cas, not me.’

‘Cas...?’ Dean scowls. ‘What the hell did you do to him?’

‘Not a thing,’ Gabriel says. ‘It was all you.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you,’ Gabriel says, rolling his eyes and pacing around the circle. Dean follows him with his eyes.

‘So...you sent me here to get me to see how things could be?’ Dean asks. ‘With Cas.’

‘How they *will* be,’ Gabriel insists, stopping in front of Dean once more. ‘It’s ... how things need to unfold.’

‘Says who?’



Gabriel tilts his head at that, a gesture that is more scathing than the innocent, curious way Cas does it. Dean knows the answer and Gabriel doesn't seem at all inclined to say it.

'So you threw me into the future?' Dean supplies, and Gabriel shrugs and gives him a little nod like it was nothing. 'What about the Dean from now? What did you do with him?'

'Conveniently out of the way,' Gabriel tells him, then gives Dean a bored look at the glare he receives. 'Look, someone had to be in your unconscious body while you were here. This isn't astral projection, y'know.'

'Unconscious?'

'You won't wake up until I make you wake up.'

'How long have I been out?'

'See for yourself,' Gabriel answers and clicks his fingers.

### ***The Beginning***

Dean wakes with a jolt. His head is still throbbing, but as he blinks back the sleep it fades. He lies there for a moment, closing his eyes once more, noting the lack of warmth to his side where Cas should be, and thinks that if he really is back in his own time, he should hurt like hell. He doesn't. He lets out a groan as he sits up and he stops when the figure at the end of his bed looks around at him. His breath leaves him all in one go.

Castiel is looking at him with wide, worried eyes. His trench coat is bunched up in his fists at his sides and Dean instantly knows he is back where he's supposed to be. This Cas isn't the same one he fell asleep beside.

'Cas...'

Cas is on his feet and at Dean's side in a second, palm pressed to Dean's forehead. His palm is warm against his forehead, and Dean leans into it for a moment. But then the hand falls away, and Dean looks up, questions on his lips.

'I couldn't get you to wake,' Castiel says, letting out an annoyed sigh. 'I healed

everything else, but you wouldn't wake up.'

'Gabriel wouldn't let me,' Dean tells him, and Cas' brow furrows even further. Dean grabs Cas' arm and pulls him down to sit on the edge of the bed. Cas acquiesces, staring at their hands when Dean twines their fingers together. His fingers flex in Dean's grip, unfamiliar and surprised at the contact. 'How long have I been out?'

'A day,' Cas says quietly, glancing over at the other bed. Dean follows his gaze. Sam is lying sprawled out on the bed, limbs akimbo and a book on his chest like he just fell asleep there. He looks worried even in sleep, and Dean knows that's because of him. Dean's been out for a whole day, yet it's really been so much longer. He knows he will never get used to the difference in the passing of time between Heaven, Hell, the Past and the Future. 'I'll wake him.'

'No, let him rest a bit,' Dean says, and he sinks back against the headboard. He feels like he should ache from head to toe, but he feels nothing. He feels nothing but Cas at his side and Cas' cool fingers against his. Cas' fingers brush lightly over Dean's, and his eyes drop to their entwined hands then. A moment later, he pulls his hand free.

Dean watches as Cas reaches into his pocket.

'I found this,' he says. 'Behind the bar...in the alley. You really took a beating, Dean.'

He holds his hand forward, opens his fist and Dean's staring at his silver ring. His gaze automatically flicks to his hand, noting the bare finger.

When Dean doesn't make a move to take it, Cas hesitates only a moment before lifting it up, almost presenting it to Dean. Dean looks at it for a moment, his throat suddenly thick, and he can't take his eyes away from Castiel's face. He hadn't realized how much he had truly missed him, until now.

Dean shakes his head. 'Why don't you keep it?'

Cas' eyes widen at his words.

'Hey, if you drag it back to Heaven with you,' Dean says, 'at least I'll know you have to come back and return it, right? You won't be able to flitter off and not come back.'

'Dean—'

'Seriously, Cas' Dean says. 'I want you to have it.'

And Castiel glances at the ring, his hand slowly closing in a fist around it, before he glances up again. He doesn't quite meet Dean's eyes as he slips the ring back into his pocket.

'Thank you,' he says, his voice barely a whisper, but Dean hears him anyway.

Dean nods. 'Yeah.'

'I should go,' Cas says quietly, and starts to stand.

Dean reaches for Cas' hand again, halting his retreat. 'You can't stay?' Dean asks.

'I have duties...' Cas protests, shaking his head. He's staring again at their entwined hands.

'I'd like you to. Just...' Dean pauses, and Cas looks up to meet Dean's gaze. There's a little shock in his eyes. 'Please?'

Cas smiles, a ghost of one that's no more than a curving up of his lips, a slight easing of the lines on his brow. But Dean looks closer, and he can see the similarities between this smile and the private smile that Dean's been seeing for the past two weeks. Given a little time, Dean doesn't doubt one will morph into the other. He wonders if it will be the same, or if this Cas will be a little bit different when all is said and done.

Castiel's fingers tighten around Dean's, and he settles back down on the bed, anxious tension easing from his shoulders.

'Of course.'

'Thanks, Cas.'

Silence settles around them, and it's comforting. Castiel hasn't let go of his hand, yet, hasn't moved, and Dean closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in. The closeness he has with Cas now isn't the same as the closeness he had become used to in the past two weeks, but it's a start. He feels like he's made a first step, and he knows it couldn't have been this easy for the future version of himself. This is *his* Cas and he can't wait to see more of him.

'Did Gabriel hurt you?' Cas' voice breaks the silence.

'No...' Dean tells him. He opens his eyes. 'He just wanted me to see something.'

Castiel nods, appearing to know not to push any further, knowing that some things are best kept private. And this is one of them.

‘Hey, Cas?’

‘Yes, Dean?’

‘When it comes down to it...’ he starts and he frowns as he thinks on what to say next, knowing this is difficult, too hard to really say. But he made a promise, and he’s going to keep it as best he can. ‘When you have to make a choice...I’ll be here. Whatever you choose.’

Castiel’s eyes widen for a moment, and his lips part as if he’s about to ask Dean what, exactly, he means. There’s a slight shift, a tiny movement where Castiel fiddles with the hem of his trench coat, and Dean frowns at the uncertainty there. Like Castiel realizes he’s been caught in a secret, one he’s not ready to give up yet.

Dean shifts closer to Castiel on the bed, pressing his leg just close enough to Castiel so that Cas can feel him there. Castiel’s lips close, and he looks stunned before a soft look comes into his eyes, half-disbelieving and all affection, and Dean sighs in relief.

‘Thank you, Dean,’ Cas says, and his voice is soft and tinged with gratefulness.

‘You’re welcome.’

They smile at one another and Dean can see it. He can see here, now, is where everything starts. It should terrify him.

Instead, it kind of excites him.

~\*~

Castiel doesn’t leave until much later. He sits with Dean until Sam wakes up, and then tells them he really must be on his way. He doesn’t want to. There isn’t a single part of him that wants to go back to Heaven and deal with Raphael and his other brothers who view him as something weak.

He hadn’t moved from Dean’s side the whole time Dean had been unconscious. And he spent it knowing that he should return to Heaven or fear Raphael’s wrath. He couldn’t though. He couldn’t leave Dean’s side until he knew he was all right. He didn’t care what Raphael and the others thought. He couldn’t fight the feeling in his gut that told him that he was supposed to be with Dean.

He can't imagine what Gabriel has shown Dean, and part of him knows it isn't his place to ask. But he can't help but be curious at the shift in Dean, at the sudden furthering of their friendship by something as simple as Dean holding his hand.

Cas puts his hand in his pocket and draws out Dean's ring, staring at the little circle of silver resting in his palm. He hadn't known what to say when Dean had told him to keep it. It felt like too much, like a grand, wordless gesture. Cas knows that Dean doesn't give up his possessions easily, and certainly not to people he doesn't *care* about. The smile that had followed the insistence that he keep the ring is a smile Cas can't quite remember seeing before on Dean. Thinking back to that smile does something to him he can't quite define, something that makes his stomach clench and his chest feel too tight. It's not a bad feeling, and he kind of likes it.

Cas slides the ring onto the same finger Dean had worn it on, looking curiously at his hand. It doesn't feel as odd as he thinks it ought to.

He lets his hands drop and balls them into fists at his sides and heads back to Heaven. Any worries he had about angering his brothers by choosing to be at Dean's side are strangely gone.

He has already made his choice.

## Epilogue

*The world isn't the same without Dean Winchester in it. It may have only been a day of absence but it was telling enough in Castiel's reaction.*

*The figure behind the curtain had been watching both of them. He had watched Castiel while the young angel had held vigil at Dean's side the entire time the hunter had been unconscious, and he kept an eye on Dean as he slowly learned the truth. As they both learned the truth. And before that he had been watching Dean when he had pushed himself to be someone he wasn't. He had gained a fondness for Dean in his dealings with him, and it is a relief to see him finally accept that he couldn't change who he is, and realize that he shouldn't have to.*

*Without Castiel, Dean's life had become about the dull every day, the Apple Pie Life, the white picket fence, the job in construction. It had been everything but him. He had let himself be dragged back into the hunting life by the two people he had been convinced that he would never see again.*

*It had taken being transported to the future and shown what he could have in order to appreciate what he does have. It isn't perfect by any means but it is his and it is comfortable and it is home.*

*The figure turns as someone joins him, ripples of darkness and lightness surrounding him as a familiar figure comes to join him. The second figure steps closer, looking through the curtain at the vision the first is watching.*

*It's Dean Winchester and Castiel, sitting on Dean's bed. They are smiling, talking, and the second figure thinks it took long enough. He turns to look at the first figure.*

*'What now?' the second figure asks. The first looks at him out of the corner of his eye and smiles warmly.*

*'We wait,' He says. 'I am sure you can think of some way to pass the time.'*

*'I vote for girls and ice cream floats.'*

*The first figure grins, blue eyes dancing. 'I like the way you think.'*

*'Well, I had to get it from somewhere,' the second figure drawls, and he casts a glance down at his brother before he turns his back. 'He'll be alright?'*

*'Castiel will be fine,' the first figure smiles.*

*'Good.'*

*'Let's go,' the first figure says, and he waves his hand before he turns to his companion, closing the curtain on the scene below.*

*He already knows what is going to happen. Or, maybe if he's lucky, Dean Winchester will find some other way to surprise him and surpass his expectations once again, make things a little better than what He can foresee.*

*He smiles. He wouldn't be very surprised at all.*

## Author's Notes and Thanks

### *Notes*

1. First, I don't think this story would have been fleshed out quite this way if I hadn't been reading Neil Gaiman's 'American Gods' at the time. Though my fic has nothing to do with it, the book served as a source of inspiration and if you haven't read it, I completely recommend that you do.

2. Picking what kind of car Sam had was bloody difficult! First off I thought a Dodge Nitro would be suitably large (whut?! It's a big car in this country!) but when I said that to Dee, I got a 'No...' and this started us on hunting for an appropriate truck for Dean to turn his nose up at. It was with the help of Flying\_monkees I picked a GMC Yukon. It looks pretty neat and Sam would love it, seeing as it's a hybrid ;)

3. Why Sarah you ask? Well...I loved Sarah from S1 and when it became clear Jess just wasn't going to work, I wanted someone we had met before and someone who just fits Sam. I think she does. I had such fun writing her.


4. The s6 spoilers almost derailed me on this story, to be honest. I started thinking nothing would work, but then I have very sensible people at my aide who smack me upside the head when I say foolish things and tell me that spoilers don't even matter for the dang story. In the end, the time jump worked well with it I think.

5. Why bring Gabriel back? Why the heck not? Also, I really loved the idea of someone in the background thinking of Cas and Dean and their happiness. I'm a sap that way. And Gabriel was definitely the coolest archangel.

6. Who are the figures behind the curtain? Well...I am pretty sure you guessed that already, but if not, speculate at will ;)

### *Thanks*

Pull up a chair, this is a long one. Comfy? Here goes...

The first, and possibly biggest, thank you goes to  [flying\\_monkees](#) who has been on this with me every step of the way, listening to all my whining and agonizing and doubts and telling me to just bloody well get on with it. She's been there since this was just a daft little idea I had about Dean experiencing a half-domestic life with Cas,




back when S5 had just started but I couldn't make up my mind how to do it and I had Sam with Jess and I just confused myself with thoughts of Djinn and other such monsters. The idea fell to the wayside.


Thankfully though, the Dean Cas Big Bang started up and I thought I could finally do this fic. I decided to go with angels rather than Djinn, I decided Sarah was a much better match for Sam in this fic (what with the whole Jess-is-dead dilemma and I really, really loved Sarah).


She's been holding my hand for a long time, I honestly don't know how she puts up with me but I love her for it. Secondly, she read over this fic and countless pieces of it in order to quell my worries and kick me up the butt for worrying in the first place (and beta-ed the bugger too).


So yes, thank you, for being my sounding board, my rock, and mama bear. Seriously, I don't know what I'd do without you.

Wibble a lot, probably. Not get anything written. Sounds about right, no?

The second goes to  [the\\_ninth\\_bow](#) who did a wonderful, wonderful job with betaing this monster. She sorted out all my Britishisms (and laughed when I used words like 'kerfuffle') while saying she wanted a version with the Scottish words in too (someday, perhaps ;)). She has been fantastic both in smoothing off the edges of this story and convincing me that I really do think about things to the point of confusing myself. She also encouraged me to do a little bit better and expand on things. Really, you're awesomesauce, I love you!

Third to my artist ( [888mph](#)) who not only made me lovely art but encouraged me to keep bloody well writing when I started thinking the whole damn thing was daunting. She's been awesome, I am glad to have met her and if it hadn't been for the Big Bang, I probably wouldn't have. And yes, I realize I am insane, thank you ;) <33

The fourth humungous thank you goes to  [i\\_rise\\_inside](#), the Dean to my Cas, the most awesome person in the universe who put up with my panicking when I didn't think I was going to get picked and then on top of all that made me really awesome artwork. I love you hun!

A big, big, thank you to  [laiksmarei](#) who let me camp in her house for a week and a half, put up with me writing all day, helped with choosing what kind of car Sam

drove, sorted out my summary, encouraged me to keep on going and kept asking how long it was going to be. Long, Deepee. It's long. (I believe I said I thought it might get to 30,000 words when I finished? Yeah, way off. Almost double that, in fact.)

Also, a HUGE thank you to my Flist, who put up with all my posts about the Big Bang, who cheered me on every step of the way and encouraged me and generally made me feel good about what I was writing. I don't know what I would have done without you lot either. You are amazing and I am glad to call each and every one of you my friends.

And lastly to you, the reader, for reading my story; I hope you enjoyed it! And to the Mods of the DeanCasBigBang, who brought this awesomeness into the world, it's been a fun ride, I look forward to the next one!