

If I'd only known

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If I'd only known

by [ifdogsworepants](#)

Summary

Castiel Novak has recently become a professor at Stanford, trying to escape his unfortunate past at Harvard, when he meets Sam Winchester, as law professor whom his office neighbours. Cas is almost starting to feel at home, when Sam's elder brother Dean, comes to town with no job, no money, and no place to stay.

A slow-burn, in which Cas is lonely and really appreciates and friendship he can find though he doesn't receive any from Dean, who appears to hate his guts (At first). Let's just say, they've both got a truckload of shit to work through before they can even dream of being good enough for one another. At first you could probably argue Cas had a crush on Sam, but personally, I think he's just really desperate for friendship.

Notes

Just so you are aware, I'm British, and my only experience of Uni comes from the ones in the UK, so if the college/uni stuff seems like a weird mismatch of British and American education that's why. I thought about having the story take place in the UK, but the temptation of indulging in Stanford Professor Sam was too tempting to be passed up.

If you have any questions, feel free to post in the comments or whatever. I have about 10,000 words of this written so far, so I expect to be posting fairly regularly for the first few chapters, every 4 days or so, but that may change in the future.

Enjoy!

First day at Suck-Ford

“It definitely isn’t in this building, ‘E’ is engineering.” She said flatly, pointing to the room number with her stiletto topped finger like she was explaining the alphabet to a child.

Cas sighed and rubbed a hand down his face before dropping his hand back to his side again; much as he was frustrated he checked himself, reminding himself the receptionist was only doing her job, however poorly. “Yes, however, I’m a theology professor, I have no business in engineering.”

This was Cas’ least favourite part of following work to a new college. He loved following the burgeoning research in his field, and meeting new colleagues with interesting ideas on previous theories, but becoming familiar with a whole new campus with new buildings, new offices and new students tired him. He wanted to find his office quickly and settle in out of the prying eyes of new students interested in who this new professor was and other academics not yet familiar with him or his work. “Besides I went to engineering, and they told me very plainly I was based over here instead. In my new office, E8.” He explained, exasperated.

As he spoke, the doors behind him entering the building opened, with a gust of the cold breeze outside following it. The receptionist’s eyes shot up to look up, as Cas felt a presence behind him.

“Professor Winchester, how are you today? How is Jess doing?” She chirped brightly, her demeanour having entirely switched from the impatient crone who had appeared to Cas.

“She’s wonderful thank you Mary. Forgive me, you’re looking for E8?” The voice, deep but with a gleaming quality to it boomed, as Cas felt a tap on his shoulder.

Cas spun around to face the man before him, however found himself at a loss when he had to crane his neck slightly up to see his face. Mr Winchester stood taller than Cas, taller than most men, but had a kind face, with wide excitable eyes, and straight brown hair to just above his massive shoulders. Cas supposed he was rather handsome. His brown blazer did little to

hide his huge frame, the fabric appearing too tight in places. His tie, purple with small embossed yellow blobs- Pikachu's, Cas recognised, failed to match any of the muted browns he wore, standing out horrendously. Cas found himself feeling oddly small next to this behemoth, squaring his shoulders slightly to account for his markedly thinner form.

“Yes, but I’m afraid I am having some trouble finding it.” Cas remarked, throwing a sly look to the receptionist who was still beaming up at Professor Winchester.

Professor Winchester raised a huge paw for Cas to shake, a wide grin spreading across his young face. “You must be Professor Novak! My office is just beside yours, I can show you to it, it’s just upstairs.” Cas noticed a slight red tinge rise in the receptionist’s face as she hurried with filling away some papers.

“Please, call me Castiel, and that would be very helpful of you.” Cas smiled, eager to find his new office, shaking Professor Winchester’s hand. He had a surprisingly pliant handshake, despite having such large hands.

“Right this was, Castiel.” Professor Winchester withdrew his hand to point up the sprawling staircase which lay to the left of reception. They began heading up the staircase when Professor Winchester turned to Cas. “I’ve heard amazing things about your work within your old department, Harvard, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ah yes, his work at Harvard. His chest swelled slightly with pride, thinking fondly of his old place of work. He’d once been a leader of his field, which largely revolved around the deities of eastern religions. His work was unrivalled, becoming a household name for academics quickly. He’d hosted seminars all over the world on his revolutionary theories. Departments around the country had started including his work within the mark-scheme, making awareness of his work an essential to gain one’s degree. Cas stopped himself. He had to stop thinking so fondly of Harvard and his work. Stanford was a new slate. A new chance to pull his names out of the gutter, now that his work had fallen out of favour.

His career at Harvard was everything he had always wanted. The head of the theology department, Chuck, was an old friend of Cas’ and had made his job extremely comfortable, allowing him all the privacy he required to research in comfort. Cas had known that if he couldn’t complete a departmental report on his findings by a certain date or couldn’t attend a seminar he was invited to speak at, Chuck would argue his case and give him everything he

needed to carry on working. And work he did, becoming arguably one of the world's most influential experts in his field.

However, on the eve of his fourth year within the department, Cas was told Chuck had transferred to a new institution overseas, and new management for the department came in. This was where Cas' fall from grace began. Naomi, a cunning and dangerous woman from an English college took Chuck's place. She despised Cas and his rule-breaking attitude. Cas had always been one to bend the rules. He's overly generous in marking to allow his students to meet the next grade rather than fall just below it. He lends out his own personal copies of textbooks to student's who couldn't afford their own. On more than one occasion he accepted midterms handed in far past the due date on account of students' circumstances. All of this was against protocol, Cas was more than aware, but he lived to see his students succeed and his field develop rather than stopping more than capable students in their tracks on account of a percentage under the pass mark or a late report. Naomi did not share his attitude.

Naomi had despised Cas, or so he had thought. On a cold Tuesday morning, he was called into her office, in order to discuss a recent complaint. He'd allowed a student of his, Anna, to complete a trip required to graduate despite not paying. He had known what Anna had come from and why she couldn't meet the £350 required to go. So he gave the green-light to allow her to attend the trip regardless. Naomi had been furious. She screamed bloody murder at Cas for failing to follow the rules and giving handouts. He stood and accepted the verbal beating until he was shocked to feel cold hands in his fair and dry, pouted lips pushing painfully against his own. He had pushed her off. Immediately she apologised, begging for forgiveness. She blamed her recent divorce. She was lonely, in desperate need of a friend. Cas sympathised with her and begrudgingly agreed not to tell anyone. He went on about his normal life, ignoring the uncomfortable interaction. That was until papers began disappearing from his office. His emails kept on being deleted from his inbox. He'd find reports he stayed up until day-break completing shredded. Rumours began spreading that Cas had forged the majority of his work. He wasn't a visionary, just a fraud. Naomi planted seeds of doubts in his colleague's heads'. His papers stopped being published until an official investigation could be completed into the validity of his research. Overnight, he became shunned by his entire field. Naomi sacked him not long after. Cas didn't know what he would have done if his old college friend, Balthazar, hadn't put in a good word for him at Stanford and gotten him this position within the theology department as a professor. That's how he came to find himself walking through Stanford with Professor Winchester, attempting desperately to memorise his route through the department to his new office, his new chance to wipe the slate clean. He hoped Stanford would be the new change he needed.

Pulling himself out of his reverie, he reminded himself that Professor Winchester was probably expecting a response.

“Ah, thank you. Apologies, when I reviewed the department’s staff I didn’t see your name, professor Winchester. Are you new to the department also?” Cas enquired, curious to see where this new professor fitted it within the department, and more importantly how much Cas would have to work at buttering him up to succeed here.

Professor Winchester smiled, raising his eyebrows looking up ahead of the staircase to the dreary hallway that lied ahead of them. “Please, call me Sam. And no actually, I’m one of the Law departments’. But recently, I’ve been dabbling in theology and it’s relation to ethics within law, and the marrying of the two made me feel right at home here.” Sam explained. Cas was surprised by this, after all, switching between departments isn’t exactly common, though he decided not to pry.

Continuing down the barren halls, lined with rows of identical dark oak doors, they made a left, then a right, and then finally, at the end of the hall, they came to a door labelled ‘E8’.

“Excellent.” Cas breathed, relieved.

Sam smiled brightly. “Home sweet home, I’m just beside in ‘E7’, so let me know if you need anything Cas.”

“Of course.” Cas smiled back. Sam began to turn to his own office further down the hall when Cas called after him, “Oh and Sam? Thank you. For helping me find my office.”

“No problem, I know the layout can get pretty...” He shook his hands either side of his head, “confusing.” With that he entered his own office, leaving Cas alone in the hall. He smiled to himself. It was rare, nowadays, that any of his colleagues would even speak to him, let alone show any semblance of warmth or kindness.

He turned the golden knob of his office and pushed the heavy door open. His office was large, bigger than his Harvard office had ever been, even under Chuck’s reign. A large, dark desk sat in the centre of the room. The walls were lined with barren bookcases, which Cas looked forward to filling with his own collection. Behind the desk, a large gothic window allowed plenty of light to stream into the office. Cas took a sigh of relief. He might just like it here, after all, he thought.

Is he always likes this?

Chapter Summary

Here we see a burgeoning friendship developing between Cas and Sam, and the first mentions of Dean, who will be joining us in the next chapter.

Chapter Notes

Forewarning for the rest of this story; basically, to begin with, Cas and Dean pretty much hate each other. They've got a lot of personal baggage behind them and they are generally both pretty much dicks. But slowly, things start to develop yada yada. I really enjoy fics that are character/dialogue focused, so that's what I enjoy writing, so let me know if you guys enjoy that sort of thing. I'll be trying to make everything flow naturally and what not but let me know if it doesn't seem authentic or if it's moving too fast/slow or anything.

Thanks guys, enjoy!

Come 12 pm, Cas stood, taking a break from trying to log into all his new college accounts on his laptop. He rubbed his hands over his eyes tiredly, before turning to look out of the large window. It was truly a beautiful campus, but Cas knew better than to believe that no underbelly was to be found here. He had thought that about his previous job. Prior to Naomi, life at Harvard was wonderful. He had believed his colleagues valued and respected him. Of course, he was shown otherwise not long after. He supposed he had to be thankful of Naomi for that.

His stomach rumbled, reminding him of the emptiness he felt there. He grabbed his coat, a battered old brown trench-coat he didn't have the heart to throw out and left his office. Walking down the hall, his steps slowed following Sam's office. Much as he didn't like to interrupt, he thought it best that he cultivate his friendship with the young professor anyway. He took a step back to 'E7' and knocked.

"Come in." Sam's voice rang out.

Castiel entered, seeing Sam stand before a whiteboard full of scribbled writing, frowning. When he saw Cas he smiled. “Hey, Cas!” He leaned back against his desk. “Can I help you with something?”

“Yes, I was just nipping out to grab a bite, do you want anything, a coffee or sandwich or something?” Cas ventured. As he spoke, he glanced around Sam’s office, eyes squaring when they met a framed photograph on his desk, of a young beautiful woman smiling, bathed in sunlight. Cas took a mental note of this, reminding himself not to hit on Sam. Not that he would of, but Sam was rather handsome, nonetheless.

“Nah, thanks for offering, Cas, but I’m probably going to grab myself something to eat at Denny’s once I figure this crap out.” He gestured to the mess of a whiteboard, grimacing.

“Of course.” Cas smiled as he went to leave but before the door closed, stuck his head back around the corner. “And one more thing Sam.” Sam looked up from his work again expectantly. “Where can I get something to eat around here?”

Sam barked a laugh and grabbed his blazer from the back of his chair. “Alright, you’ve persuaded me.”

At Denny’s, Sam ordered a salad, and Cas got fries. “So Cas-“ Sam began, “What brings you to Stanford?” He questioned politely. Cas automatically squared his shoulders and ducked his head down slightly.

Never-mind, it seemed that Sam was as fickle as all his previous colleagues. Looking to humiliate him by reminding him of his fall from grace.

A sharp exhale came from Cas’ nose, a half-laugh embodying as much sarcasm as Cas could muster. “So good of you to avoid departmental gossip, Mr Winchester.”

Sam raised an eyebrow questioningly, his eyes squaring. “I’m sorry?”

Cas looked up to the ceiling, then back to his meal, before looking at Sam once again. "I'm sure my arrival here has been preceded by chatter. I'm sure everyone knows about that train wreck already." He laughed darkly.

Sam's eyebrows came together sympathetically, and he raised a hand to illustrate his next words. "Hey, like I said before, I'm from Law. Not exactly popular in the department for taking up an office space."

Ah, so he didn't know. Cas felt a wave of relief followed by shame. "My apologies Sam, I shouldn't have presumed. Trust me, the majority of my colleagues who ask already are fully aware of why I'm here."

Sam waved his hand and laughed. "It's fine man, honestly I think they're all just bitter that we got the biggest two offices." He grinned. "I've not heard anything about your arrival past that you'd be taking the neighbouring office. I decided to read through some of your works to brush up on your field, I particularly enjoyed the one about the Pad-Thai Borneo Najash. Really interesting stuff."

Cas ducked his head, accepting the compliment. "Again, apologies. I, erm, fell out of favour with my head of department when management changed and let's just say she made my life at Harvard a living hell."

Sam grimaced, his lips thinning. "Ah, that sucks. But hey look on the bright side, you'll love Stanford, honestly, it's awesome. The kids are great, all the staff are pretty fun to work with, and best of all they grant tenure at the drop of a hat."

Cas laughed. "Is that so? Maybe one day." He turned his gaze outside the window, closing his eyes slightly as the brightness outside contrasted the dimmed interior. "But I'm unfamiliar with the town, I think it will take some time until I am comfortable here."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, the town is pretty big but once you get your bearings it's easier. Where about are you living?"

Cas pouted, thinking the back the dingy, lifeless apartment he had left to come to work this morning. With everything still packed away, it didn't feel like much of a home. His apartment wasn't bad, just quiet. He'd wanted to look for something more permanent but he more or less fled to Stanford as soon as Balthazar had mentioned it. His rent was very high for a college city, but it didn't look like his landlord would budge anytime soon. Cas made a mental note to look in the local newspaper for any cheaper apartments going. It didn't help his apartment was large, easily big enough for two people, with two large rooms, each with an ensuite, and large living space. It just appeared so lifeless, as if no-one had lived there in years. Dust permeated every corner. Cas wasn't even sure if he had neighbours, as all the other apartments seemed just as barren from the outside as he had made his way upstairs to his own. "I have an apartment in the centre. It's within walking distance of the campus."

"Oh, you're living in the centre?" Sam seemed surprised. "Most professors live in the outskirts." He said, humming as he finished, as he continued with his salad.

"Is that where you live?"

"Yeah," Sam straightened in his seat, smiling happily, "with my wife Jessica. She studied law here too, that's how we met, but she went down the court route while I went into teaching. We're expecting our first child in February." His cheeks turned pink and he shook his head slightly as if he himself couldn't quite believe it.

"Congratulations." Smiled Cas.

Over the following weeks, Cas began to settle in nicely. He was acquainted with the majority of staff in his department and had no qualms with any of them so far, although he definitely received some raised eyebrows when he introduced himself as the famed Castiel Novak. He settled back into his work quite well, preparing his term of teaching come later in the term. Castiel truly hated delivering lectures and had succeeded in avoiding them when Chuck had been his higher up. However, it was a fact of life for professors, being allowed to focus on their research for the majority of the year so long as they deliver a course of lectures for students during the year. But Cas had received some helpful tips from Sam, who Cas had been incredulous to hear, actually enjoyed giving lectures. He got on well with Sam he had decided and often brought in doughnuts for him and Sam to share on his way into work. The only part that hadn't improved yet was his apartment. Still too large and too empty, all of his things not even occupying half of the space. He was certainly paying far more than he could

afford however, with no other options he had to settle, looking in the papers every day to check if a cheaper, one-bedroom apartment became available. As of the end of November, he still had no luck.

As such, Cas elected to spend the majority of his time at work, aiming to reform his empire of knowledge. Sam said he didn't know how Cas could spend so much time working. Cas would always just shrug and say he enjoyed it. He did, or he had, prior to everything that happened, but at the moment it was just about staying out of his daunting apartment, though Castiel would never admit.

Cas walked into his building, smiling at Mary, the receptionist as he passed. Her attitude never changed with Castiel, still as exasperating as always. He made his way up the stairs, knocking on Sam's door, balancing the box of doughnuts in his other hand as he did so.

"Yes." Came a quiet reply.

Cas pushed Sam's door open. His office remained largely unchanged, just like the first time Cas had seen it, only now accompanying the framed image of Jess was a small image of an ultrasound tucked into the edge of the frame.

Looking up from his desk he looked to Sam, who looked towards his lap, his big hands tucked through his long hair. As he raised his head to smile at Cas, he looked awful. He had strong bags under his eyes, and his smile had a pained quality to it. "Hi, Cas." He said, his voice sounding rough.

Cas grimaced. "What happened to you?" He asked, realising after he probably shouldn't have opened with that. He often had difficulty being 'tactful'.

Sam made a sad, breathy laugh. "Thanks, Cas. It's nothing." He said, taking a doughnut from Cas' box.

"Doesn't look like nothing." Cas pushed. Again, he remembered that probably didn't sound very nice. "No offence." He added. *Much better.*

“It’s nothing, my brother Dean is er, in town, and he’s staying with us for a bit. I love having him around, and Jess does too, he’s just hard to live with and the house just feels cramped.” He admitted, stuffing a doughnut into his face. “He’s staying in Darcy’s room at the minute-“ he mouthed around the doughnut, “but with Jess getting bigger and bigger I don’t know how long we can house him.”

“Can he not just go back to his home?” Cas asked, brow furrowed. From what little Sam had said about Dean, Cas was surprised by Sam’s attitude now. He knew he was a mechanic who worked about an hour outside of town, but Sam had always spoken very fondly of his brother and Cas failed to see why Sam would suddenly be so unhappy being around him.

“He, er, quit his job. And he lived upstairs of the garage, so he can’t live there now either.” Sam explained, seeming uncomfortable.

Cas felt as though there was more to the story but checked himself, deciding not to pry, in a rare moment of social awareness.

Sam sat back in his chair rubbing his eyes. “Luckily he spends his evenings out, bars mostly.” Cas thought he saw a flash of pain in Sam’s features as he said that, but it was gone too quickly to know for sure. He continued, “so that’s good at least.”

Cas took in his tired features again and felt a wave of pity for his friend. He truly did look exhausted. “But hey-“ he began, attempting to cheer up Sam, “not long now and Darcy will be here. It’ll all fall into place, Sam.” He reminded him, smiling.

Sam smiled back, seeming grateful for his attempt to cheer him up. Then his eyes lit up. “Hey Cas, how would you like to come to my house for a meal one night this week? Jess is a wonderful cook, and I’ll tell Dean to make himself scarce, he does anyway, to be honest, and you can even see Darcy’s room!” He beamed.

Cas thought carefully. On the one hand, Sam was his only friend here, certainly the only colleague here he could talk to. However, the sound of an evening of hearing Sam coo at Jessica and ramble on about Darcy sounded painful. But once again the thought of avoiding his apartment rose its ugly head.

He conceded defeat. “That sounds wonderful Sam.”

Sam grinned back at him, writing down his address and ‘Thursday 6 pm’ on a post-it and handing it to Cas.

Oh, joy.

The curious case of Dean Winchester

Two evenings later, Cas awoke suddenly, a page sticking to the side of his face as he pulled his head up from the desk. He checked the time. 6 pm, he couldn't believe, he'd fallen asleep at work. '*Better than my apartment*' he thought ruefully. He was grateful to whatever woke him up as he started packing away the papers on his desk.

Bang!

The wall to his right shook, making him jump. His sleep fogged mind became dully aware of the sound of grumbling voices on the other side. Sam's office?

Bang! Again, papers flew from Cas' hands as he jumped yet again.

He replaced the papers on his desk and left his office, jogging to Sam's door. He knocked 3 times loudly, and suddenly the grumbling voices from within cut off.

Through the door, a sigh and then Sam's grumbling "Come in."

Cas entered Sam's office to an air of uncomfortable silence. Sam leant against his bookcase at the wall he shared with Cas' office, one of his large hands running down his face before returning to its position crossed over his chest.

There was someone else there too. A stranger. He stood at the back of the room, facing out of the window with his arms crossed. He had short spiky hair and a leather jacket, but that was all Cas could tell without seeing him head-on.

"I...", he began awkwardly, "I heard a bang. Just wanted to check everything was alright." He finished his sentence with a pointed glance at the stranger, making it clear to Sam what he was talking about.

Sam smiled and dropped his head. “Castiel, my brother Dean. Dean, this is Castiel, my colleague.” He gestured between them accordingly.

When Sam finished, the stranger, which Cas now knew to be Dean, turned. His demeanour changed immediately, his shoulders dropping and a smirk spreading across his face.

Cas was taken aback. When Sam had described Dean Cas never would have imagined this. The man before him was... unlike anyone Cas had seen before. His spiky hair heightened towards the front of his head, casting small thin shadows over his tan freckled face. His eyes were half-lidded and dark. His lips were pulled into a smirk. His beauty almost offset the strong sense of warning Castiel gleaned from him.

Dean walked around the desk to approach Cas and took his hand. His handshake was very different from Sam’s, a little too forceful and hands much too weathered to be soft.

“Well hello there...” Dean eyed him up and down, “Castiel.” Cas’ name rolled off his tongue like ash falling from a cigarette. It hung in the air for what seemed like an age. Now closer, Cas could see Dean’s eyes were a brilliant green even when half-lidded. He stood the same height as Cas but was wider. Not as wide as Sam, that was certain, but it was evident he carried muscle. Appropriate for a mechanic, Cas reasoned.

Cas was sure he was looking at Dean like he was a crossword, brow furrowed and lips pursed.

Reflexively, he corrected Dean nonetheless. “Cas.”

Dean’s lowered his head, considering Cas through his eyelashes. “Cas...” he corrected himself, speaking slowly as if trying to work out how the name felt on his lips.

Sam interrupted suddenly, coughing.

Cas turned from Dean to look back at Sam, who was now looking dumbfounded at Dean. From the corner of his eye, Cas saw Dean mouth 'what?' although he was sure he wasn't supposed to see that.

"Dean yes-" Cas began turning back to Dean. "Sam mentioned his brother was in town. How are you enjoying Stanford?" He asked politely.

Dean's smirk changed to a toothy grin, as he jogged over to Sam, ruffling Sam's long brown hair as he did, being rewarded with an eye-roll. "It's sweet, I get to annoy my baby-bro 24/7." Cas decided Dean's voice was much too deep and rough to suit his delicate features. "So Mr Cas, what do you teach?" Dean asked, returning to the window to lean against it while he considered Cas.

"Theology, though I fear I don't enjoy *teaching* it nearly as much as your brother does." Cas smiled at Sam who chuckled in return.

Dean glanced between the two of them. "Sam said you're new here?"

"Yes." Cas conceded, yet again reminded of exactly what he was trying to forget. "I worked at Harvard originally."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "So what? D'you decide you're too smart for them or something?"

Sam yet again interrupted. "Sorry about the noise Cas, something about Dean makes me want to punch walls." He joked, though judging off the bang that woke him, he wasn't entirely joking. "Besides we were just heading home now."

"Ah yes, me too." Cas smiled, straightening his sweater.

Sam turned his head slightly and narrowed his eyes while still looking at Cas. "Why are you here so late by the way?" He asked.

“Well, I erm-“ he grinned sheepishly, “I may have fallen asleep at my desk.”

Dean laughed from across the room and both men turned to look at him. “I can tell, got one sweet bedhead going on Einstein.” He winked.

Cas felt his cheeks heat up, running a hand through his hair feeling that Dean was most definitely right.

“See you tomorrow Cas.” Sam turned back to Cas, more or less forgetting about Dean’s outburst.

“Sam.” Cas smiled as he began for the door. “Dean.” He smiled as he left. Once again before the door could swing shut Cas twisted his head around and looked at Dean. “Will you be joining us for dinner Thursday?” He asked. He couldn’t quite explain why, but Cas hoped Dean would be.

Dean beamed, looking to Sam who now had his face hidden behind his hand. “No! Sammy here forgot to mention it. I look forward to seeing you there Cas.”

Cas smiled and left, returning to his office, packing his documents away and heading out of the building. As he left he heard nothing from Sam’s office and so assumed both brothers had already headed home.

The drive to his apartment was short and uneventful as always. Although Cas admitted he could easily walk the distance, driving felt more purposeful and certainly warmer when the cool weather picked up. Walking up the stairs to his apartment. Cas felt hairs raise across his arms. His apartment block felt creepy, far too quiet, like entering a graveyard after dark. Entering his apartment, Cas saw exactly the sight he had seen for the last couple of weeks. The sight that he hated.

To his right was his kitchen, clean and symmetrical Cas was sure some would say, though to Cas it looked clinical. To his left, his small TV balanced precariously on a pile of books, in

front of a white leather couch and a glass coffee table. Why have a big TV when you don't spend any time watching it anyway, right?

At the end of the room was his bedroom to the right, and his ensuite attached to its right.

Mirroring it was the other bedroom and its ensuite, though Cas so rarely went in there, he almost forgot what it looked like. Almost, because he was sure it was identical to his own room. A large bed in the centre with a plain white spread sat atop a plush white rug. The dresser and mirror were pushed up along the wall to avoid detracting from the one highlight of the room. The long length window spanning the entire length of the far wall, overlooking Stanford's sprawling city. Cas still couldn't explain his discomfort. By all reasonable measures, his apartment was wonderful. In the centre of the city, within walking distance of work, with good central heating and water pressure.

But it felt... off. Cas was sure his problem wasn't with the apartment so much as with Stanford itself. Within the college halls he could almost find himself forgetting he was elsewhere than Harvard, but out within the town, the difference was apparent. Cas felt like a stranger here. Cas found himself oddly wondering whether Dean Winchester felt the same. Being forced away from home and work, into a foreign unfamiliar environment. Cas sincerely doubted it. Dean seemed to be a well-adjusted individual and judging off the confidence which rolled off him in waves, Cas couldn't imagine a situation he'd be uncomfortable within.

Maybe his apartment felt so dead due to its stark contrast to his home previously. He grew up within an adopted family, an orphanage even though Cas had been encouraged to consider it just to be a very large foster family. His 'parents', an elderly couple who seemed to have fallen into fostering rather accidentally, were devoted to keeping the household running although their age meant they couldn't much keep up with the rambunctious whirlwind that was Castiel growing up. Instead, he considered himself a product of his 'siblings' influence. When he was young, he truly considered his home to be heaven. Its busyness kept him from thinking too hard about why he didn't look anything like his siblings or parents, or why he had to refer to them as 'Mr & Mrs Hannigan' rather than mom & dad until he was old enough to understand it all. When he turned 14 the issue was formally addressed, being told both his mother and father had died in a collision with a drunk driver when he was a baby. Cas was sure that although his life growing up was far from perfect, he was cared for well. Going from such a bustling home to a college environment was surprisingly simple for Cas. Halls of residence were constantly jumping with loud music and screaming teens, as laughter filled the halls every night. He stayed with postgraduate residence within the college in his teaching years at Harvard.

The subtle irony of having once played music to tune out the loud neighbouring noises of others, as compared to playing music to tune out the oppressive silence he felt in his new apartment was not lost on him.

Cas doubted he would ever feel 'right' within his apartment.

Venom

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry for making you wait, I've been preoccupied in writing a bunch of other stuff, although to be fair I had this chapter written out already so that isn't much of an excuse. Either way, enjoy!

Cas made a miserable attempt to flatten his hair within his rear-view mirror, parked outside Sam's home on the outskirts of town. As usual, his black hair stood unruly atop his head, sticking in every which direction despite brushing it and battling with it for the better part of 10 minutes before he left his apartment. He donned his usual brown trench-coat and had even worn a tie for the occasion. Of course, the wikihow article on how to tie it hadn't helped at all, having eventually left it hanging loosely at his neck like a child being forced to wear one for the first time at a christening.

As he stepped out of his car, he took in a deep breath of the cold air to settle his nerves. Cas was fully aware that feeling so anxious was unreasonable; Sam was his friend.

Their doorbell rung loud and clear when he pressed it. The door swung open all too fast to Jess' beautiful face. "You must be Cas! It's amazing to finally meet you!" She remarked as she pulled Cas in for an unexpected hug. Of course, it was more of an arms-length half-hug given the huge space occupied by her round stomach. Cas felt her warm sweet scent roll over him like a cloak, followed immediately by the smell of something delicious cooking. Cas opened his eyes, not entirely sure when he had shut them to see Sam leaning against the bottom of his staircase beaming. Cas was sure the smile was directed entirely to Jess but it was nice to see a friendly face nonetheless. Detaching himself from Jess, Cas smiled down at her.

"And you too Jess, you've a beautiful home!" he grinned, and genuinely meant it, as a warm homely feeling settled in his chest. The warmth confused him. Although he never felt neglected growing up, whatever energy his elderly carers could devote was spread thin given the volume of children within the home. The white picket lifestyle was never something he'd considered important as a result, more than sure that he'd never want to live with another soul given how little alone-time he had in his youth. He'd had more than enough of 'family' or whatever the people he grew up with were. But even just stepping through the threshold of Sam's house made him doubt what he'd been sure he'd understood about

himself. The warmth, the smell of food cooking, the sheer amount of love generated by the occupants was intoxicating.

Going to shake Sam's hand, Cas was again surprised to be pulled into a huge bear hug. Cas decided Sam's hugs were like being swamped in a much too large blanket; too warm and far too difficult to get out of. "So glad you made it Cas!" Cas felt more than heard Sam say. Once free Cas could take in his surroundings more thoroughly. Sam and Jess' house was as homely as one could imagine. The bright magnolia walls were cluttered with family pictures and variations of 'Live, Laugh, Love' and other family mottos. The interior was large but felt cosy nonetheless. Cas felt a pang of jealousy; he was sure neither Jess or Sam would ever struggle to sleep, feeling only suffocating silence in a barren hole of the home Cas would have to return to later.

"Now Cas, how'd you like a glass of wine?" Jess linked his arm and led him through to their kitchen. Cas got the sense that this kitchen was truly the heart of the home, beautiful marble sides and shiny appliances, with a beautiful dining table adorned with candles and a fruit bowl.

Dean stood before the oven, an apron covering his clothes. Cas thought it funny that a pink 'kiss the chef' apron protected his clothes despite the fact they seemed plenty worn and oil-stained already. The minute he saw Cas he looked him up and down again before focusing on his tie. "Your tie is all wonky." He grunted turning back to the oven, slipping on oven mitt over his hand. Cas felt his cheeks heat up with embarrassment.

"Oh, Cas honey, let me get that for you." Jess smiled, straightening his tie. Once it fell correctly, she tapped his chest. "Much better. Red or white?" She asked again, opening a cupboard to collect a wine glass.

"No thank you, I don't drink." Cas smiled, removing his outer jacket. His choice to avoid alcohol could be traced back to, yet again, his upbringing. When he was told how his biological parents had died at 14, and that it was due to alcohol, he couldn't bring himself to muster the same interest that his peers had in getting drunk or parties. Perhaps this was half why he preferred his own company, and why his studies had always been important to him. It wasn't a conscious choice so much as a knee-jerk reaction to associate alcohol with pain.

Dean huffed a laugh, still not turning around from the oven, now halfway reaching in to remove the delicious looking turkey. Cas was sure he heard a whispered "figures

” accompanying it. When Dean stood up from the oven, turkey in toe, he announced to the household. “Bon Appetit !”

“ And so I rush back in, and he’s on the floor with flour all over himself and the kitchen!”
The dining table erupted into laughter when Jess finished her story .

Jess placed a hand on Sam’s huge shoulder as she laughed. “You know I love you really honey.” She managed between breathy laughter. Sam’s pink cheeks, partly due to the wine, partly due to the embarrassment of having his baking mishap revealed, bunched as he grinned in return.

Once the laughter had died down, Jess directed the conversation towards Cas. “ What about you Cas? What’s the biggest cooking mistake you’ve ever made?”

Cas sat back, wracking his brain as he tried to think of a story to match Jess’, while silently cursing her for singling him out. After a few seconds of silence, his brain produced a story of when Cas had been back at the orphanage. He’d been off school for the day, on account of the flu, when Mr Hannigan called an ambulance for his wife following her first heart attack. Cas had stayed at home until his siblings came home from school, but not before trying to cook himself some food. Of course, the backstory wasn’t particularly funny , but Cas thought if he left that bit out it might get a few laughs.

“I once erm- I put a fork in the microwave when I tried to heat up some leftovers when I was a boy ; it went exactly as you’d expect.” He admitted, pleasantly surprised when Sam and Jess began laughing heartily. Dean, however, didn’t laugh or even chuckle. Instead, he considered Cas with a frown , eyes narrowed over his glass of whiskey.

“How old were you?” He asked , his green eyes trained on Cas’ now rather uncomfortable expression. Sam and Jess had stopped laughing.

“ Erm, I’m not sure... I must have been about 8?” He answered, trying to remember while also trying to reason why Dean would be so hostile .

Now Dean laughed, a small bitter chuckle escaping his mouth. “How didn’t you know by 8 not to put fucking metal in the microwave?”

Cas adjusted in his seat. “Well I erm-“ admittedly it hadn’t been his finest moment, but he’s never been told by either of the adults in his house to avoid it, they’d always been busy elsewhere, and Cas had no use for the microwave before, dinner always appeared in the kitchen before him and his siblings were all told to go eat it in their rooms. He’d never seen how the food had been prepared, none of the children were allowed in the kitchen while Mrs Hannigan cooked. He supposed that given his thorough understanding of how microwaves worked even at a young age, supplied by his physics teacher who found time to answer his questions, but in his panic having seen the closest thing he had to a mother wheeled away in a stretcher into an ambulance meant forming thoughts beyond ‘hungry’ was difficult, until his siblings arrived home later than day and comforted him, bringing him out of his hysteria. “I had never been told that metal would react that way. I hadn’t used the microwave before.”

Dean’s gaze focused intently on Cas as his face twisted into a grimace. “Yeah, I didn’t think you would’ve cooked for yourself really. Lucky.” He growled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cas grumbled, a surprising flash of confidence evident in his words, crossing his arms across his chest, mindful of his now full stomach.

“Well you know,” Dean began, a bitter smile painting his delicate features, “fancy hotshot like you, bet your mom made you some homemade pork chops or something each night” he leaned forward, lips wrapping carefully around each word as though they were a lover’s name rather than an attack “or y’know, maybe the maid did that shit, while your mom was off sucking the principals dick to get you in top classes.” he spoke quickly, but the venom laced in his words was clear.

Sam’s face was aghast as he slapped a heavy hand onto Dean’s shoulder. “Dean!” He spoke, horrified by his brother’s aggression. “Would you excuse us for one moment?” He asked, not waiting before he pushed out from his chair and dragged Dean with him to another room.

Cas hadn’t reacted, still frozen. Dean’s words played back in Cas mind. What on earth was that supposed to mean? Had Cas so offended him somehow? His behaviour the other day in

Sam's office had been positively charming, seeming more than delighted to meet Cas, even going so far to say he'd look forward to seeing Cas tonight. Where had this sudden hostility come from?

Arguing began through the walls of the home, not clear enough to make out words but loud enough to make Cas and Jess flinch simultaneously. Jess eventually reacted, peeling herself from her chair, using the table for balance to offset the weight of her huge stomach. "Cas I-I don't know what to say." She bit her lip, before reaching over to Dean's glass and walking towards the kitchen sink, "I think Dean might have just had too much to drink. Maybe he's feeling too off, or he is tired. Yeah, I'm sure that's it. He's on a blow-up mattress in Darcy's room and I can't imagine it's comfortable, maybe the couch would be better? I'll get some thick cushions tonight maybe he'll sleep better..." she muttered, rambling mostly to herself.

Cas only now became aware that his mouth had been hanging open, still watching the space where Sam and Dean left the kitchen. He felt his throat tighten.

Jess fumbled to put some music on, no doubt to cover the shouting that still could be heard.

After a few awkward minutes, Sam returned. He cleared his throat loudly as he entered. "Dean's gone to bed. He's... he's really tired. I'm sorry about that Cas. Honestly, I really don't know what to say." Sam echoed, his wide eyes apologetic.

"It's fine." Cas managed around the tightness of his throat. "I should be going anyway. It's late. I have to mark assignments." He lied, hoping the expression he'd managed to conjure looked like a smile. He left as quickly as he could after that, awkwardly thanking Sam and Jess for their hospitality before leaving all too abruptly. On his way home Cas could barely see the road, too lost replaying the evening.

Dean's outburst had seemed odd, but perhaps Cas had missed something. Maybe he'd accidentally appeared not to enjoy Dean's cooking, or said something else to offend him. Maybe his poor presentation, the 'wonky' as Dean had been quick to point out had deeply offended Dean. Maybe the politeness of his first meeting with Dean was a ruse, to hide from the instant hate that Dean had held for him. Cas cursed his social ineptness, sure he'd done something awful without realising it, ruining any chance of a friendship with Dean and no doubt in the process mutilating his relationship with Sam. Cas saw his school bullies, laughing at him during recess. They pushed and hit him, laughing about the 'filthy Novaks'

who's parents hadn't loved them enough to keep them, pawning them off to go with the rest of the freaks. Maybe there'd been some truth in their jabs; maybe Cas was too much of a freak to have friends. All the friendships he'd ever had had been largely work-related, becoming familiar with colleagues until he considered them to be friends. Maybe he'd been wrong about Sam, maybe Sam saw him as nothing more than an annoyance, a colleague he felt pity for. After all, hadn't all his 'friends' in Harvard done the same?

Cas scarcely remembered getting to his apartment, or climbing into bed, or drifting off to sleep. And for once Cas' apartment didn't feel so empty when he compared it to the overpowering emptiness within himself.

Let's burn that bridge when we get to it

The next day, a knocking at Cas' office door pulled him from his research.

"Come in." He called.

Sam entered, with a sheepish smile. Maybe it was actually a sneer, for all Cas knew. He thought he could recognise a smile but maybe again he was wrong like he'd been wrong about everything else.

"Oh, Sam. Hello." He cleared his throat, "how can I help you?" Best to keep it professional, after all that would be what Sam wanted anyway.

Sam's face dropped. "Cas I-" he began, before stopping himself. He looked at the floor, his hands balled into fists at his side before flexing. He took a deep breath.

"Cas, I want to apologise for everything last night." He spoke quickly like he'd scripted out what he was going to say. "Dean's behaviour was really unacceptable, and he knows that. I'm not making excuses for it, but I wanted to try and explain. If I can."

Cas considered him for a moment. He truly seemed sincere. If Cas had had more self-respect and could handle the thought of losing his façade of a friendship with Sam and returning to loneliness, Cas would've surely stopped Sam. But much without a conscious will, Cas' hand gestured to the seat before his desk.

Sam blinked in confusion, before graciously taking the offer and sitting before Cas. Cas figured Sam hadn't expected him to say yes.

"Dean he..." Sam began, much more slowly now, like he was carefully picking out each word before saying it. "He has never been one for this." He gestured all around the room. "College, academia, all of it. Mom died when I was a baby and Dad left us to fend for ourselves way too early. Dean didn't get the opportunity. All this stuff intimidates him, I

think. I'm guessing you reminded him of all of this, and he judged you because of it. I haven't told him anything about you besides you worked in Harvard beforehand and that you were at the top of your field." Cas knew he should feel a swell of pride in his chest at that remark, but at the moment he just felt empty. "He probably took that to mean you were some entitled dick who got here off your parents' money." Sam cringed as he finished his sentence. Cas remembered he had told Sam that he was orphaned when he was a baby but had never elaborated. "All the stress of getting fired and-

"I thought you said he quit." Cas interjected.

"Well yeah, he did. Sort of. It was a 'mutual agreement'." He said, sneering at the phrase. "I can't tell you why, it's his business, not mine, but turns out his friends weren't his friends." Cas felt a pang in his stomach with that. "And he didn't have anywhere to go. Please, I know it was really ridiculous, but just try to disregard last night. He's an idiot, and he knows it."

Cas thought for a moment. Dean's story reminded Cas of his own. Abandoned by friends and family, forced to flee from his home and work. Cas rubbed a tired hand down his face. Just because Dean's past made him an asshole, didn't mean Cas was.

"Sam. I'm grateful for the effort, but please. I'm not particularly offended by what Dean said," A lie, "and in truth, I enjoyed yesterday evening." A partial lie. "Please, tell Dean I hope things get back on track for him."

Sam's eyes lit up. "Amazing, thanks Cas, really. Dean will be thrilled. He'll be down later on today if you want him to bring along some doughnuts, we can all-

"I appreciate the offer. However, I'm not really keen on seeing Dean nonetheless." Cas said, picking his words slowly, mimicking Sam's manner.

Sam bristled but smiled. "No problem." He stood, heading for the door. "I'll er... I'll see you around Cas. Once Dean's back on his feet we'd like to have you down again and do the evening right this time."

Cas smiled in response. "I'd like that."

With that Sam left. Cas felt sort of hollow. Had he just lost Sam as a friend? He hoped not. Dean, however, Cas had no problem burning bridges with. He had important work to do, on restoring some semblance of normality in his life after Harvard, and he didn't need Dean Winchester distracting him.

One week had passed, and Cas hadn't seen Sam all week. Sam text often, just polite small talk mixed with work discussions but that was the extent of it. Cas felt stir-crazy, having had little to no valuable social contact in so long. Sure he'd smile at other colleagues, or strangers passing by, but without a true friend, the familiar tendrils of loneliness began creeping up on him. Cas caught himself missing Sam's company, ramblings about Jess, and even the regular updates on Darcy's progress as it got ever close to February.

More than one occasion, Cas had chosen to stay at work overnight rather than heading back to his apartment. It still felt as dead as always, and the oppression of the apartment was unbearable without having anything to take his mind from it. Cas really hadn't expected isolation to pain him so badly, but it stung like salt in a wound.

He was sleeping at his desk early morning when loud music came from next door. He awoke in a frenzy, navigating his way to Sam's office through bleary eyes. He knocked angrily, wrapping 4 times quickly.

A grunt came in reply.

Inside was a scene that Cas, admittedly, really didn't see coming.

Dean Winchester was led on Sam's office floor, in a sleeping bag and using his leather jacket as a makeshift pillow. ACDC was blaring from his phone beside him. To be honest, Dean looked as bad as Cas felt. Dean rolled to look at Cas, his eyebrow raising when their eyes met.

“Cas?” He asked, slurring, with alcohol or exhaustion Cas couldn’t tell. He fumbled to turn off the music blaring from his phone.

“Dean...?” was all he could conjure in reply. Cas was sure that weeks of sleeping in a hellhole of an apartment had done a number on his looks, but Dean looked genuinely terrible. The darkness under his eyes made the bright green of his irises shine almost black in the still dim morning light.

Dean’s dark eyes were watching him expectantly. Finally, he popped the heavy silence; “Yes?” Dean prompted, looking thoroughly disgruntled even though he had been the one to wake Cas up.

“You’re in Sam’s office...” Cas began to venture, slowly, as if trying to explain the scene in front of him to himself before describing it.

“Yeah, duh.” Dean interrupted.

“You’re *asleep* in Sam’s office.” Cas managed to clarify. He was sure Dean was making fun of him, but he didn’t really have the energy to fight it.

“And your point is?” Dean scowled, turning onto his other side to face Sam’s desk rather than Cas. “Don’t forget to close the door on your way out.” He muttered.

Finally, the sleep had faded enough from Cas’ head that the cogs began turning. “That’s against university regulation.” Okay, maybe the cogs weren’t as ready as Cas had thought, seeing as his only valid criticism of Dean’s predicament was that it violated policy which provided visitors could not be left alone in a professor's office where student information may be accessible.

“So?” Dean snapped, pointedly.

“It’s a fireable offence for Sam, Dean.” Cas explained angrily, only just becoming aware of how their voices carried down the corridor outside.

“He has tenure.”

“That’s not what it's for.”

Dean sighed. He sat up and turned towards Cas again, rubbing a hand down his face. Out of his sleeping bag, Cas could see his grubby attire. Baggy basketball shorts and an old faded band tee for a group Cas didn’t recognise.

“Look, Sammy ‘n Jess need the space back what with Darcy being due in a couple weeks and I wanted to get out of their hair. I swiped Sam’s office key and what’d’youknow , suddenly an apartment needing no references or rent has opened up right nearby, as luck would have it.” Dean didn’t look at Cas as he spoke, instead trailing his fingers over the worn fibres of the carpet, creating swirling patterns in front of his sorry excuse for a bed.

Cas looked down at Dean, a stranger weight settling in his stomach. Pity? He’d heard Dean’s story from Sam, and although Cas could definitely sympathise with being unwanted at home and run out of your job, Dean was still rude to Castiel. Still, he couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. He tightened his fists at his sides, trying to resist saying his next sentence but it came out much before Cas could put up much of a fight against it.

“Get up, we’re going to Denny’s.”

Dean moaned deliciously into his first bite of the burger. Though Cas often liked to pride himself on his decency and decorum, he was similarly animalistic in his consumption seeing as he hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon. He’d been forgetting to eat a lot recently. Come to think of it, Cas was sure his clothes fit a little more loosely than before, but he couldn’t be certain giving he went to his apartment so rarely to change nowadays, preferring to use the staff changing facilities available on campus to shower before donning his pre-worn attire.

“Cas... about the other night-” Dean began but didn’t get far before Cas piercing scowl cut him off. Cas really didn’t want to hear Dean’s excuses. He was an ass and Cas was an idiot for taking pity on him. He’d invited Dean to this diner with the intention of suggesting he move into his apartment with him, seeing as Cas used it so rarely recently and the rent was still ridiculously overpriced. But the more Cas sat here, the more he began to realise it was a bad idea. Dean held idiotic preconceived notions about Castiel that he had no reason to believe. Cas couldn’t see much difference between Dean and the bullies in school that used to shout ‘orphan!’ and ‘fag!’ on the school bus at him.

And yet, something about that analysis didn’t seem quite right. Maybe it was the warmth he’d demonstrated when they first met. Maybe it was seeing Dean cook in Sam’s house, complete with oversized oven gloves and a ‘kiss the chef’ apron that looked so domestic, contrasting the rest of Dean’s persona. Maybe it was based on some idiotic subconscious desire to have this attractive man like him.

No, it felt deeper than that. He didn’t just want Dean not to hate him, or even to like him. He wanted Dean to understand him. Cas knew he could come across as ‘dickish’ or whatever. But he felt a deep sense of injustice thinking Dean believed him to be ‘privileged’ or ‘entitled’. But it had been so long since he’d opened up to anyone. Not since he was a senior. His ‘boyfriend’? Was that what Alfie had been? He’d felt like more, like ‘boyfriend’ wasn’t enough to justify the profound bond Cas had had with him. The only person Cas had been fully open and honest with. God, he had to get his head out of the gutter. What was it recently with dragging up dead and buried memories?

Cas put down his burger and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a napkin. He looked up at Dean, who he was surprised to see did the same wordlessly. Their eyes met. Cas took a deep breath.

“I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I’d like to start again, start this-” he gestured between them, earning a raised eyebrow from Dean, “again, like new.”

He cleared his throat. Here goes.

“My name is Castiel James Novak. I’m a theology professor. My parents were Elijah and Hester Novak. They died when I was 3 years old.” Dean shifted in his seat, his eyes searching

Cas' expression, though Cas knew he'd find no emotion there. He'd gotten good at hiding it. He continued within missing a beat; "I was raised in 'Hannigan's home for orphans'. I earned my PhD at Harvard and took the position of professor soon after. Regrettably, I am no longer employed there, and I now teach at Stanford." He finished. Dean's expression had hardened somehow. Something, which Cas selfishly hoped was regret, flashed across his features but it was replaced with determination soon after.

"Nice to meet you Cas." A small smile appeared on his face, though it didn't touch his eyes. "I'm Dean Winchester, son of-"

"Dean." Cas interrupted, hoping the tenor of his voice could convey something of what he was feeling. "I don't need to hear anything about your past. I just wanted you to understand."

Dean closed his mouth with an audible snap. His mouth opened again but closed just as soon. Cas picked up his burger to continue eating the tasty morsel but was disappointed to find it had gone cold. He threw it down back into the wrapping in disgust.

"How did your parents die?" Cas heard Dean say, in barely more than a whisper. Dean was looking at his hands in his lap.

"Car accident. A drunk driver." Cas was sure saying this should have roused something within him, but it really didn't. Ironically, his dead parents were one of the few things Cas had no problem talking about. He'd never known them and never would. There was a sense of finality in their story, like their lives had been wrapped in a bow and delivered for Castiel to consume as an independent observer. He couldn't even picture them as people, more as abstract concepts as fluid as the imaginary family Cas had once hoped would adopt him. Cas knew better than to hope for the miracle of being wanted now. He was content with being destined for loneliness. Loneliness was good. It made him feel safe. Although he couldn't deny that even to him, who had become so well-versed in loneliness he considered himself an expert, it still hurt.

When Dean raised his face to meet Cas' gaze, he looked like a broken man. His brows were pinched in a sympathetic expression, his wide green eyes shone in pleading, searching Cas' own blue eyes. "Cas, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." He swallowed dryly. "I just, I see someone getting friendly with Sammy and it... I don't know, I just..." Suddenly his brow

furrowed and his eyes narrowed. “He’s ten times as smart as any of those jackasses in his office and he got there with all the shit dad, and me, put him through.”

They sat there like that, for too long a time, the silence between them growing heavy, being disturbed occasionally by the bustle of the restaurant around them.

Suddenly Cas sat straight, slapping his palms lightly to their table.

“I do have just one question about your past though Dean.”

Dean bristled. “Shoot.”

“Do you have a criminal record?”

Cas grinned in reply to Dean’s confused expression.

Sam flew into Cas’ office without knocking, almost tripping over the chair in front of the desk as he did so.

“Hello, Sam.” Cas spoke without looking up at Sam, staying focused on marking the sloppily written essay in his hands.

“Have you seen the keys to my office anywhere?” He burst out, speaking too fast and tripping over his words as he did. Cas noticed he was panting like he’d just run up the stairs and the hall.

Cas sat back and looked up at Sam, removing his glasses to rub at them with the microfibre cloth.

“I imagine Dean has them. He used them to break into your office this morning.” He answered calmly. Sam frowned.

“He WHAT? I- He- do you know where Dean is now?”

“He’s at my apartment.” The look on Sam’s face was priceless as he reeled. Cas wasn’t sure he’d ever seen a flush as bright before as the one that now covered his stricken face. He was sure that if he didn’t explain sooner rather than later, he’d have to call for help from one of his colleagues to drag Sam’s huge unconscious form up from the floor of his office.

“I found Dean sleeping in your office this morning. It seemed only logical that he should take the second bedroom of my apartment, given he can contribute to rent, and I am there so rarely.”

Sam’s eyebrows were so high it was a miracle they didn’t disappear into his hairline. “Uh-huh?” He mumbled, looking anywhere around the office but at Cas. “I thought you said you didn’t want to see Dean again?” He asked, leaning against one of Cas’ bookshelves now filled with his personal favourites.

Cas sat back in his chair for a moment, interlacing his fingers underneath his chin. He let a breath out through his nose. “I didn’t.” He answered honestly. “When I saw him lying on your office floor, he looked... well, pathetic.” Sam flinched. “And I sympathised with him.”

“Sympathised or empathised?” Sam asked, searching Castiel’s expression.

Cas smiled ruefully. “Besides, it’s far from a permanent solution. He has the second bedroom until one of two things; he gets back on his feet or I find a cheaper apartment.”

Sam was looking at Cas in admiration, though Cas was sure he'd seen a flicker of something else across his expression. Regardless, he seemed satisfied with Cas' answers. When he left the office, Cas watched him leave wondering if he'd see more of the Winchester brothers now. Yes, Dean would be living with him, however Sam had remarked earlier that he spent most of his time out at bars. And Cas wasn't sure if offering Dean his help would even make Sam any more friendly towards him. He could see in their joking interactions and their caution for each other that they obviously cared greatly for one another, however Cas felt as though there was something thinly veiled, some sense of frustration they each harboured towards the other.

Ignorance

Dean's first night at Cas' apartment was a disaster. When Cas had arrived at his apartment, he'd been greeted by Dean lying across his sofa, beer in-hand, watching something on Cas' pathetic excuse for a television. Dean climbed quickly to his feet when Cas came through the door and smiled.

Cas smiled back, despite the goosebumps that began to rise across his arms. It felt very strange having someone else within the apartment. He'd become so used to the sense of emptiness in the apartment that it felt foreign to recognise another person in the dead space. Maybe he should have used a step in-between and gotten a cat before he invited Dean Winchester of all people to live with him.

"Hey Cas, how was work?" Dean asked brightly, his words slurring ever so slightly.

Cas gazed at Dean with a similar confusion painting his face like the first time they'd met. Now that he didn't like. Asking 'How was work?' in some mockery of domesticity. As if they'd been old friends for years or had shared this space long enough to become comfortable in each other's company. Cas gritted his teeth. He gave Dean an incredulous look.

Dean shrugged, the beer sloshing in its bottle as it did so. "What? Can't a man ask his friend how work was now?"

Cas let out a pitiful laugh. "*Friends* ? Is that what you think this is?" He spoke quietly, an edge of bitterness in his words. Was he being unfair? After all, Cas was the one to invite Dean to live here, and now he was punishing Dean for taking him up on his offer. He felt a layer of disgust settle at the bottom of his stomach, though if it was for himself or for Dean he couldn't tell.

Dean's eyebrows raised. "Well, I think if we're gonna be living together, we should at least act like it."

"Well, what a fantastic actor you've been up to this point, *Dean* ." He sneered as he spoke. Cas wanted nothing more than to retreat to his room and wash the workday off of him. Let all

the stresses of the day, of marking, of colleagues, of responsibilities to swill away down the drain along with the suds. Was that why he was being so rude? Was it tiredness? Or was that just another excuse? Cas thought back to the venom in Dean's words at Sam's house. He decided that, for now, his anger could be justified. He began walking to his room, fully prepared to sink into his life of only seeing Dean in the unfortunate moments their schedules would line up and if there was a fire in the apartment block, and never at any other time.

"Well, you ain't winning any Oscars anytime soon either, *pal*." Dean's raised voice made Cas pause. "Think I can't see through your little act Novak, huh?" Cas turned, to find Dean right in front of him, up to his face, teeth bared. Cas kept his expression entirely neutral. He wouldn't give Dean the benefit of conjuring any emotion in him, not even the fury that he felt swelling amongst his insides. "You're runnin' from something. Big hotshot like you, sleeping at your desk rather than your crappy little home away from home? Something in you is *broken* man." He spit out. Cas flinched at his choice of words.

If only he knew how right he was.

"You should show me some respect." He ground out, with as much venom he could muster. "I dragged you out of hell." He gestured around the apartment, though he did cringe a little at his poorly chosen words; he'd always had a flair for the dramatic. "I can throw you back in."

Dean took a step back, though his expression illustrated that although he may have lost the battle he was still in for the war. He walked back around the couch and drank all the beer left in his bottle in one large gulp. Cas continued to glare daggers at his back as he did so, watching as he finished and grabbed his jacket, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" He asked. He wasn't particularly invested in the response, he just wanted to hear that he would be coming back.

"Out." Came the curt response as the front door swung shut once Dean had stormed through it. Cas remembered Sam saying something about Dean being out in bars often, and so Cas assumed that's where he had gone now. Cas was sure that even if Dean reported their altercation to Sam it wouldn't make much of a difference in where they stood with each other. Cas had made it perfectly clear already that his relationship with Dean would be purely business.

Still filled with the glowing embers of resentment, Cas thought back to his previous insecurities. He didn't need *friends*. Loneliness was by now a familiar feeling to him. He'd become acquainted with the gnawing it would cause in his chest and the sorrow that would settle in his stomach. If the previous years had taught him anything, it was that he couldn't risk trusting anyone but himself. Everyone eventually betrayed him. His siblings, Naomi, even Alfie. At least Dean had been a dick from the beginning, Cas suppose there wasn't a lot of betrayal to be found there.

Cas headed for the shower. From the minute the water hit his back, he could feel the fury begin to flow out of him. He felt cold in its wake. He raised the water temperature higher and showered quickly, cleaning himself of all the bullshit of today. Although a lot of the anger had been washed out of him, he still held onto the bitterness he felt for Dean.

What an arrogant prick. Walking into Castiel's life conning him out of his private apartment space and forcing him to suffer in his presence. Maybe this was his penance; to suffer the drivelling idiot that was Dean Winchester. Who knows, maybe after that he'd be accepted into paradise with open arms for having persevered in the face of the devil.

Somehow, he doubted it.

Because, realistically, he knew Dean wasn't some devil incarnate. He was a normal guy, coming out of a crappy situation, being flung into what at the minute seemed to be an even crappier situation. Cas wondered about what had happened to cause Dean to be fired, or quit, or whatever had happened. Maybe, like him, there'd been a change in management and the prospect of suffering it was too great. Maybe he'd been fired for being late, or for stealing. Maybe his boss had hated him. Maybe he just couldn't be bothered turning up for work one day.

Really it shouldn't be bothering him, any of it. It didn't matter, any of it. Perhaps he had been a bit harsh on Dean, but it shouldn't matter anyway. Who cares what Dean Winchester thought of him?

A grimace worked its way onto Cas' face, for he already knew what Dean thought of him.

He'd made it abundantly clear.

Broken.

Once out of the shower, Cas wiped the steam from the shower with a swipe of his hand and looked thoughtfully at his reflection. Cas often got the very real sense that he didn't recognise the man in the mirror. Was the man that looked back at him happy? Surely not, the lack of light in his cold eyes told him that much. But maybe, just maybe, he was content. Cas wasn't sure if he felt content. He didn't think he felt sad a majority of the time, but he certainly didn't often feel happy either. He supposed he didn't often feel anything at all.

Wrapping a towel around his middle, he wandered back into his room. Surprisingly, he found himself continuing out of his room and crossing the hall to enter Dean's new room instead.

The room was still sparse. It seemed as though Dean didn't unpack before retiring with his beer this evening. Perhaps he really wasn't planning on staying long? Cas could see two medium-sized boxes stacked on the dresser. The top box was open and appeared to just contain clothes. Cas idly wondered where the rest of Dean's things were, maybe they would be collected later? This surely wasn't all his personal effects. A small photo frame sat neatly unpacked in the centre of the bed, beside an impression on the bedspread, where Cas supposed Dean had sat while unpacking.

He considered the picture carefully. A beautiful blonde woman smiled up at the camera, clutching her swollen stomach. It appeared to be a maternity shoot. Dean's girlfriend? To his knowledge, Dean didn't have any children. Maybe she was an ex he was still close to? Cas thought she bore a striking resemblance to Jess, with beautiful golden locks and a glowing smile. Happiness suited them both.

The coldness of drying water droplets on Cas' back finally got the better of him, and he retired to his room. Maybe Cas would find out where the rest of Dean's belongings were, and why he left his job, and who the woman in the photograph was. Maybe he wouldn't. It didn't matter what he knew of Dean and vice versa.

That's what he repeated in his head as he found sleep.

White pickets just won't cut it

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, I've caught up on what I've currently written now, which means I'll be writing the new chapters as I go. As such it might take a little bit longer to get chapters out. Sorry about that. This chapters still uber salty, but next chapter we're gonna start seeing some plot and character development, promise. In the mean time, enjoy.⁴

When Cas' alarm rung out the next morning, he was pulled out of a dream that he couldn't quite remember once he was awake. Something green, perhaps?

He wasn't sure if Dean had come back in last night, and moving through his apartment to his small kitchen, Cas wasn't sure if he cared. So what if Dean didn't come back? He was probably with someone, maybe a one-night stand, maybe the woman in the photograph, maybe dead. It's not like Cas was worried about him.

He prepared himself for the day ahead, making a lame attempt to tie his tie correctly just like every morning, cursing himself when he realised the time. Granted, he didn't exactly have to clock in at any particular time, and Cas was sure that as long as all his work was completed, the faculty wouldn't even care if he turned up for work, but he still aimed to be at work at 9 am sharp every day. Largely a way of avoiding his apartment, though Cas wasn't sure if he continued this habit now to avoid the possibility of running into Dean instead.

He arrived at work at 9:12, carrying a small box of doughnuts under his arm like every morning. Surprisingly, Sam was standing outside of his office waiting for him.

"Sam?" Cas questioned, fully expecting to earn an ear-full from Sam about how rudely he'd treated Dean. Cas began thinking of replies in his head. If the argument took a sour turn he decided he'd cite Dean's rudeness at the meal as cause for his surly attitude towards him.

Sam bumped off the wall he had been leaning on, raising a large hand to wave at Cas, while a huge grin spread across his face. "Heya Cas! Sorry, your office was closed but I guessed you were on your way, just wanted to see that Dean hadn't made you rip your hair out yet."

He laughed as Cas balanced the doughnuts to unlock his office. Once inside he opened the box on his desk and gestured that Sam should take one, which he did, like always.

Ah, so at least Sam understood how infuriating his brother could be. Sam was clearly going for a non-aggressive route when speaking about the argument last night. “Not just yet, no, why did he say something?”

Sam licked the sugar from his fingers as he began explaining. “No, y’know it’s weird, he won’t say anything about any of it. Won’t say what your apartment is like, where it is, even what you guys talked about. He just keeps on saying-“ he put his hands on his hips awkwardly, and swayed side-to-side as a poor impression of Dean’s voice accompanied his next impression, ““Sammy it’s his place, not mine, I’m just grateful the guy’s given me a place to live. ’ Honestly I can’t get anything from him. You didn’t make him sign a blood pact of silence or anything did you?” Sam raised his eyebrows comically, laughing as he did.

“No Sam, I can assure there has been no blood pact as of yet.” Cas answered . He heard how unimpressed his voice sounded and cringed internally. He didn’t mean to sound so bored, he just really didn’t want to ruin his work-day by bringing his personal life into it. Although Cas wasn’t sure if Dean was part of his personal life, or if it was truly the business agreement he had hoped for. He was pleasantly surprised to hear that Dean hadn’t spoken of their argument yet to his brother.

“I’m joking Cas.” Sam laughed, clearly interpreting Cas’ boredom as having the joke go over his head. “So go on, what’s it like?” Sam pushed.

Cas sat back in his chair , scratching at the leather of his seat under his hand as he spoke. “Well I’ve only lived with him for one night but so far I would have to argue he’s... a handful.” Cas settled for that description as although it was a far cry from what he really wanted to call Dean, he decided he afforded Dean the same privacy he had shown when telling Sam.

Sam grimaced. “Ah , that bad huh?”

“ We got off on the wrong foot. I fear I was unfair; I’d had a bad day.” *As if that excuses my behaviour* . “I’ll endeavour to correct any bad blood as soon as I see him.”

Sam's eyebrows drew together . "You didn't see him this morning?"

"No, he left last night, stormed out . He wasn't back by this morning ." *Because of my appalling attitude .*

"Huh." Sam huffed, his eyes focused somewhere in the distance. He shook his head minutely, before plastering on a smile that even Cas could discern was false. "Anyway, like I promised, Jess has plans for tacos next Tuesday, are you in?"

Cas winced. Not again, not another ordeal. The atmosphere would surely reek of the altercation of last time, and that's if Dean didn't turn up, though Cas bet this time he wouldn't escape with just words being thrown at him. "I'm not sure Sam..."

"Please, Cas, Dean will not be invited and trust me, both Jess and I are wanting to forget last time just as much as you." . Sam seemed sincere, but Cas still hesitated.

He was unsure whether he could mend the friendship he'd had with Sam, not sure whether his new mantle of landlord to his brother helped or hindered it. He was sure he could survive just fine without Sam's friendship, particularly now that he was settled well at Stanford, though despite this, he found himself oddly still wanting to maintain his relationship with Sam, and to a lesser degree, Jessica. Though Dean's friendship was nothing Cas wanted to gain nor maintain anytime soon. He decided that he would give the evening one more chance, without Dean's intrusion, to test the waters. Nothing ventured nothing gained, right?

"Yes I'd love to... set the record straight so to speak."

Sam beamed. "Awesome, I'll let Jess know." As he made for the office door, he turned on his heel and raised his hands in an apologetic fashion. "Just promise me one thing Cas." He face was suddenly serious, and his voice had a cold edge underneath the surface. It was altogether an expression that Cas wholeheartedly hated on Sam.

“Anything.” Came Cas’ reply, with no conscious effort made. Even if their friendship would never prosper or be repaired, Cas knew he owed Sam as much.

Sam’s wide eyes looked imploringly at Cas. “Just... just promise me, you’ll... make an effort, with Dean.”

Cas’ mouth opened, ready to voice his defence, but Sam’s hand shot up, begging for him to listen. “ I know he doesn’t deserve it, and you’ve been nothing short of amazing to him so far, but... though he’d never admit it, Dean really needs a friend right now. ”

Cas would love to say he kept his promise to Sam, but in truth he never made much of an effort with Dean , and although that made him feel bad, the prospect of interacting with Dean made him feel far worse.

Despite the awkwardness, they’d managed to settle into a good routine. Cas would get up for work, while Dean was still out from the previous night, and head to work, during which time Dean would return to shower and sleep. He’d always be gone by the time Cas got home from work together. Honestly, they saw each other so rarely, Cas would believe Dean had moved out if it wasn’t for his belongings still around.

Of course, on unfortunate days, they would see each other and be forced to drudge through a painfully awkward interaction. Exchanged gruff greetings muttered before escaping into their respective rooms, the occasional knock on a bedroom door offering coffee if plenty had been brewed, in fact Cas had even one night told Dean ‘thank you’ for silently getting up and fetching some aspirin when he saw the professor clutching his head as he poured over papers at the dining table.

It was bearable. Not comfortable, not horrible, just bearable.

One particularly soggy day Cas had burst through the front door, soaked from head to toe and shaking like a leaf. He’d stopped to help the elderly Dr. Bard into her car before running

to his own, and despite only being out in the downpour for a couple of minutes, the strength of the rain meant that was more than enough time to become waterlogged.

Cas had expected some snide comment from Dean, or maybe a chuckle as he looked over Cas, sarcastically pointing out he should have taken an umbrella because as he'd already reminded him this morning, the forecast did predict rain.

Instead, the moment Dean saw Cas, his jaw dropped and he jumped up, almost knocking his beer off the table in his haste to run to his bathroom, retrieving 3 fresh towels.

"Cas, you idiot, you're gonna freeze!" He huffed as he helped Cas shuck his outer coat. He dropped a fresh towel onto Cas' head and gestured for him to start drying his hair with it.

Cas barely noticed the tug at his tie until it was already being pulled from his collar, when he lifted the front corner of the towel from his face to gaze questioningly at Dean, who's nimble fingers were now making quick work of detangling his knotted silk tie. "What?!" Dean shot back defensively when he was caught, although the tips of his ears did turn a shade of pink.

Before Dean could make it any further in undressing him, Cas grabbed the other man's hands, stopping them from working the tie any looser. His skin, ice cold from the rain, practically burned where it met Dean's warmth. Dean flinched. Then Cas had escaped to his room, remarking that he needed a warm shower, which Dean shouted after him to 'turn it up to full!'.

Besides that awkward interaction, there'd been very little to unpack regarding his new arrangement with Dean. Cas never asked who the woman in the photograph was, or where Dean went each night, or why he bothered showing any decency towards Cas given their rocky history. Why? Because he didn't care.

The Family Business

Taco Tuesday arrived all too quickly for Castiel's tastes but he was powerless to stop it. Every time he considered the evening, his stomach would twist unpleasantly, in excitement, or terror, or both.

Deciding to do things right this time, he stopped by a supermarket on the way to Sam's house and picked up a cheap bottle of wine. Knowing Jess wouldn't be able to enjoy it, he grabbed a large chocolate bar for her as well as he hurried on his way. As much as it was embarrassing to admit, Cas really did want to make the effort to salvage his relationship with Sam and Jess. Their company was the closest thing to a friendship Cas had experienced in years and he craved it.

Jess' tacos were cooked to perfection, as Cas had come to expect. Watching Sam and Jess chat and joke and reminisce made Cas realise that he couldn't think of any two other people more deserving of happiness and of each other. Sam looked at Jess like she hung the stars in the sky, and the way Jess' face would soften when she looked at Sam felt so intimate Cas always averted his gaze.

It made Cas consider his own relationships. Sure, Cas had never been one for friends, but he'd had more than his fair share of relationships. There was Meg, when he was young, just 14, and still under the illusion that he could be straight. Sweet young Meg, who held him while he sobbed that he was sorry he didn't feel the same way. Cas was sure that if times had been different, Meg would have been one of his only friends. But life didn't work that way. Meg found it too painful to just stay friends with Cas, so they drifted apart. Last he'd heard, she was working as a mental health nurse in a psychiatric hospital.

Then there was Zach. Zach, Cas' first foray into men that ended far from amicably. If he'd been honest with himself, Cas was using Zach to experiment with his sexuality, and Zach had been using Cas for just about everything other than sex. It didn't last long. Sometime later, in an awkward meet-up, Zach had admitted he'd never even known Cas' birthday date. Cas had been furious, asking how he could date him for over a month without ever bothering to learn that detail. Zach had pointedly asked if Cas knew when his birthday was. Cas had to shut up when he realised how hypocritical he was being as, in truth, he had no idea. I mean how was he supposed to know?

Zeke had been fun. It had only lasted a few weeks before Cas admitted that as much as he liked having him around, he just wasn't particularly *into* him. That, and the sex had sucked.

Of course, then there was the most significant relationship Cas had ever had, romantic or otherwise. Alfie. Bright, beautiful Alfie, who seemed to radiate a positive energy that Cas couldn't help but leach from. They'd met in the summer, at a house party that Cas' siblings dragged him to. Alfie had seen him from across the crowded room and approached him, shouting over the music to ask if Cas wanted a drink. Cas had shouted back that he didn't drink. Alfie had grinned, a bright beautiful look that seemed to make the music fade out from the overbearing reverberation that it had been to but a whisper in the background. He told Cas that he didn't drink either and they'd laughed about how ridiculous it had been that they were at a party refusing to drink. They'd talked all night, sneaked on to roof and made out under the stars. Cas would always say when they were together that they had a beautiful love story, and that even if he'd never be able to give Alfie much of a family name given the name 'Novak' didn't mean anything to him, he still gave him his whole heart.

Of course, Alfie had always said that too much heart was Castiel's problem. Blindly, he fell head over heels with him. When they both made it to Harvard, Cas swore that this would be the start of their new lives, together. Away from both of their families and from that sad little town where nothing ever happened. But soon, their love had morphed into something twisted. They were keeping secrets, ignoring each other's texts in favour of new friends, and avoiding one another. Cas had loved him, truly, but they drifted apart. The final straw came when, at a party, someone had dared Alfie to kiss the hottest person in the circle. Alfie blushed and leaned across the bottle in the centre of the circle. Cas, of course, had leaned forward to reciprocate, only to see Alfie locking lips with a senior he didn't recognise. He was humiliated. Looking back, he was almost grateful for Alfie's betrayal. Cas looked at the life Alfie was headed towards, a white picket fence and kids and blowing your brains out at 30 from sheer boredom, and it made his skin crawl. He didn't want to become one of those people.

Of course, now Cas supposed he was one of those people. Getting up early, going to work, coming home, watching tv then rinse and repeat. Sure, he loved his work, but the feeling of monotony had begun to grind on him years ago.

Sam too had this lifestyle; wife, child on the way, white picket fence. But he seemed... happy. Not sad, or regretful, just happy. It confused Cas although, he had to admit to himself, being in Sam's house made the prospect almost attractive.

Just looking at Sam and Jess together made the whole 'happy life' thing seem like a pretty good gig.

That thought stuck with him as they exchanged stories through their tacos. Cas told them about his upbringing, just bits and pieces, anything that seemed relevant. In return, Cas heard about Jess' relatively normal upbringing and Sam's unusual one, although there was definitely more to the story than a shrug and accompanying 'we moved about a lot'.

"What made you pick Stanford?" Cas asked, surprised by the genuine interest he felt in finding out more about Sam.

A smile appeared on Sam's face, although his eyes continued to stare off into the distance, his brows furrowing a fraction. "I don't know, I just... I'd always been mad at Dad for dragging me along with him on the road. I pretty much just picked the further college possible that still had a good law department. 'Course, 2 years later Dad died of cancer. I'd always felt guilty for leaving, but as harsh as it is, once he was dead, it -it was like a weight had been lifted. I didn't have to feel guilty anymore. I could just... be me." He smiled over at Jess and took her hand, squeezing it tightly. "And it's funny, because looking back, I know if Dad saw my life now, he wouldn't have hated me for it. He'd tell me way to go. He wasn't a bad guy. He was just bitter. Took me way too long to figure that out I think."

There was a heavy silence that hung in the air at the end of Sam's reverie. Cas hadn't expected such an emotional story to be tied to his choice of college. But hearing it first-hand put Dean into perspective. He hated members of the college because, at the end of the day, it was college that had torn their family apart. It must have been hard, especially without their mother there to guide them.

Suddenly, Sam leaned back, clapping his large hands to his thighs loudly before standing. "Cas, follow me up to Darcy's room, you're going to love it." He practically bounded up the stairs in his excitement, carrying a bottle of beer which shook with every step.

The door to Darcy's room was painted white, with an elaborate purple and gold decal on the front reading 'Darcy Winchester'. Once inside, the room seemed to reverberate with pulsing love. The pale lavender crib went well with the lilac wallpaper, creating a soothing setting perfect for a well-loved little girl. The walls were adorned with large stickers; unicorns, hearts, characters from the jungle book, a few Disney princesses. Cas supposed the whole

setup was cliché, but it still felt so inherently ‘Sam and Jess’ that it was impossible to mistake.

Would this have been Cas’ life had he been raised by his biological parents? A beautifully decorated nursery, a mother swinging him on her hip, singing to him, whispering her love? Playing catch with a father who told him that he was strong, that stuck his test scores on the fridge, and warded off the bullies from school ?4 Maybe that would have made Cas much more responsive to the whole ‘nuclear family’ setup. Maybe he’d be married, with kids in some fancy house somewhere. Although he knew he was viewing their lives through rose-tinted glasses, he still couldn’t quite resist the idyllic setting of it all.

If this was the perfect life, and Cas’ life would surely never resemble this, then what was his path? Loneliness? Going back to a cold bed, caring for a cat perhaps, ignoring his neighbours to avoid their pitying looks?

“We went for purple since the pink seemed too much.” Sam spoke, wiping a hand across the baby changing station to disrupt the dust that had begun to settle there.

“It’s lilac!” Came Jess’ shout from the kitchen downstairs. Sam chuckled.

“When’s the date?” Cas asked.

“February 23rd.” Sam answered matter-of-factly, as he began counting on his hands. “4 weeks away.” He produced. “Although I don’t know who of us is more excited; Jess, Dean or I.”

“I’ve noticed the starts of a mountain of baby clothes in our living room ready for her arrival.” Cas chuckled, weighing his vote for Dean being most excited. He pointedly chose to ignore his choice of the word ‘our’ in reference to the living-room. *His* living-room.

After a beat of silence, Sam leaned his back against the wall and considered Cas. “What about you Cas? Kids on the cards or...?” He left the question in the air.

Cas automatically bristled but reminded himself to relax his shoulders before formulating a response.

“Not really my area.” He decided to answer, abruptly stopping the train of conversation and inevitable thought.

“Ah” Sam smiled down to the ground. “Y’know it’s funny; but me neither.” He answered after a moment, raising his head to consider the room, his eyes shifting quickly between the furniture.

“What do you mean?”

“All this...” he waved about the room, his hand lingering for a fraction too long towards the crib, “kids, wife, all of it. It was never my sort of thing. It was always Dean’s dream. Not mine.”

Sam was Cas’ friend, a friend Cas was beginning to realise he needed more and more, and was already sure he would do just about anything for, but so was Jess. What was he saying? “Sam ...” Cas spoke slowly, but stepped into his line of sight, like a cop entering an interrogation room. “Jess is-“

“The love of my life.” Sam interrupted, smiling up at Cas, seeming to understand exactly what Cas was beginning to say. Cas’ shoulders relaxed minutely. “But I hadn’t planned it. Now it’s here, I’m so grateful and beyond happy, but I always kind of... resented this type of life, I think?” He took a long thoughtful sip of his beer, before looking down and beginning to fidget with the label. “This had been our families’ life before I was born. It’s what got mom killed. She stayed in the house to try to get *me* out, which meant she couldn’t. So I grew up thinking if I ever loved someone, I wouldn’t do that to them; I wouldn’t risk putting them in danger. Of course, when I met Jess, she... she changed me. Made it so I wasn’t afraid anymore. I could just enjoy my life and not worry about whether I deserved it or whatever.” He grinned to himself. “Dean though, ha, Dean always wanted this. To get married, to have a boat-load of kids, to bake pies and leave them on the windowsill to cool.” Sam’s voice had dropped to little more than a mumble, as if he was talking more to himself than to Cas now. “I think that’s why he drinks. He’s mad at himself, because as much as he wants it, it’s a life he can never have.”

“Why can he never have it?” Cas interrupted.

Sam looked up at Cas again and flashed a sad smile. “ Honestly?... I don’t think he can bear to let himself be happy.”

Cas and Sam stared at each other for a long while, Cas in confusion, while Sam’s face reflected such a strong sense of concern it almost bowled Cas over. It made Sam look much older than he really was, and Cas suspected Sam had spent many years worrying about Dean.

“Sam?” Jess’ uncertain voice floated up the stairs. Both of the men jolted, and started downstairs, confusion painting Sam’s face as they reached the landing .

Jess stood at the front door, holding it open for a man in the doorway. He appeared to be in his late fifties, wearing a dirty baseball cap and a mucky jacket over a similarly dishevelled plaid shirt. His face was old, and the lines there read that he seemed much older, although there was a kind glint in his eye. A scruffy beard topped off his look.

“B-Bobby?” Sam ventured, uncertainly. A cacophony of emotions flitted over Sam’s features; surprise, happiness, fear .

The man, Bobby, now Cas had learned, smiled through his beard up at Sam. “Boy, you got some ‘ splainin’ to do.”

Balls!

Chapter Summary

Here we see the introduction of Bobby, he's not going to have a major part but he'll no doubt crop up again at some point. Also guys, now that I'm writing the chapters as I go, although I have a rough idea of where the plot is going, I can't know for certain enough to put appropriate tags in place, so please check the tags before reading each chapter just in case there are any changes which might make you uncomfortable.

“The nocturnal African dung beetle Scarabaeus satyrus is the only known non-vertebrate animal to navigate and orient itself using the Milky Way.”

Honestly, why Jess had stuck this on the television, Cas had no idea. She sat beside him on the big sofa, having long since fallen asleep, her half-eaten chocolate bar threatening to slip off her lap with every deep breath. It had been what felt like hours since Bobby, who Jess had quietly explained was a family friend, had arrived and demanded to speak to Sam in private. Cas had the strong sense as Jess hurried him into the living room and planted him in front of this horrific documentary that he was being held hostage.

Heavy footsteps behind him, entering the living room, pulled him from the documentary instantly, though to be honest, that wasn't much of a feat.

Sam stood in the entranceway to the living room, with an expression far too tired for his young features. “Cas, can I borrow you for a minute?” He croaked, his voice sounding as though he hadn't done much speaking over the past few hours. Cas rose ungracefully having been sat in the same spot for so long but was careful not to wake Jess up as he went.

Within the dining room, Bobby was sat at the head of the table, swirling a small amount of whiskey around in a tumbler. He didn't look up as Cas took a seat at the opposite end of the table to him. Sam sat beside Bobby, filling both of their tumblers to half-full before turning to Cas with a grim look.

“Cas, Bobby.” He gestured to Bobby, and back again, “Bobby this is Cas.”

Bobby's head finally rose, his eyes becoming visible under the brim of his baseball hat. The warmth Cas had seen in his eyes before had since vanished, replaced by a cold hardness. He gave an expression which reminded Cas of being reprimanded in school, though what he'd done wrong he didn't know.

"You drinkin', boy?" Bobby's slow drawl eventually came. The way he eyed Cas made him want to sit straighter and puff out his chest as if Bobby could see his soul and all his secrets just by looking at him and was carefully weighing up whether he was worthy.

"No, thank you. I don't drink." Cas answered honestly, refusing to be intimidated by this hillbilly.

Bobby frowned, but his voice remained level; "Where I come from boy, you don't know a man till you drink with 'im". His dialect reminded Cas very much of Dean's way of speaking, though it seemed more natural.

Cas narrowed his eyes, realising that this wasn't an introduction as much as it was a game of chess. "Well, your boys-" He gestured vaguely to Sam, who all of a sudden looked rather scared, "must be exhausted keeping up with all of their friends then." Cas didn't know where this confidence had come from, nor his stupidity. What possessed him to refer to Sam and Dean as his 'boys' he wasn't sure, but it felt like a natural conclusion upon examining what little information he had about Bobby at the minute.

Bobby's face remained hard for a moment, as Sam's fearful expression turned to him with quiet horror, anticipating some disaster no doubt, but to both of their surprises, Bobby's beard split to reveal a huge grin, his entire face warming considerably. Cas found it to be an unusual reaction, given he essentially had just called both Sam and Dean alcoholics. Cas was beginning to figure that in their family, the term 'alcoholic' was not so much a condition as it was a badge of honour.

"Well, any friend of Sam an' Dean's is a friend of mine. Just wanted to check Dean's new boy was good enough for him." Both Sam and Cas began to object at that, but Bobby paid them no mind, raising his hand, "And to drop of this of course." A small gold charm dropped from Bobby's hand and dangled on a thin leather cord.

As soon as Sam gave up on arguing Bobby's words and saw the necklace, his entire face changed, a small smile appearing on his lips and a glimmer of emotion shining in his eyes. Hope? Happiness? Wonder? Cas wasn't sure.

"B-Bobby?" Sam choked, reaching forward to take it from Bobby's hand. Bobby swung it away from Sam, and though his long arms easily could have still reached it, he faltered.

"He lost it in the fight. Searched for weeks before finding it in a damn junk engine. By the look of it, those bastards wanted to hide it." Bobby grumbled, gauging Cas' expression carefully. Cas met his gaze and held it for just a moment, before stretching his own hand out to collect the necklace. Bobby dropped it into his palm immediately. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be a small amulet, the weight of the gold charm surprisingly heavy, resembling a small face with a horned helmet.

Cas gave Bobby a questioning look.

"Make sure that gets back to him. Tell him the Impala's his whenever he grows the balls to come back and pick her up." He stood and finished his last sip of whisky. He scarcely reacted to the burn, before punishing Castiel with his gaze once again as he made his way to the front door. "And tell that damn idjit to pick up the phone sometime."

Rage, Rage

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is late guys, kind of got addicted to a few other fics that are currently works in progress. I'm not 100% happy with this chapter but I felt guilty having just left this for so long so nevertheless, here you go!

This is where we start venturing into Dean's backstory, and its bloody. Although I don't explicit talk about the violence, you can get the general gist and hear about the injuries following violence, so I just wanted to warn you guys if you are sensitive to that. Also warnings for homophobia. What happens in this story is in no way meant to belittle victims of homophobic aggression or anything such as, I just wanted to explore it here a bit.

Cas crawled into his apartment at quarter to eleven, far later than he'd been planning. The evening had ended quickly once Bobby had taken his leave, a daze of thanking Jess for the food and congratulating Sam on having such a loving family, before stumbling back to his own apartment. Cas had more or less never been drunk, but he imagined how he felt at the moment was similar to it. The information from Bobby had made his limbs feel weightless yet also incredibly heavy. The turbulence in his head made navigating difficult, hearing sounds through a far tunnel even when they were beside him.

Bobby had said there had been a fight and suggested that 'those bastards' wanted to hide Dean's amulet from him. The idea of Dean participating in a fight, particularly if it took place in a bar, didn't much surprise Cas. Bobby's choice of words, calling Cas 'Dean's boy' also seemed peculiar. If it meant friend, not only was it a strange choice of words, but it also wasn't entirely true given Cas doubted Dean was under any false pretence that they were friends. It also seemed strange to describe one's landlord in these terms.

Once he was through his front door, Dean turned his head slightly in greeting, his eyes not leaving the TV screen as he spoke, "Hey Cas, Sam kept you yapping huh?" He laughed, raising a beer bottle to his lips without actually drinking, just holding it there in place.

"Sorry?" Cas replied, still dazed, failing entirely to hear Dean's words.

“I’m saying it’s late, way past your bedtime.” He raised an eyebrow questioningly, finally removing his eyes from the screen and taking in Cas’ appearance. “You okay?” Dean pressed, seeing the confusion in Cas’ face. He raised the remote to silence the TV and adjusted in his seat so he could throw his arm over the back of the couch and face Cas.

Cas stumbled his way around the couch and sat beside Dean, resting his elbows on his thighs as he cradled his too-heavy head.

“‘M fine.” He mumbled.

Castiel was sure he was overreacting. He knew Dean, didn’t he? Sure they didn’t ever really talk, and he had come here with no mention of what preceded his arrival, and his own brother didn’t want him in the same house as his pregnant wife...

The drive back to Castiel’s shared apartment had been punctuated by these traitorous thoughts.

Dean had been in a fight. A fight that was bad enough he had to leave town. And then when he arrived, Sam was hesitant about housing him.

Was Dean... dangerous?

A fight could mean anything from a spat to all-out warfare, and of course, Sam refused to enlighten Cas before he left, saying instead that Dean would have to tell Cas himself.

What if Dean was a dangerous person? That would explain his unwillingness to talk about his past, maybe the drinking too, and Cas couldn’t deny that Dean had been exceptionally quick to anger thus far.

The rational part of Cas' brain argued that Dean was fiercely protective of Sam and his family and hadn't been aggressive so far. A memory surfaced, of Dean in the diner chowing on a burger, Cas surprising him by asking if he had a criminal record. He'd said no, and Cas had believed him.

But he could have been lying. Perhaps that's why he went out every night, he went to bars to pick fights with anyone that looked up for it. He never seemed particularly dishevelled when he'd arrive at the apartment the next morning, but perhaps he was good at hiding it. Or at winning fights.

"Cas?" Dean's surprisingly soft voice pierced his thoughts, accompanied by an equally soft hand resting on his shoulder. Cas lowered an arm to see Dean, leaning forward with his eyebrows pinched in concern. His wide green eyes betrayed the same concern, staring at Cas with such focus as if trying to decipher whether he needed medical help.

No. Dean was not dangerous. The decision came very easily despite Cas' previous thoughts of Dean's sketchy past and the potential bloodshed that caused him to flee. Flee from his home. Flee to Castiel.

Cas let out a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding, Dean's worried gaze cementing his decision. Expecting that words would fail him should he try to explain, instead he gripped blindly in his pocket to retrieve the amulet Bobby had entrusted him with. He held it by the string before Dean, the weight of the charm causing the strap to sway, comically reminding Castiel of the way magicians would pretend to hypnotise audience members with a swaying pocket watch.

Dean's eyebrows furrowed when he saw the item, fractionally, before understanding swept over his features as he made a grab for the necklace. He pulled it out of Cas' hand before he could react, not that he would've stopped Dean from taking the charm anyway.

"Where did you get this?" Dean breathed, rubbing a thumb over the charm in reverence, causing the bronze to shine as if freshly polished. He shot an accusing look up to Cas as he spoke before returning his gaze to the amulet.

"Bobby Singer showed up at Sam's house." Cas answered honestly.

“Bobby was... here?” Dean’s eyes seemed to conceal an angry storm just below the surface but his voice was soft.

“He told me to give this to you, and tell you there was an Impala waiting for you. Oh, and to call.” He added as an afterthought.

Dean’s eyes seemed to be focused on something far into the distance. His bottom lip quivered for a short second before he began worrying it with his teeth. Cas afforded him a minute with his thoughts in silence, simply looking at Dean. With each second that passed, Dean seemed to retreat into himself, so by the end of the minute when Cas began to speak Dean appeared nothing more than an emotionless mask.

“There’s more. Bobby mentioned a fight?”

That had managed to rouse a response from Dean, who sat up suddenly as if he has been hit with an electric current. The hand which concealed his newly returned amulet squeezed a fist over his heart defensively. Dean’s eyes focused on the TV, the coffee table, the wall; anywhere but Cas.

“Dean...” Cas began again. Dean’s eyes automatically shot to him as he began but just as quickly as they had reached him, they retreated, opting instead to take in his surroundings again. Cas opened his mouth to press but quickly found himself closing it again, not wanting to disturb the pregnant silence that had grown between them, heavy like fog.

An eternity passed.

When Dean broke the silence, his voice was barely more than a whisper, but held such a tenderness that it reminded Castiel of speaking a loved one’s name. He slumped as he spoke, clearly defeated.

“Sam gave me this when we were just kids. Think it must’ve been my birthday or something ? I thought he stole it. Said Uncle Bobby gave it to him. When Sam left for Stanford this was

all I had left of him. I wore it every damn day.” He tightened his hand into a fist with the amulet fixed in his palm. His eyes switched to the side to watch Cas carefully for a moment, as if suddenly unsure. His tongue slipped out to swipe at his bottom lip, betraying his nervousness. His spine straightened as he began again.

“Back home, I worked in Bobby’s autoshop . I loved it; working for that grumpy ass.” The sides of his mouth tilted upwards. “Fixing the cars, updating the vintage models, all of it.” His eyes became hard. “ Should’ a known better. Something always goes wrong. I just... I needed... a win. To finally have something go right, after Sam and Dad and all of it.”

He shifted his body to the side, so he could look at Cas straight. His green eyes shone with intensity, his eyebrows pinching high as if pleading forgiveness, though there was still a hardness to his expression.

“You gotta believe me, man, I didn’t want to fight anyone. The guys at Bobby’s shop, they’re not bad guys, they’re just... I dunno , but after... after... after-” Though he repeated the same word, his final use indicated a finality that wouldn’t be budged, “They looked at me different. Stopped talking to me. My lunches kept on going missing.” He smirked humourlessly. “Thought it was just a prank. Bobby told me to be careful but I didn’t listen. Bunch of ‘ em were waiting for me at the edge of the property one night.”

A gasp fell from Cas’ mouth, startling him, though Dean didn’t react.

“Those fucking son’s ‘a’ bitches . Almost killed me. When Benny couldn’t drag them offa me, he called the cops. I could tell you every one of their fucking names, but they all got off with no jail time.”

“Why?” Cas interrupted, appalled .

Dean looked sheepish, though there was still clearly anger lying just below the surface.

“The... the thing I did... in a small town like that? Cops woulda done it to me themselves if they’d gotten the chance. Anger overtook his expression again. “Punctured lung; two broken ribs, two fractured; 3 broken fingers; fractured skull with a concussion. You can still feel the

cut-” He made a blind grab for Cas’ hand with both of his, careful not to drop the amulet from his left, guiding his fingers to trace a raised angry line at the back of his skull, hidden below short brown hairs. Dean’s skin was warm and his palms sweaty. “-right there.” He dropped Cas’ hand. The difference between Dean’s warm skin and the cool air was jarring.

Dean’s fist, still enclosing the amulet tightened, as if he was drawing strength from it. “I swear-” Dean began again and Cas pulled his attention from the man’s hands to his face. His lips were set in a hard line. “If Benny hadn’t of stopped it when he did, I’d be dead. No doubt if they managed to find me now they’d finish the job. I was in the hospital for 4 weeks. I don’t know which was worse, the pain or the hospital foo-” He cut off his sentence as his voice wavered, rubbing a hand slowly across his face, leaving it pressed against his mouth. When he removed it, Cas thought he saw his lip quiver. His fist shook slightly with how tightly he was gripping the amulet, his knuckles becoming pale.

Cas’ mind was racing. Dean was hospitalised in a fight. Nearly killed. Dean had said they weren't bad guys but... What kind of monsters could do that to a person? That was all Cas could see them as in his mind, a repulsive concoction of evil towering over a kind, righteous man. The men must have been less than human, less than-

But at that, Cas stopped. Less than human. But they were not monsters. They were normal men. Apparently they were not 'bad guys'. What in all of heaven and hell could compel someone to do something so heinous? Perhaps, Cas’ traitorous thoughts supplied, the thing Dean did did warrant such inhumane violence. An act so hurtful and grotesque that his friends turned against him, and even the police would rather beat him to a pulp than have him face a fair trial for his actions.

“Dean.” Cas began slowly, aware that what he was about to say would likely set Dean off. “The ‘thing’ you-”

Dean roared, a guttural broken sound, flinging himself off the sofa, dragging his hands through his hair and clutching at the fine strands as if to rip them out. His eyes were wild and unfocused. He took deep uneven breaths that matched the shortness of Cas’ own breaths.

“No don’t you-”

“Dean I just want to understand!”

“Fuck you Cas! You don’t get to-”

“I deserve to know!” Cas didn’t believe his own words, although Dean apparently did, letting his arms drop heavily to his sides. He looked deflated. Utterly, utterly broken.

A voice echoed in Castiel’s mind.

‘ Something in you is *broken* ’

Perhaps Dean’s particularly painful choice of words that today were more relevant to his own experiences than any reading he was making of Castiel’s circumstances.

“Cas.” Dean’s eyes were shining, but his hands were curled into fists as if he was ready for a fight. “Not this...” His voice quivered with unshed tears. “Not now.”

Cas got up from the couch and approached Dean slowly as if approaching a wild, cornered animal. He lay a hand on Dean’s shoulder. Dean flinched and his shoulders caved, dropping his head to his chest in defeat.

“Dean... if they come here, if they come looking for you... I need to know what lie to tell them. To keep you, and Sam and Jess, safe.” He finished. Each word had been picked carefully. Castiel didn’t think it was possible, but Dean seemed to deflate even more.

Dean took a deep, shuddering breath to steady himself. He flexed his hands before letting them hang limply at his sides. His eyes slipped closed slowly.

“I... They... They found out I’m bi.” He let out in nothing more than a whisper.

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