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## Set Me Up, Buttercup

by [TamrynEradani](#)

### Summary

Dean is the starting setter for his college's volleyball team. His plans for the year include winning Conferences, passing his classes, kicking Benny's butt at basketball, and making sure Ash remembers to eat and bathe on a semi-regular basis. He doesn't plan on meeting Cas Milton but once he does, Dean's carefully planned year changes.

### Notes

Thank you to everyone who has helped me through my first Big Bang; especially the mods who made this whole thing possible (and were very good at getting back to me even though I had lots of questions), my fantastic artist who made some pretty awesome art, and my sister and Lily for reading through this (multiple times) and helping me iron out all the issues.



Dean gets to the gym, and he finds his teammates by the lockers next to the practice courts, but he doesn't take off his sweats or his long sleeve yet. He shoves his coat, his wallet, and his phone into a locker, grins at Victor, and does a quick head count.

They're all here so Dean jerks his thumb towards the stairs. "Come on. Let's go warm up."

He's met with an immediate chorus of groans.

"You're kidding," Robbie says.

"Nope. Coach was very clear on this. If we want to play intramural basketball then we have to properly warm up."

Dean's the co-captain and starting setter for his college's volleyball team. They have a short season in the fall and a longer, regular season in the spring, and the guys get antsy in the winter. There's too much practice with too little competition to break it up. Somehow, they'd wheedled Coach into letting them form an IM basketball team, and Dean hopes it's enough.

Winter training makes or breaks the spring season. If the guys get bored and start slacking and ruin the season before it starts then Dean's going to be pissed. Their team's got potential, it's just a matter of harnessing it.

Dean flick his gaze over to Victor, their senior captain, for support.

"Come on guys," Victor says. "It's only three laps. We're lucky Coach is even letting us play at all."

The guys continue to grumble, but since they do it while warming up, Dean doesn't care. The goal is to have no pulled or strained muscles at the end of tonight's game.

"Seriously?" Robbie mutters when they're back on Court 3. "We didn't need to warm up for this game."

Dean follows Robbie's gaze to where the other team is getting ready, and he can't help but agree.

It's the cross country team, and it's no secret that basketball isn't their forte. They're great at running through the woods, and they have the highest GPA of any sports team on campus, but they suck at basketball.

It doesn't help that most of them are short and scrawny. Rupert, the loud mouth with a severe Napoleon complex and a thing for tequila, can't be more than 100 pounds soaking wet. And some of the other guys might have height, but their legs are the size of Dean's arms.

Well, all but one.

"Looks like they've got themselves a ringer," Dean says, loud enough to be overheard.

Benny's head snaps up and he groans when he spots Dean. Dean flashes him a smile and jogs over to say hi. They'd played football together in high school and somehow they'd ended up at the same college. Neither of them play football now, but it's nice to have a familiar face on campus.

Dean and Benny meet halfway between their respective teams and clap each other on the back.

"How'd you get roped into this?" Dean asks.

"They promised me a free cup at the next party if I showed up. Not sure it's worth it though."

"Ah, come on. It'll be fun." Dean's full of shit and they both know it. "You gonna be the game changer? Single-handedly win the game for your teammates?"

Benny does track year round now. He's a thrower and the reason Dean knows any of the track guys at all. He's dragged Dean to a couple of the track parties, and in return, Dean extends an invite whenever the volleyball guys, or girls, decide to do something.

"You're not going to let me live this down, are you?" Benny asks, forlorn.

Dean and Benny sometimes play pick-up hoops at lunch with Benny's fraternity and some of the football guys. They're never on the same team which means Dean doesn't win too many, and Dean's eager to rub this loss in Benny's face.

"See you at tip off," Dean says. He smirks and heads back over to his teammates.

They go through a three man weave passing drill and some lay-up lines, and Dean's worked up a sweat by the time the ref (some poor work study who doesn't make enough money for this to be worth it) calls the start of the game. Dean strips down to his shorts and his t-shirt and joins his four teammates at half-court. They're in their grey practice shirts so they match (and no one has to wear pinnies, because those things are nasty). Dean wants to know who's brilliant idea it was to have grey practice shirts. All he's done is warm up for some IM basketball and he has a dark, wet patch on the small of his back. At the end of volleyball practices, his entire shirt is three shades darker than it starts out as.

The cross country boys circle up for some kind of cheer, and they're all now in knee length spandex. Well, all except Benny, and Dean's grateful for small miracles.

"And people give us shit about spandex," Victor mutters.

Dean's lost track of how many snide remarks he's gotten about how he must wear spandex, because he plays volleyball. He used to get into fights over it. Now he just looks threatening until they cower or he rolls his eyes and walks away. Men's volleyball wears shorts. Compression shorts under them, but they don't show. And they don't prance around in spandex.

"They just want to see us in the tiny girls' spandex," Karl says. "Inseam so short they ride up your ass."

“For fuck’s sake, keep your fantasies out of my hearing range,” Victor snaps.

Dean laughs and lines up so they can figure out who’s guarding who. He wishes he got to cover Benny, but Benny and Strub are tipping off which means they’re paired. Benny cranes his neck up to get a proper look at Strub and then he turns to raise his eyebrows at Dean.

Dean grins. Strub is 6’7” and he’s got a decent vertical and a wicked arm swing. He’s the best middle Dean could ask for. They’re going to tear up the court together this season. Especially since they’ve finally managed to nail down the timing for Strub’s quicks. The guy can get his hand on anything, but when they’ve got the perfect set he can put the ball down inside the ten foot line. And it’s awesome.

Dean’s team wins the tip off easily. Strub taps it to Victor who passes to Robbie and they’re off. Robbie gets an easy lay-up, and they hustle back on defense and Dean gets his first good look at the guy he’s covering.

He’s only an inch or so shorter than Dean, and while he’s got more muscle than his teammates, he isn’t big. His eyes are bright and blue, and Dean would say they’re his best feature but then the guy smiles, and Dean’s heart does a stupid skip thing.

“Cas,” the guy says when he catches Dean staring.

“You’re Cas?” When Benny had talked Dean’s ear off about Castiel Milton, the awesome transfer, Dean hadn’t expected the guy in front of him. He seems quiet, unassuming, but apparently he’s one of the best half-milers in the country.

“You’ve heard of me?” Cas seems surprised, and a pleased blush creeps up his cheeks.

The basketball clunks off the backboard and Strub easily gets the rebound. Dean doesn’t rush back down the court. Neither does Cas.

“Benny was excited about you. Said you’re fast.”

Cas shrugs like he hadn’t shattered the Division 3 freshman records two years ago. Dean gets passed the ball, and he easily pivots around Cas for a bank shot.

“I’m quite miserable at basketball if it’s any consolation.”

Dean laughs as they head back down to Cas’s side of the court.

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The game is a slaughter. Dean’s heard a couple rumors about the XC team being mercied in IM basketball. Dean hadn’t even realized basketball was the kind of sport you could be mercied in, but he can definitely see how it might have happened to them.

At the end of the game they shake hands with each other and the XC team circles up and shouts, “Still 3rd in the nation,” and it’s over.

Dean pulls on his sweats and his jacket and runs to catch up with Benny. “Since you don’t have a Nationals plaque to console yourself with, want to come to ‘Kins with me? We can split some gator fries.”

“And you can tease me relentlessly?” Benny guesses.

Dean grins. “It’s like you know me or something.”

McKinley's is on the first floor of the Campus Center which is only about 100 feet from the gym. Sometimes, Dean really likes going to a small school. Today is one of those days. There's a good four inches of snow on the ground, and the cold air bites at Dean's lips and ears as they speed walk across the street to reach the Campus Center.

They sit down to chocolate milk and fries loaded up with cheese sauce and bacon. Dean thanks his good metabolism and his daily workouts for letting him eat shit like this on a daily basis.

"How's your actual IM team doing?" Dean asks.

That brings a smile to Benny's face. "Good. Better when they don't show up completely baked. Sunday nights are a tough time for games. The Sigs beat us, but they play dirty. You guys will definitely give us a run for our money. Strub's a menace."

"Oh yeah. We can all dunk. Well, except Shurley. Poor libero's got no ups."

"Even your fat ass?"

"You love this ass."

"You wish."

Dean takes a long drink of his milk. "How are things with Andrea?"

Benny shrugs and doesn't meet Dean's eyes as he drags a fry through congealing cheese. "She parties a lot, but she promises she's not taking anyone home with her. The long distance sucks."

Dean has no experience with this kind of thing, but he nods his agreement.

"You didn't come here to listen to me whine." Benny straightens his shoulders and shoves the fry into his mouth.

"No, it's - " Dean pauses. Cas is at the checkout line with a yogurt and a granola bar. Their eyes meet, and Dean doesn't know what prompts him to do it, but he raises a hand in a half-hearted wave.

Cas catches the movement and smiles, and once he's paid, he comes straight towards Dean and Benny's table. He hovers for a moment once he gets there, uncertain, and Dean slides over to make room for him.

"Guess you probably don't want any fries," Dean says watching as Cas's nimble fingers crumble his granola bar into his yogurt. Cas has nice fingers, nice hands in general. They look soft, and Dean's betting Cas doesn't have lifting calluses lining his palms. Dean would feel weird about checking out Cas's hands, but Dean's a setter; checking out other people's hands is second nature to him. Cas's fingers are long, not enough to palm a basketball, but enough that with the right training he could be a decent setter.

"You're welcome to, of course," Dean says, forcing himself to say something so he doesn't get lost in thoughts of what else Cas's hands might be good at. "Are you really eating yogurt at night?"

Cas mixes the granola chunks into his yogurt. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Yogurt is a breakfast food."

"If it makes you feel any better, I had a yogurt for breakfast too."

"You must really like yogurt."

Cas takes a large bite, swallows before he answers. "It has calcium and protein. It's filling. I can mix granola into it. It's quick and," Cas's cheeks pink, "it's easy to take on the go."

It takes Dean a moment to get what Cas is getting at and when he does, he laughs. "You have a problem getting to class on time?"

"I don't like waking up early."

"You should've gone D1," Dean says. "I hear they not only hand out As to athletes, but you get to sleep in."

"I'm not good enough to run D1. And I don't like being handed things." Cas tucks his arms in against his sides and goes back to finding his yogurt fascinating.

Dean knows better than to press so he puts on his easiest smile and says, "Guess I'll have to start calling you Tony Stark. You don't happen to have an extra Iron Man suit lying around, do you?"

That gets a small chuckle out of Cas and they move on to safer topics like superheroes and franchises. Once it's firmly established that Marvel is the best franchise but Batman is the best superhero, Dean decides that he and Cas can be friends. They exchange numbers, and Dean teases him some more about his yogurt and then Cas is off to try and get some work done.

"You were awfully quiet," Dean says pushing the rest of the fries towards Benny. "Surprised you didn't jump in to defend Wolverine seeing as he's your favorite and all."

"Didn't want to ruin the magic," Benny says with a grin. "You always give out your number on the first date?"

"Jackass," Dean says but he's smiling too. "Why don't we head up to the game room, and I'll kick your ass at pool."

"Yeah, 'cause *that* sounds like fun," Benny says with a roll of his eyes. "How about Mario Kart. Best three out of five. Winner gets to pick tonight's movie."

Dean pretends to think it over. "Deal. Getting tired of easy wins anyways."

"I'm gonna kick your ass," Benny promises with a growl and, laughing, they head upstairs to round out the night with video games and a movie.

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The thing about a campus like this is that once you know someone, you see them *everywhere*. The whole week after the basketball game, Dean sees Cas constantly. On Monday they end up in Quigley together where Dean has his Sports & Politics class. Cas is coming down the hill, and Dean's coming across from his ceramics class, and they meet at the walk-up to Quigley. Once they get inside, Cas heads upstairs for his macroeconomics class, and Dean heads down the hall.

On Tuesday, they pass by each other when Dean's headed to his history class and Cas is leaving from Carr - the math building. Dean smiles and Cas smiles back, and Dean finds his American Environmental history class a little bit easier to sit through than usual. He hopes they're done with the bison book soon. The first chapter was definitely the worst, a twenty five page discussion on the different types of grass bison eat. The content has gotten more interesting, but it's still a dry read and Dean doesn't have the attention span for it.

On Wednesday, they meet by Quigley again, and Dean rallies up his courage and says, "Hey, wanna grab lunch after this?"

“Sure,” Cas says. “Kins?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a lab at 1:30 so I don’t have time to do Brooks justice. Besides, I live up in North Village so my meal plan isn’t that big.”

North Village is by far the best housing on campus. It’s apartment style living with a full kitchen, a living room, five bedrooms, and, perhaps most importantly, two bathrooms. The only reason Dean’s managed to snag a spot in one as a junior is because Victor had senior draw number 5 last year.

Living in an apartment means Dean makes most of his own food these days. It’s for the best, because he’s pretty sure Brooks dusts their food with laxatives or something, and McKinley’s is too expensive to eat three full meals at every day. He’s got a meal plan so he can go to Sunday brunch (the best part of the week, and the only good reason to go to Brooks) and for late night snacking or the occasional lunch at Kins.

“Oh,” Dean says, before Cas can go up the stairs. “This is a Monday-Wednesday class for me so I don’t get out until 12:15.”

The corners of Cas’s lips quirk up in a smile. “I’ll save a seat for you then.”

Dean’s lucked out with his schedule this semester. He has two Tuesday-Thursday classes and two Monday-Wednesday classes and he has a geology lab that takes up most of Wednesday afternoon, but his Fridays are free. It means he doesn’t miss class for weekend tournaments, and it’ll give him a big block of time to work on his ceramics projects once they get further into the semester.

He’d taken Ceramics I last semester, because he’d needed a class that wasn’t for his major or minor, one where he didn’t have to care too much. The plan had backfired, because Dean had gotten a bit obsessive about the class - enough that he’s taking the next level - but it’s definitely relaxing. He likes to go down to the basement of the Campus Center and work. He can sit there for hours, sketching out designs, molding clay, creating something new and interesting and *alive* out of a chunk of reddish brown clay.

The process amazes him every time. He looks at a lump of clay and then at his latest project, and he can’t believe how that lump could become an entire set of dishes or a statue or a storage container shaped like a book. Dean had been particularly proud of that last one, and he’d given it to Sam as a birthday present.

Dean likes to work with his hands, something that shouldn’t surprise him given his choice of sport and his position on the team. Unlike setting, pottery is an individual thing and at the end of the day, he has something to show for his work. Well, something more than game footage or updated stats on the website. Speaking of game footage, Dean should go to Coach’s office sometime today and get some tape to review so he knows what plays they should focus on next week at practice.

Before Dean can get too lost in thoughts about practice prep and strategy for their upcoming season, Professor McLeod (it’s Crowley to you peons) sweeps dramatically into the room to start their lecture for the day.

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Dean finds Cas tucked into the corner of the campus center lobby, at one of the high tables. Dean’s surprised Cas managed to find a table at all, because the lunch rush at Kins is the worst. Usually, Dean would just grab a burger instead of waiting fifteen minutes for a sandwich, but he has a three hour lab coming up and then it’s straight to practice, and he needs something a little more substantive. So he’s got a turkey and ham and salami sandwich on Italian herb bread. He piled on the cheese and the lettuce and even some tomatoes and peppers, because he figured the more food he could eat the better.

“Was Econ good?” Dean asks. He hooks his backpack over his chair and sits down.

Cas shrugs. “I guess. I’m an Econ minor because I couldn’t double major in English and Religious Studies, not because I have any particular interest in it.”

Their college prides themselves on producing well-rounded graduates (producing, like instead of a college they’re a freaking factory) which means you can’t major and minor within the same division of study. Out of the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences you have to major in one and minor in another. After that, if you want any additional majors or minors they can be in any division, but finding the time for all those extra classes is near impossible. Dean would know.

“You could’ve gone for Geology,” Dean says and he grins at Cas’s shudder.

“I took astronomy for my lab science, and I will never take a science class again in my life. Thank goodness.”

“Bio’s awful and chem is the worst, but geology isn’t so bad. We’ve got rocks. And there’s a seismograph underneath Alden.”

Cas doesn’t even pretend to look interested. “I take it you’re a geo major?”

“Geology major, History minor. If I can swing it I might add an art minor. You?”

“English major with an Econ and Religious Studies minor. I want to do my senior project on *Paradise Lost*.”

“Ew.” They had to read a bit of that in Dean’s English 200 class, and it had been miserable. He can’t imagine why anyone would voluntarily read it let alone write a sixty page paper on it.

“Lucifer is fascinating,” Cas says and a couple girls walking by turn to give them weird looks.

Dean grins obnoxiously and waves. They clutch their takeout boxes to their chests and hurry off.

“By tomorrow we’re going to be known as the resident Satanists,” Dean says.

“I’ll make sure to brush up on my Enochian.”

Their eyes meet across the table, and Dean cracks first, bursting into laughter. Cas joins him and then Dean has to rush through his lunch so he’ll make it to lab on time.

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Dean’s used to the snow. You don’t grow up in Northwestern Pennsylvania without learning to deal, but he hates the long winters. Volleyball is an indoor sport, but Dean likes to workout outside. He likes to go for long runs, he likes to hit a ball around on the beach, and he hates being cooped up in the gym all the time.

What he hates the most, though, is the treadmill. He doesn’t run on the indoor track, because it’s 200 meters, and he’d drive himself insane if he had to run 24 laps every time he wanted to go for an easy three mile jog. Plus, whoever made it didn’t think it through too well, because there’s not enough padding between the surface and the underlying concrete, and it gives you nasty shin splints if you run on it too often. So Dean’s stuck with machines - treadmill, elliptical, rower - when he wants to get his cardio done during the winter.

Of course, he could probably get away without doing anything like that at all. It’s pre-season for the volleyball team which means Dean and Victor are running practice. Three days a week they set up a

net and work on volleyball skills, but the other days are dedicated to fitness training.

Today was a stair day followed by lifting, and Dean's feeling wiped out. They squatted and hang cleaned and benched and followed it up with some auxiliary lifts and Dean feels like he's floating through space. But, his workout isn't finished yet. He's going to run three miles and do another few sets of core before he calls it a day.

He makes it his personal mission to be the fittest person on the team, and it's a tough call between who needs to be in the best shape; the libero, the setter, or the middle hitter. In theory, Dean shouldn't have to take more than half a step in every direction, because the ball should be passed right to him. But once they get into a good volley and the ball gets hit with some heat and people aren't in quite the right positions, the passes deteriorate. And it's Dean's job to get the second ball no matter what, so if Shurley shanks a pass then Dean better track it down, get off a good set, and then bust his ass to get back and cover the hitter.

Besides, Dean likes to run. He's not a competitive runner, cross country and racing have no appeal to him, but he likes to turn his mind off as his body moves. It's relaxing, it's a break from the rush of daily life and the best part is that he doesn't feel like he's wasting time. He's exercising so it's okay to take a mental time out.

When Dean's run is over, he wipes down the machine, wipes the sweat off his face, grabs a yoga mat, and goes to find a space to do his core. By the time he walks into one of the squash courts his face is sweating profusely again. Dean wipes it off with a damp shirt sleeve and rolls out his mat.

He starts with V-ups, because they're the worst and the guys are too wimpy to do them. They whine and complain until Victor agrees to do suitcases which are the baby version of V-ups. By the end of the season, Dean's going to have them doing V-up ladders.

He's doing windshield wipers when a mat plops down next to him. Dean's startled out of the exercise and he grins up at Cas. "Hey man."

"Hello." Cas's cheeks are flushed and he has some sweat wetting the hair at his forehead. "Mind if I join you?"

"Depends. You going to show me up?"

Cas laughs and drops down on his back. "Looks like we're evenly matched. But I'll wait until you've finished the wipers to start."

"Ha!" It's more of a grunt than a laugh as Dean swings his legs to the right. His stomach muscles strain and tremble as he keeps his feet from touching the ground. He lifts his legs and swings them to left.

"Waitin' for the easy ones?"

"Figure you'll get tired of showing off eventually." Cas fits his hands under his ass and starts doing little flutter kicks. "Guess I can do this until you're ready."

"You don't have teammates you do this with?" Dean blows out a breath as he starts the next rep. He'd almost talked himself into only doing fifteen reps instead of the usual twenty but now that Cas is here Dean feels like he needs to finish the whole set. It's stupid, because there's no need to impress Cas and it's not like Cas knows how many reps Dean's done or how many he plans on doing, but Dean grits his teeth and does all twenty anyways.

"It's pre-meet so we're pretty much on our own." Cas switches to scissor kicks. "Went for a light run, now I'm doing some core, and then it's time to load up on pasta."

"Pre-meet? Where are you guys headed?"

“Baldwin-Wallace. We’ve got a 6am bus.”

“That sucks. At least they get us the nice buses so you can sleep.”

“If you think the bus will be quiet enough to sleep then you’ve never met my teammates.”

Dean starts his bicycle crunches. “Even at 6am? That’s rough. Coach pretty much enforces a silence rule until 9am which is good for napping and on the rare instances I try to get my homework done.”

“I’ve invested in noise canceling headphones. They work until Rupert gets bored and starts poking me. Or throwing things at me. Or flicking water at me. There’s a pattern here.”

Dean huffs out a laugh and immediately regrets it, because laughing makes core so much worse. “You wanna plank with me?”

Cas rolls onto his stomach in answer. Dean follows suit, rises up on his forearms, and sets the stopwatch app on his phone.

“How long?” Cas asks.

“I would say go until the first man drops, but I wouldn’t want to tire you out before your race.” Dean throws a sly look Cas’s way. “Two minutes work for you?”

“That’s fine.” Cas bows his head and pulls in a deep breath. “You often do a double workout?”

“Sometimes. I like to be active.”

“Is the volleyball team expected to do well this year?”

“That’s the goal. I want to go for the third straight Conference win, and I’d like to go higher than that too. We’ve got a good team this year.” Dean checks his watch. Still forty five seconds left to go. “What about you guys?”

“OWU and Wabash are fighting for first, the rest of us are fighting for third. And for me personally, I’d like to be an All-American.”

Dean whistles. “That’d be sweet.”

“Yes.” Cas cranes his neck to look at the stopwatch. “Two minutes never seems long until I’m planking.”

Dean can plank for five minutes with minimal effort. “Think of it in relative terms. How long does it take you to run your race?”

“Less than two minutes.”

Dean gapes. “You run half a mile in less than two minutes?”

Cas grins but it looks more like a grimace than a smile. “Yep.”

“Damn.” Dean checks the watch and drops down to the mat. “Time.”

“Thank goodness.” Cas collapses and sprawls his limbs out. He doesn’t look comfortable, cheek smushed against the mat, but he doesn’t look like he’s planning on moving either.

“Does this mean you’re not doing side planks with me?” Dean laughs and rolls out of the way of Cas’s

half-hearted swing. Once it's safe, he rolls back and props himself up on one arm.

"I have a ton of pasta," Cas says reluctantly pushing up on his arm as well. "You're welcome to come over for dinner."

"Sure." Dean hits restart on his watch. "I can bring some sauce over. Pesto good? I have an alfredo mix, but I doubt you want something that heavy before a race."

"Definitely not. Pesto's good but you shouldn't feel obligated."

"My Aunt Ellen taught me never to show up to dinner empty handed, and I only drink Saturday nights which means no beer."

"Beer the night before a race is definitely a bad idea," Cas agrees. "NCAA violation."

"One of the few rules I follow," Dean says. "Well, most of the time. If I'm not in season I'll have a beer at karaoke nights. But once we're in season it's Saturday night only. And no going overboard."

"My teammates haven't caught on to that concept yet. Apparently the cross country team used to have a dry season, but that's obviously not the case anymore."

"You guys go hard," Dean agrees. "Speaking of, party Saturday night?"

"Always. It has a theme, but I'm not planning on going so I tune them out whenever they talk about it. The Thetas are decorating headbands in the Campus Center, and I promised Rachel I would go."

"Rachel?" Dean's stomach sinks at the thought that Cas might have a girlfriend. He switches arms and resets the timer.

"She's a friend of mine. And teammate. And a Theta. She wants me to come so she won't be bored."

"Look at you being a nice friend." Dean can't even manage full teasing, too relieved that Cas is still, possibly, single.

"I do try on occasion. Dinner at six thirty work for you? I'm hoping to get some of my homework done tonight, because tomorrow's a complete wash."

"Yeah. Fine." All Dean has to do is take a quick shower and throw on some clothes. "I'll just shower and then head right over so I can get the sauce started. Where do you live?"

He drops out of the side plank and thinks about putting Cas through another full set of planks, but it's almost six now so if they want to keep their time schedule then they need to get moving.

"North Village II. Come to the bridge door and text me, and I'll let you in."

"Sounds good."

They gather up their mats, spray them down and then head out.

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NV II is only a minute walk from NV I, but Dean still bundles up in his winter coat and pulls his hood up, because the wind is biting cold, and Dean's still damp from his shower. He can get through the first set of doors without swiping an approved ID so at least he can wait inside a heated entryway while Cas comes down to get the door for him.

Cas is in a pair of running pants, the kind that taper at the ankle. Dean likes his sweats baggy, but he

doesn't have to run for long distances in them. He also has to fit shorts under them unlike Cas who wears spandex for a uniform. And there's a thought Dean shouldn't be having. He and Cas are friends. That means no creepily picturing Cas in skintight clothing.

Dean smiles and pulls the packet of pesto out of his pocket. "Lead on."

They end up on the second floor. Cas lives in 227, a double instead of a quad. It's much smaller than NV I, and Dean understands that the place is supposed to be a feat of green engineering, but how are two stovetops supposed to be conducive to apartment living?

"Seriously?" Dean asks. He looks from the two stovetops to the small countertop then the fridge. "You don't have an oven?"

Irritation flickers across Cas's face. "No." He grabs a pot and a saucepan, and he hands the second to Dean. "For the pesto."

"That's bullshit. Any time you want to use an oven, you're welcome to come to our place. Sundays are indulgent baking nights. I think we're on for cinnamon streusel cupcakes this week."

"Those sound delicious." Cas has the look in his eye of a man who hasn't had any kind of fresh baked goods in too long.

So, of course, Dean can't resist teasing him a bit. "Well, maybe it's not such a good idea. I'm sure you're on some special diet for All-American hopefuls."

Cas grabs a fistful of Dean's t-shirt and yanks him close. "I am coming over for cupcakes on Sunday." Their faces are inches away from each other, and Dean can feel each angry puff of air as Cas breathes. And then Cas seems to realize the position they're in, and he backs up, a blush high on his cheeks. "Sorry. That was a bit overdramatic."

Dean just shrugs because he was being kind of an asshole and it's not like Cas hurt him or anything. Dean's just now very, very aware that Cas is hot when he's pissed off. "Maybe we should make more than just cupcakes if you've been deprived this long. And budge over, you're taking up the whole counter."

Cas obligingly moves so Dean can get to the sink. The pesto recipe calls for water, vegetable oil, and the packet and Dean easily finds the ingredients and the measuring cups. The water for the pasta is boiling by the time Dean has his sauce whisked and put on the second burner.

"Cupcakes are fine," Cas says. "It's just," he pauses, busies himself with opening up the box of spaghetti. "My brother Gabriel has a wicked sweet tooth. My mother refused to indulge it so he learned to bake. Dessert makes me think of him." Cas shrugs and dumps the spaghetti in the pot.

"You have a brother? I've got one too, but he wouldn't know what to do with a cupcake even if you unwrapped it for him."

Cas laughs quietly and goes to track down a wooden spoon to stir the pasta with. "I've actually got five brothers. And two sisters."

Dean's mouth drops. "Holy shit."

Cas shrugs. "The house got quite crowded." He comes back with the spoon, and they stand side by side, shoulders touching so Cas can stir the pasta and Dean can stir the sauce.

"No kidding." Dean thought their apartment was too small and it was just him and Dad and Sam. Of course, in recent years Sam had grown enough to take up the space of two people but still. Seven

brothers and sisters? No thank you.

“You just have the one brother?”

“Yeah. Sam. He’s a junior in high school. Just started the college search thing. Where do you fit in in the hierarchy?”

“Youngest,” Cas says, glum. He hands Dean the wooden spoons and goes to get plastic cups. “I have water, orange juice, or milk.”

“Water’s fine.” Dean can’t imagine what it would be like to be the youngest of eight. Even to be the youngest of two. Dean gives the pesto a stir and then realizes that it’s bubbling. He turns the heat way down and puts the lid on the pot.

“I started running just to get away from them all. And then it turned out that I was pretty good at it, and it was a way to get noticed. Most of my siblings have big personalities so I was constantly being overshadowed, but none of them can run as well as I can.”

There’s a note of pride in Cas’s voice that makes Dean smile.

They continue to make small talk while they cook, and Dean learns a little bit more about Cas’s family, and in return Dean goes on about Sam for a bit. While they’re dumping the spaghetti into bowls, the door opens and Cas’s roommate comes in. He pauses when he sees that Cas has company and offers Dean up a shy smile.

“Dean, this is my roommate, Samandriel. Samandriel, this is Dean. You want to eat with us?”

“Sure. Let me go dump my stuff.” Samandriel kicks his boots off and jumps to avoid the puddle of melted snow and goes to his room to drop off his gym bag. He comes back in a t-shirt and track pants and Cas hands him a bowl.

“How was your run?” Cas asks. “He’s on the track team too,” Cas explains for Dean’s benefit. “He runs the 5k and once we hit outdoor he’ll be running the 10k.”

“Way too much running,” Dean says. There are four chairs at the kitchen table, strange because there are only two rooms, but Dean’s grateful for it as he sits down with his spaghetti and his water.

“Yeah,” Samandriel agrees. “I don’t know why Coach is making me run the 10k. You know how depressing it is to run for thirty five minutes and have it mean nothing?”

“That was freshman year,” Cas says. “Think about how much faster you’ll be this year. Your body’s had time to adjust to college life and to harder workouts. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were in the thirty three range this year.”

“You’re just saying that.” The tips of Samandriel’s ears turn pink, and he twirls a mouthful of spaghetti around his fork.

“Cas seems like he knows what he’s talking about,” Dean says. “I’d believe him if I were you.”

“Dean’s on the volleyball team,” Cas says. “And he’s friends with Benny.”

Samandriel’s eyes go wide. “Benny picked me up at the last party.”

“What?” Dean hadn’t heard about this. “Are you sure? He has a girlfriend.”

“What? No! No, not like that. Like, actually picked me up. Physically. My feet left the ground. I was

very high up. And it was terrifying.”

“Oh.” Dean’s cheeks color with the mistake. “Yeah, he’s a cuddly drunk. You get used to it.” Dean certainly is. He’s used to the heavy weight of Benny’s arm draped over his shoulder. He’s used to propping Benny up. And he’s used to collapsing on the nearest surface with him and waking up the next morning hungover as fuck. There are some buddies you can get smashed with and then wake up in bed with and everything is cool. Benny’s one of those friends. He knows that Dean’s into guys but isn’t into Benny, and Dean knows that Benny’s into girls, specifically Andrea, and everything’s fine.

“You should come to our parties,” Samandriel says.

“To run interference?”

“No, to have fun. You seem cool, and I know we’re kind of weird, but the team knows how to have a good time. Rupert and Cottington are planning a zip tie party. Cas, you going to that?”

“There are zip ties involved. I doubt it’ll be fun.”

“I’ve been to a zip tie party before,” Dean says. “They’re not bad as long as you get paired up with someone chill.”

“It’s not this party but the next one,” Samandriel says. “You should come. Both of you.”

“Sure,” Dean says. Benny’s been after him to come to the parties anyways. He can bring Victor and Jo and maybe if they get tied together for a couple hours they’ll finally work through their issues. Or, more likely, they’ll get in a fight. They have a shit ton of sexual tension that they occasionally give into which leads to epic fights in the living room. Victor wants to be an FBI agent, and Jo’s dad was a cop and died in the line of duty, and she doesn’t want to end up like her mother. If they could turn off their romantic feelings and be friends they’d be fine. But they can’t so Jo fools around with frat boys to try and prove that she doesn’t care, and Victor takes out all his frustration on the volleyball court, and Dean’s not sure if everything will get better or worse when Victor graduates.

Dean and Samandriel both look to Cas. Cas shrugs. “We’ll see how I feel after the race. It’s Kent State so it should be a good competition. But,” Cas looks so torn that Dean laughs and waves him off.

“Relax. No one’s asking you to commit now. Just, it’s where all the cool kids are going to be.” Dean grins and steals a forkful of spaghetti from Cas’s plate and eats it without remorse.

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“So?” Dean demands, ushering Cas inside NVI. “How’d the meet go?”

Cas shivers and tugs his coat tighter around him. Snow melts on his eyelashes and into his eyebrows. He shuffles closer to Dean, and Dean’s tempted to wrap an arm around the guy’s shoulders and pull him close. Instead, he brings Cas to their apartment where the heat blasts hot, because Jo likes to prance around in short shorts and tank tops.

“Want me to make you some hot chocolate? You look freezing, man.”

“I’ll be fine.” Cas toes off his boots and reluctantly gives up his jacket. He drapes it over the stair railing, and it leaves him in an Asics three quarter zip. He tugs the sleeves down over his hands. “And the meet was good. Samandriel ran well. Ruby ran well. Meg ran very well.”

There’s someone missing from the list, but Dean gets it. When he has a shit day, he doesn’t want to talk about it either. He’d much rather talk up his teammates. So Dean drops the subject and herds Cas into the kitchen.

There's the scent of cinnamon and brown sugar and cupcakes, and Dean can't help his grin. He checks on the cupcakes, because his roommates are useless and have disappeared to who only knows where. When he opens the oven he's hit with warmth and the scent of delicious baked goods. They'll be even better once he drizzles the icing on top.

"Henrikson!" Dean shouts. "Get your ass upstairs and be social!"

"I am upstairs!"

The door at the end of the short hallway kicks open. Victor is flat on his back on the air mattress and has apparently decided that pushing the door open used up all the energy he was willing to use.

"Each of the NVI apartments come with an extra room," Dean tells Cas. "They're too small to set up a pong table so we put an air mattress in. Perfect for impromptu naps and way more comfortable than the sofa." Dean jerks his thumb towards the blue, two person couch. "The only person who fits on that thing is Jo."

"That's a fucking lie!" Jo calls from her room.

"Are you all just lurking in your rooms?" Dean rolls his eyes. "Come out and say hi you heathens."

Pam, Jo, and the extra room are on the first floor with the kitchen and the living room which means down the stairs is man zone. Dean thinks they got the short end of that stick though, because he's constantly going up and down the stairs.

Pam and Jo emerge from their respective rooms, and Jo goes to kick Victor into moving while Pam saunters up to Cas. Dean goes to dig up a cooling rack that they're still a few minutes away from needing. He turns his back to them, but not before he sees Pam's smirk or the way Cas draws up, nervous, as she slinks into his personal space.

"Aren't you a handsome one," she says.

"That's entirely subjective, and I'm a biased party so I can't answer."

Pam's eyebrows go up and she looks over Cas's shoulder at Dean as if to say is he for real?

Dean grins because he's never met anyone immune to Pam's charm before. "He's taking stats right now."

"Right." Pam eyes Cas like she's debating whether to push again or cut her losses. "In that case, let's get a non-biased party to weigh in. Dean, how do you think Cas's attractiveness rates?"

Dean's stomach catches in his throat for a moment, panicked that somehow Pam knows, and then he realizes that she's decided that if she can't mess with Cas then she's at least going to mess with Dean. She has no idea that she's onto something, and Dean's going to keep it that way.

"You know me," Dean says, his tone light, casual, "I'm a sucker for blue eyes."

Pam laughs, sharp and sudden, and she gets out of Cas's face. "Yeah, because Lisa's eyes were so blue."

"Don't forget Aaron! His eyes also weren't blue," Jo says. She grabs Victor's wrist and tugs. "Come on, asshole. Get up. Dean's making cupcakes."

"And we need your expert opinion," Pam adds. "You wanna tap this ass?" She pinches Cas's ass, and Cas startles and looks to Dean for help.

Dean's pretty sure Cas is never coming over again.

"Alright," Dean says. "Leave the poor guy alone. He came over for cupcakes not your special brand of crazy."

"Most people are flattered by my special brand of crazy." Pam plops down in one of the chairs and throws her legs over the back of it. "I'm actually kind of hurt. How's my ego going to recover from this?"

"Aren't you going to Slippery Rock next weekend to see Anna?" Jo asks, appearing in the kitchen with Victor in tow. "I'm sure she'll be more than happy to stroke your ego."

Pam smirks and opens her mouth, no doubt to say something filthy and Dean quickly cuts her off.

"Where's Ash? Usually he's all over indulgent Sundays."

"Spoilsport," Pam says. "I'm sure Ash is in Murray, working on some computer project, and I'm sure he'll be there for another four hours."

Dean checks his phone. "It's only 8. I'm betting he won't wander in until 2am at the earliest."

Ash is the resident computer genius, and he keeps weird hours, even for a college student. Dean's simply grateful that Ash is quiet when he returns to the apartment in the early hours of the morning. The walls in their apartment are paper thin. Dean can be downstairs in his room with the door closed and hear the door click upstairs when someone opens it.

"Ooh, betting?" Pam perks up at the thought.

"Easy there," Victor says. "You're the only one in this room that can bet."

"Unless it's horses," Jo pipes up. "There's something else we can bet on, but I forget."

"You're an athlete too?" Pam asks Cas and when he nods Pam lets out an exaggerated groan. "Surrounded by jocks and none of them will put their athleticism to good use by fucking me."

Dean puts on his best leer and leans in. "Just say the word, babe."

Pam pretends to vomit. "Call me babe one more time, and I'll kick your ass."

Dean turns to Cas, conspiratorial. "She can't get enough of this ass."

Cas tries to look serious, tries to stay above their, admittedly low grade humor, but the corners of his eyes crinkle and then his nose scrunches up and then he's laughing and sliding into a chair next to Pam. "Can't blame her."

"You have a lot of basis for comparison?" Pam asks, and Dean's not sure whether to drag Cas out of the room or run as far away as he can.

"All of my teammates, male and female, wear spandex. Some of them even wear speed suits. I have more basis for comparison than I could ever want."

"Spandex?" Pam asks. "Tell me more."

"I'm on a team with chicks that wear spandex, and it's not all it's cracked up to be," Jo says. She smacks Victor's shoulder. "Stop drooling. You're disgusting, you know that?"

Victor looks to Dean for help, and Dean, like the best friend that he is, checks on the cupcakes again. They're done now, and he takes them out to cool and then turns off the oven.

"Stop it," Dean says, smacking Jo's hands away when she tries to get one. "They have to cool."

"Who made you the cupcake police?" she grumbles.

Dean ignores her and gets out the plastic bag of icing that came in the box with the cupcake mix. All it takes is a dollop on the top of each and the heat melts the icing until it runs down the sides of the cupcake.

"Perfect," Dean says. "They should be ready to eat in ten or fifteen minutes."

"I vote for five," Pam says.

Dean rolls his eyes and leans against the back of Cas's chair. "This isn't a democracy, princess."

"Ooh, I love it when you use your Han Solo voice on me. Makes my insides all tingly."

Dean flips her off and everyone laughs.

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Later, when the cupcakes are gone except for the one that Dean smuggled down to Ash's room, Dean and Cas find themselves in the spare room. They're both on their backs, but Cas has got his feet up and resting on the wall.

"How is that even comfortable?"

"It's called a leg drain, and it's surprisingly comfortable. Also, it's beneficial to do every day. Helps to drain all the nasty stuff out from my runs. And it makes running tomorrow a little less of a struggle."

"Huh." Dean eyes Cas's position then decides it's too much effort to do it himself. "Did you really run today even after racing hard yesterday?" The volleyball team doesn't get the day after a weekday match off, but, as per NCAA rules they have to get one day off out of every seven. Usually that day is Sunday. If they have a Saturday-Sunday tournament then it ends up being Monday.

"Not officially but we went for a shakeout this morning. Well, those of us that could drag ourselves out of bed."

"Shakeout? Another way to get gunk out of your legs?"

"Exactly. We only get one set of legs and we work them pretty hard."

"Yeah. There are days where I'm positive my knees are never going to recover. It's amazing what an ice bath can do for you."

"I passed out in my first ice bath," Cas says.

"Shit. Really?" Dean flips onto his stomach and the whole mattress bounces.

Cas laughs at a long ago memory. "Yeah. My high school coach filled up the tub and told me to hop in and I was sitting so I went up to my chest and the shock of it knocked me right out. Haven't passed out since which is a relief. I never take them alone, though, just to be sure."

"You have ice bath parties at the hotels? Those are my favorite. Can't tell you how many times people have seen us carting bucket after bucket of ice to our room and thought we were having an actual party."

Strub hooked up with someone that way once. Coach found out, though, and was pissed.” Dean’s legs still hurt from the suicides they had to run for that one.

“We do. Hard to fit two people in at once though.”

“Hard to fit one of us.” Dean laughs. “You should see Strub try and cram his legs into those little tubs.”

“Trash cans are the best. Once the weather gets nice we fill a trash can up and two of us will hop in.”

“Trash can is a good idea. We’ll have to see if we can liberate some from the CC or something.”

“Liberate?” Cas turns his head so he can give Dean a disapproving look. “Don’t you mean steal?”

“That makes it sound so much worse. Put it this way, if you were a trash can would you rather be filled with half-eaten food and useless shit or ice and water and studly athletes?”

Cas fights, and loses, his battle to not smile. “I’m not a trash can so I don’t feel qualified to answer that question.”

“You just don’t want to admit that I’m right. It’s fine. I don’t need anyone to validate my opinions. You almost done draining your legs?”

Cas shifts from amused to suspicious in a second. “Why?”

Dean grins and tuck his legs in and rolls to his feet. “You ever jump on an air mattress before? Kind of like a not as fun moon bounce.”

“You’re joking,” Cas says.

Dean jumps a few times, making the mattress ripple under Cas’s back. “You sure about that?”

“This is definitely not good for my legs,” Cas says, but he drops his legs down and gets to his feet as well.

“Good for the soul though,” Dean says and he runs from one end of the mattress to the other, laughing the whole time.

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Cas becomes a more permanent presence in Dean’s life after that. They pass each other on the way to their classes and more often than not Dean will end up at Cas’s for lunch or Cas will end up at his, and they’ll talk over sandwiches or pancakes or whatever they feel like making that day before settling in to do homework.

Inevitably, practice will disrupt their productivity, and they don’t usually get out at the same time, but most nights Dean will end up at Cas’s apartment, and they’ll do homework in the cramped living room with Samandriel. If they’re not too hung up on getting work done then they’ll go to Dean’s apartment.

And if Dean’s small attraction turns into a full blown crush, well, whatever. It’s not important. They both have too much to be focusing on to be worried about relationships, and it’s not like Dean even knows whether or not Cas is into dudes.

Besides, things are good the way they are, and Dean’s a firm believer in not screwing up a good thing.

Which is why Dean’s hesitant to go to the zip tie party when it finally rolls around. He likes eating lunch with Cas when they talk about their classes that day. He likes how they can sit in easy silence and get work done together. He likes how Cas doesn’t ask stupid questions when Dean’s had a bad

day at practice and his mood's carried over, and he likes how he can tell when Cas is in a mood to talk about running and when he just wants to be distracted.

Dean's friends with Cas, only his rigid self-control has kept him from messing that up. Alcohol is a great way to lose that self-control.

But Dean's been itching to go out for a few weeks now, and he's promised Cas that he'd go. Not to mention, Jo would probably eviscerate him if he backed out now. She and Victor are in a weird state of flux again, and Jo's invited herself along to this party to prove something to Victor or herself, but she won't go if Dean doesn't.

So, ten minutes to ten, Dean goes down to his room and changes into a pair of worn jeans and an old club volleyball shirt. After a moment, he changes into a polo. And then he shakes his head at himself and changes into a black v-neck.

"Dean!" Jo shouts from upstairs. "Get your ass up here or I'm drinking your shot."

Dean rolls his eyes and pops his head in Ash's room on his way up. "You wanna come out with us?"

Ash picks his head up off his keyboard. His bangs hang in front of his eyes, and Dean's going to have to remind Jo to give them a trim. Preferably when she's not in the middle of pre-gaming. "No."

"Okay. You want to take a few shots at least?"

Ash considers it, then must decide that moving is too much effort, because he drops his head back down.

"Right," Dean says. It's one of those weekends. Dean has no idea if Ash's comp sci classes are that involved or if Ash is working on some kind of crazy extra credit project, but the guy's been working nonstop lately.

Dean tosses Ash's comforter on the floor and eases Ash into bed, ignoring the muttered protests and vague threats. Once Ash is situated, Dean pulls the blanket over him. Dean turns off the light and closes the door on the way out.

"Ash coming out with us?" Jo hands a shot glass over to Dean and knocks hers back before she pours another.

"Naw. He's wiped out by whatever he's been working on. I put him to bed."

"Aww, Mama Dean strikes again." Jo's hair is perfectly curled, and her make-up looks flawless, but she's only on shot number two. By the end of the night she's going to be a sweaty, flushed mess, and Dean wonders if he's going to have to put her to bed tonight too. It probably depends on whether Victor tries to text her while they're out tonight.

"Shut up." Dean downs his shot and makes a face. "Who the hell is buying shitty vodka again?"

"Hey, if you're going to be such a baby about it I can break out the mixers," Jo says. "You want some fruit juice? Sweeten it up for you a bit?"

"You know sugar and alcohol gives me the worst hangovers." Dean braces himself before he takes his next shot. "Why the hell are you buying Vladdy? Totally not worth it."

Jo shrugs. "It's cheap. Now quit whining. Is anyone actually pregaming or are we just going to take a few shots before we head over?"

“The team is getting off the bus, probably taking quick showers, then going to the party. If they’re drinking it’s while they get dressed.” Dean checks his phone. “Benny says people are starting to show up.” His phone buzzes while he’s checking his messages. “And Cas is there. And wants us to come over.”

“I hate showing up on time to parties.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Now who’s the whiner?”

Jo flips him off and then caps the vodka. “You and Cas have been hanging out a lot. I didn’t realize you socialized with people besides your teammates and your roommates.”

“I hang out with plenty of people that aren’t you guys. Benny’s on the track team. I chill with him. He’s also a Theta Chi so that double counts.”

“Does not.” Jo scoops up her wristlet and heads out the door, clearly expecting Dean to follow. “Benny doesn’t count at all. You knew him before you came here. Cas isn’t in any of your classes, and he doesn’t play any of the same sports as you. Admit it, you’ve made an exception for him.”

“You make me sound so close minded. I’m allowed to hang with people that aren’t exact clones of me.”

“Someone’s defensive,” Jo mutters.” She pauses, halfway down the stairs and turns to look at Dean. “You’re defensive. Do you like him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Dean flips his hood up and pulls his hands inside his sleeves. They didn’t wait quite long enough for the post-shot buzz to kick in which means he doesn’t have his drunk coat on. It’s going to be a cold ass walk down to the XC house. “He’s got blue eyes. He’s not my type.”

“Bullshit.” Jo grabs his arm and yanks him forward so they’re walking side by side. “You do. You like him.”

“Ridiculous,” Dean repeats, and he knows it’s a dead giveaway, but he’s got nothing else to say. Cause yeah, he likes Cas. The dude’s kinda strange, but he’s funny, and he’s smart, and he’s interesting, and he’s easy on the eyes, and if Dean wasn’t such a coward he would’ve made a move by now. But he’d wanted to make sure he actually liked Cas before hitting on him, but now Dean likes him too much, and he’s afraid of losing Cas altogether if he says anything. Best if they stay friends.

“Idiot,” Jo says. “You angling to get tied up with him tonight?”

Dean blushes and blames the alcohol. “I’m not angling for anything. We’re getting Samandriel a free cup, I’m going to see Benny, and I’ll probably chat with Cas a bit.”

“Samandriel? Why do all your new friends have weird ass names? And how are we getting him a free cup? Do I get a free cup?”

“Apparently if you bring three non-track people to a party you get a free cup.”

“There’s only two of us. How’s math been treating you lately?”

“Girls count as two. And don’t make fun of Samandriel’s name. He’s cool. Quiet unless you get him going on the impact of soccer on world politics.”

“Really? That’s what he chooses to be interested in?”

“You like knives,” Dean points out. They pass by the CC on their left and Baldwin on their right, and

Dean hurries them along. It's only a minute or two left until the house, but his ears feel like blocks of ice and he wants to get inside where it's warm and there's beer.

"Knives are the shit. Soccer is stupid."

The girls' soccer house is right next to the boys' XC house, but it's too cold for anyone to be hanging out on the porch. Which means they're not going to get in a fight before they even get to the party. Dean's grateful for the little things.

The XC house looks dead from the outside, and Dean has a moment to worry that he's at the wrong house, before Jo's tugging him forward and opening the front door. As soon as it opens, they're hit with a wave of heat and music and sound, and Dean hurries through and shuts the door behind them.

There are a couple of people in the entryway and a handful on the stairs, but most of them seem to be packed in the room to Dean's left. The couches and chairs have been pushed up against the walls which leaves the floor clear except for the coffee table smack in the middle of it. The coffee table that currently has three couples trying to all fit on top of it.

"Oh boy," Dean mutters, and he looks around for any signs of Benny or Cas or even Samandriel. The people on the stairs are eyeing them with suspicion, and Dean smiles briefly at them.

"Dude!" A gawky looking kid with something weird going on with his hair stumbles over. "You kicked our ass at basketball."

Dean nods, conceding the point. "Hope I'm still welcome."

"Course you are! If we kicked out everyone who beat us at basketball then our parties would be pretty small." He seems to notice Jo for the first time, and his eyebrows lift appreciatively. "And you are most definitely welcome. Jeff Cottington." He pulls a handful of zip ties out of his back pocket. "You two looking to get hooked up?"

"Not with each other," Jo says. "I'm stuck with his ugly mug too much already."

"She's denying her lifelong crush on me," Dean stage whispers, and he doesn't even bother trying to dodge Jo's smack to his shoulder. He just laughs. "Have you seen Samandriel? He's the one who told us about your party. Figured we should say hi and thank him."

"Samandriel?" Cottington looks even more surprised. "That sly dog. Don't move. I'm going to get Samandriel, and I'll get cups. You guys want cups, right?"

"Yeah, man. Thanks."

Dean and Jo shrug out of their jackets and Dean hangs them up on the overlaid coat rack next to the stairs.

Cottington comes back with cups and Samandriel as he'd promised, but he also comes with Cas and someone Dean doesn't recognize. The guy Dean doesn't know is zip tied to Samandriel, and he tries to give Dean a hug and belatedly realizes that one of his hands is connected to one of Samandriel's and he almost knocks all three of them over.

"Whoops," the guy says, laughing it off. He settles for a clap on Dean's shoulder instead of a hug. "I'm Garth. I run with these fools." He jerks his thumb towards the distance guys. "Cas says you play volleyball. That's cool."

"We both do actually," Dean says and he gives Jo a nudge forward, because Dean doesn't hug people on first meetings, and he has a feeling Garth is an affectionate drunk.

“Yeah? Cool. We put an IM team together one year, but we were pretty bad. Hand-eye coordination is not one of our specialties.” Garth sways on his feet, and Samandriel has to anchor him. “I’m a bit of a lightweight.” Garth laughs a little to himself. “This was probably not the best party for me to come to.”

Cottington exchanges cups for money and then he holds up two zip ties. “So, any preference for who you get paired with?”

Dean’s eyes flick over to Cas before he can help it, and he tries to cover it with a shrug.

“Cas’s wrist looks awful empty,” Jo says. She reaches back behind her and yanks Dean forward.

Dean promises to get her back for this later, but for now he keeps his mouth shut and lets Cottington zip tie him and Cas together.

“And you?” Cottington asks, looking Jo over. “See anyone you like?”

“I’ll take her.” One of the guys on the staircase stands up. He’s in an Abercrombie & Fitch polo, and he’s got a pair of sunglasses on even though it’s 10:30 at night, and the lights in the house are dim.

Dean looks from the guy to Jo’s horrified face and thinks that maybe he won’t have to get Jo back after all. Karma might be taking care of it for me.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Jo says, but she holds out her wrist.

Dean barely holds in his laugh, and he knocks his shoulder against Cas’s. “How long do you think until she decks him?”

“Hessel can be quite overbearing,” Cas says.

“He’s wearing sunglasses at night. Do you know who does that? No talent douchebags. He’s not any good, right? Well, I guess compared to you, no one’s that great.”

“I’m not that good,” Cas says. He shifts uncomfortably and glances over at Jo and Hessel to see if they can hear him. “But I would agree with the no talent and the douchebag assessment. He’s not exactly built for cross country.”

It’s true, Dean thinks looking over. He has to bite back his smirk when he spots Jo’s scowl.

“Name’s Marv,” Hessel says. “And what’s yours, gorgeous?”

“Fucking hell,” Jo mutters. “I need to fill up my cup now.”

“Basement!” Garth tells her happily. “We can come with you if you want. I’m about due for a refill.”

“Oh no you’re not,” Samandriel says, digging his heels in. “We’re going to wait a bit before your next refill.”

“You want yours filled?” Cas asks. “It’s three drinks apiece to get them to cut the zip ties.”

“You that eager to get rid of me?” Dean grins and knocks his shoulder against Cas’s. “Sure, let’s go. I could go for getting my buzz back.”

“It’s my favorite part of drinking,” Cas says. “The guys like to get really wasted and sing and dance and do stupid shit, but I like the early buzz when your fingertips tingle and everything is fuzzy and you feel like you’re walking on clouds.”

“Shit, you’re not a philosophical drunk, are you?”

Cas ducks his head but not before Dean sees the blush rising on his cheeks. “No, I just,” Cas shrugs and sidesteps the couple making out against the wall so they can reach the basement stairs.

“Hey.” Dean tugs on their joined wrists. “I was teasing, but I’m serious now. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Beer first,” Cas says, and he leads Dean down the stairs.

They have to wait in line for the keg, but soon enough they’ve each got a full cup and a tally mark to mark their first beer. They don’t leave the basement right away, because it’s significantly less crowded than it is upstairs. The basement’s unfinished, a cement floor and rock walls and low ceiling, but Dean finds a spot he can stand without crouching and looks over at Cas.

“So. What are you trying to avoid telling me?”

“It’s nothing.” Cas takes a sip of his beer like that’s going to be enough to distract him.

Dean leans against the wall to wait. It’s cooler down here, and he’s in no rush. He’s betting he can outwait Cas.

He’s right.

After a long moment, Cas blows out a breath and looks down at his shoes. “You know when I first told you why I got into running? Everything I told you was true, but the real reason I stick with it is that sometimes, on the really good days, I almost feel like I’m flying.” Cas is quiet for a moment. “I sometimes get these dreams about flying, and they’re beautiful and peaceful, but when I wake up I’m unsettled. Like I’m living the wrong life, like nothing is quite right. And then I put my shoes on and go for a run and all that melts away.”

Cas scuffs his foot on the floor. “That probably sounds crazy.”

“Sounds poetic,” Dean says. He can’t mock Cas for that. Not when he sounded so serious. Not when his shoulders are hunched like he’s waiting for Dean to knock him down. “Sounds sad.”

“The best poetry is.” Cas takes a long drink from his cup. “I didn’t mean to bring the mood down. Why do you play volleyball?”

Dean laughs but it’s subdued, because he’s not ready to break the mood Cas has set. “Not for any reason like you.”

Cas waits, expectantly.

“Right.” Dean passes his cup into the hand that’s joined to Cas’s and wipes his free hand on his jeans. “Well, I’d always played football, because my dad really pushed it. He’d played football, and thought it was a necessary formative experience for every teenage boy. I was never good enough for him, but I was a decent enough player, and my coach told me I should find a spring sport to keep me in shape.

“I was actually going to join the track team, because I didn’t know anything about baseball, and the lacrosse guys were mostly jerks, and then the volleyball team did a demo to try and stir up some interest. I watched them scrimmage, and it was incredible. The way they all moved together, how high they could jump, how hard they could hit. I wanted to be them.

“I remember going up to the coach and telling him I knew nothing about the sport, but I would do everything he asked if he’d give me a chance. Still don’t know why he did, but he worked with me for

the two weeks leading up to tryouts, and I managed to land myself on the JV team, and he was the varsity coach, but he'd still say hi to me when he saw me, check in with me, congratulate me on a good game. It was really weird. My football coach called me 14. I'm not sure he actually ever knew my name. But Coach Jim knew my name. He knew my stats. He knew my strengths and my weaknesses, and at the end of the season he gave me a list of each and how to improve them.

"And somewhere during sophomore and junior year I went from being the kid who tried really hard to being the kid who could actually play. My dad never understood, and he still thinks it's a stupid sport, but I'm good at it."

Dean seems to realize he's been talking for too long, and he takes a long swig of his beer. "Sorry. You can just tell me to shut up when I go on like that."

"No. It was interesting. You're interesting." Cas's eyes go wide and he buries his face in his beer cup.

Time for a tactical retreat, Dean thinks. "We should go check on Jo. Make sure she hasn't gotten arrested for assault or something."

Cas doesn't put up a protest, trailing behind Dean as they head upstairs. There's a commotion going on, and Dean has a bad feeling in his gut. He pushes through the crowd of people in the kitchen and elbows his way into the living room and pauses. In the span of a few seconds, Jo uses an unused zip tie to get hers undone and zip tie Hessel's wrist to the fly of his jeans.

"I have a feeling that's all the action you're going to be getting tonight," Jo says. She gives Hessel's cheek a condescending pat and snatches his beer from him and disappears into the crowd.

A cheer goes through the party, and Dean shakes his head.

"Is she okay?" Cas asks. He has to lean in close and shout in Dean's ear for Dean to hear him, and Dean resolutely ignores the shiver that goes through him. Cas is pressed against his back, and Cas's breath is hot in Dean's ear, but Dean's not going to make his move when they're both kinda drunk at a party.



“She’s good. She can take care of herself. But I should make sure she’s not leaving without telling me.”

They make their way to the other entrance to the living room, the one by the front door, and they go through the door across the hall. It opens into someone’s bedroom, but their desk chair has been appropriated as another coat rack and there are currently three couples on the bed. Jo’s dropped herself on the lap of someone Dean doesn’t know, but Jo waves him off when she spots him so Dean figures she’s fine.

“Inias is a good guy,” Cas says as they wander back towards the kitchen where the beer pong game has resumed now that the fun’s over. It’s hilarious to watch, because the partners are zip tied while they play and some are trying to use their left hands and some are trying to use the hand zip tied to their partner and in both cases it’s hilarious.

“Winchester!” Benny bellows. He’s red-faced and sweating and almost knocks his partner over when he waves. “You playing the next game?”

“Only if you win,” Dean says. “Haven’t kicked your ass good and proper lately.”

“You talk a big game.” Benny lines up his shot and sinks it. “Can you back it up though?”

Dean smirks and turns to Cas. “You don’t mind playing, do you?”

“I’m afraid I’m not very good.”

Dean watches as Benny’s partner completely misses the table with his toss. “That’s fine. You right-handed?”

Cas nods and frowns when Dean waves Cottingham over for a zip tie. Dean slips the end inside his zip tie and gets himself untied from Cas in a matter of seconds before switching his zip tie to his right hand and tying them together again.

Cas looks impressed when Dean hazards a glance up and Dean grins. “Jo’s dad was a cop, and my dad’s a Marine. Our games of cops & robbers tended to be more like training exercises than games. You should see what I can do with a set of handcuffs.” Dean waggles his eyebrows and laughs as Cas’s face, predictably, blushes bright red.

“Are you left-handed?” Cas asks.

“I wish. It would make me a better setter. I can hit pretty well with my left, but it doesn’t matter for pong. There are two things I’m good at in life; beer pong and pool.”

“And volleyball,” Cas adds.

“You don’t know that.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to come to a game and see.”

“Then I guess I’m going to have to drag myself out of bed some Saturday and get out to one of your meets.”

“They’re boring,” Cas warns. “And long. Very long. Very boring.”

“Then I’ll be an even better friend when I come and sit through most of it. You have to have something kind of close, right?”

“Most of our meets are in Ohio.”

“But not all.” Dean shakes his head. “You think you’re winning by being stubborn, but I can always ask Benny where your closest meet is. Or, you know, look up your schedule on the website.”

“Maybe I like making you work for it.”

Was that innuendo? Dean turns to grill Cas on it but then he gets hit in the head with a ping pong ball, and Benny effectively claims his attention, because it’s Dean and Cas’s turn to play. Dean will chase down that thought later. Right now he has a reputation to maintain.

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Dean and Cas are on their third beers, not nearly as drunk as everyone else at the party, when Cas’s phone buzzes. Cas ignores it until he realizes it’s a phone call not a text, and he and Dean are close enough that Dean can hear the entire conversation.

“Damn it,” Dean says and he sets his beer down and Cas does the same and they only stop long enough to get their coats before they’re rushing out the door.

Inias’s roommate lets them into Catflisch, and leads them to their quad. Jo and Inias are on the couch in the common room and Jo is crying, and Inias is awkwardly patting her on the back. When he spots Dean, he startles and looks like he doesn’t know whether to be relieved or to duck for cover.

“It’s fine,” Dean says. He brushes by Inias and he tries to pull Jo in for a hug before he realizes that he and Cas are still connected. “You got a pair of scissors or something?”

Inias scrambles to track down a pair, and Dean runs a hand through Jo’s hair. She turns her head, relaxing only when she sees Dean. Her make-up is in streaks down her face, and her curls have lost their volume, drooping now around her face, and as soon as Dean’s cut free from Cas he’s pulling her into his arms.

"I know," he says as she snuffles and buries her face in his shoulder. "I know."

"I love him," Jo says, broken, angry, resigned. "I don't want to. How do I make it stop? Why can't I stop?"

Dean doesn't have an answer. He never has the answer. He's never been in love like this. He's never been in love period. She loves Victor, and she doesn't want to, and Dean wishes he could make it better.

He slips an arm under her legs and another under her back and lifts her off the couch. "Let's get you home. You'll feel better in your own bed."

"Don't wanna be in my bed," she slurs. "Wanna be in his."

"I know." Dean cradles her against his chest and gives Inias a look that hopefully conveys his thanks for calling Cas. "But you'll regret it if you do that. You can go to sleep in your bed and if you're feeling the same way tomorrow night you can sleep with him. Kay?"

"You're a stupid face," Jo says.

Dean huffs out a laugh and gingerly starts down the stairs. It isn't until he's at the bottom and trying to figure out how to get the door open that he realizes he's not alone. Cas steps in front of him to push the door open and Dean doesn't move for a moment, shocked.

"Hey," Dean says. "You didn't have to come if you wanted to chill with your teammates."

"Doors are a pain when your arms are full of another person," Cas says. "Besides, we cut the zip ties before we finished our third drink, which was cheating."

Dean laughs and shakes his head as they start up the small hill to get to North Village. "So what? You're going to help me put Jo to bed then we'll take a shot?"

Cas shrugs. "Figured you shouldn't have to do this alone."

"Thanks."

Jo nestles closer and Dean sighs.

"She's one of the toughest people I've ever met. I've seen her shoot and skin a deer with terrifying precision. I've seen her shoot Frisbees out of the air. I've seen her take out three guys that hit on her after she told them she wasn't interested. Victor makes her feel out of control. He slips past all her defenses and he makes her smile when she doesn't want to and cry when she doesn't want to, and she doesn't know how to deal with it."

"It's called love," Cas says.

"Yeah, well, it's stupid."

They get to North Village and Dean realizes they have a problem. Because his ID is in his wallet and his wallet is in his back pocket, and he's got his hands full. But then Cas is reaching into Dean's back pocket, his fingers pressing against Dean's ass.

Cas flashes a brief smile when Dean stares. "Figured it was easier than trying to juggle a body." He opens the door and that's that.

Cas scans them into the apartment as well, but he hangs back as Dean brings Jo to her room. Dean's

grateful, not for the first time, that the girls live on the first floor. He eases Jo into bed, and loosens her death grip on Dean's shirt.

"It's going to be fine," Dean promises. He brushes Jo's hair out of her face and kisses her forehead. She makes a vague noise of protest when Dean steps back, but he eases her shoes off and pulls the comforter over her before going out to the kitchen. He grabs a tall glass of water and two Ibuprofen, puts them on her bedside table, then shuts her door and joins Cas in the kitchen.

"Sorry about that," Dean says. The bottle of vodka and shot glasses are still on the table from earlier. Dean grabs them and heads over to the couch. "You still up for that drink?"

"Sure."

They sit down even though it's a bad idea. It's almost two in the morning, and Dean should go to bed. He definitely shouldn't be drinking anymore, and he shouldn't be sitting with Cas, but Dean doesn't care. He pours them each a shot and knocks his back, wincing at the taste.

"Jo buys the shittiest vodka."

"Cottingham drinks this stuff straight out of the container," Cas says, pointing to the Vladdy. "I think the real reason he buys it is it comes in plastic containers which means it's less likely to break when he drops it."

Dean shakes his head. "Fucking disgusting." He pours another shot anyways.

Cas takes the bottle away after that and they sit in silence for a bit. Dean rolls the shot glass between his fingers as the alcohol sinks in. It's late so instead of getting buzzed, his head drops back against the couch, tired.

At one point, Dean rolls his head to the side so he can look at Cas. "You ever been in love, Cas?"

It's too personal a question for people who've only know each other a couple of weeks, and it's definitely too personal for Dean to ask while he's looking the guy in the eye, but Cas doesn't turn away, and he doesn't dismiss the question.

"No. I haven't."

"Huh." Dean goes back to looking at the ceiling. "So how'd you know all that stuff earlier? About being out of control?"

"Because a milder version happens when you have a crush. Your heartbeat stutters when you see them across the quad. Your palms sweat when you talk to them. You laugh at things that aren't funny."

Dean laughs a little and stretches his arms across the back of the couch. "Yeah. Sounds familiar."

"You've got a crush?" Cas asks.

"Sounds like I'm not the only one."

Cas shrugs, conceding the point. His fingers loosely grasp the neck of the vodka bottle. "I'll tell you yours if you tell me mine."

"Yeah?" Dean arches his eyebrows. "I think you've had a little too much to drink. Either that or we've suddenly become psychic."

"Eh." Cas's arms fall limp at his sides and he tips over until he hits Dean's shoulder. "You might be

right.”

Dean laughs and gives Cas a nudge, but he doesn’t have the energy to sit upright any more. “Am I going to have to put you to bed too?”

Cas beams up at him, all bright teeth and brighter eyes in response.

“Good thing you runners are so fucking skinny,” Dean grunts as he lifts Cas up. He staggers down the hall to the mattress room, muttering curses under his breath.

“Oh no,” Dean says when Cas clings to him when they reach the room. “Let go. It’s bed time for you too.”

“But not you?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got a bed downstairs. Memory foam mattress. It remembers me.”

“I’d remember you,” Cas says, quiet, almost too quiet. He lets go though, and Dean lets him drop to the mattress.

“I’ll see you not too early in the morning,” Dean says.

He staggers downstairs, Cas’s words echoing in his head.

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Dean and Jo have an unspoken rule. What drunken confessions occur between drunk people, stay between drunk people. They’re not discussed the next morning or the next afternoon or brought up in a fight or even a relevant discussion. Dean figures the same agreement goes for him and Cas. He’s not sure if Cas remembers their embarrassingly chick flick moment on the couch or Cas’s almost whispered confession on the air mattress, but Dean isn’t going to bring either of them up.

He decides this in the shower after he finally drags himself out of bed Sunday morning, pounding head and all. He showers to wake himself up which only makes him realize how groggy and hungover he is. He pulls on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt and a sweatshirt and then heads upstairs to see if anyone is awake and interested in going to brunch. Some hashbrowns soaked in hot sauce sound like the perfect cure to his hangover.

Pam and Jo are up, and Jo looks even more miserable than Dean feels. She’s lying on the couch, head in Pam’s lap as Pam gives her a forehead massage.

“Morning Dean,” Pam says so Jo doesn’t have to open her eyes. “Good night?”

Dean shrugs and stretches, waiting for the familiar pop in his shoulder from when he strained it junior year of high school. “Wasn’t the worst.”

“You didn’t bring a lady home. You losing some of your charm?”

“Never,” Dean says. He mouths *is she alright?* then says, “Besides, I might have brought a guy home.” Which, technically is true. Well, more like Cas followed Dean home but close enough, right?

“Oh?” Pam mouths *okay, what happened?*. “Where is this mystery man?”

*Later.* “He’s sleeping off his hangover in the mattress room.”

“That would explain the vodka in the living room. What’d you do, take bedtime shots?”

“Something like that.” Dean presses a hand to his head. He’s in desperate need of some Ibuprofen. “Need to get the wild nights out of me before the season starts.”

“You always cut back when you’re in season. Spoilsport.”

Dean grins and gets himself a glass of water and some painkillers. “You have a good night?”

“Skyped with Anna. Worked on my strip tease. Very productive.”

“TMI,” Dean says. He flops down into the armchair. “So, poll time. Do we let Cas sleep or do we shake him awake and drag him to brunch with us?”

“Ooh, Cas is your mystery man?” Pam’s hands pause their work on Jo’s forehead. “I knew there was something going on there.”

Dean doesn’t bother trying to deny anything. She’ll sense he’s lying but maybe if he just stays quiet she’ll forget about it or something. He wonders if waking Cas up will save him from this situation or just make it worse, but his train of thought is derailed when he hears voices downstairs.

More specifically, a male and female voice.

Even more specifically, Victor’s voice and an unknown female’s voice.

Shit, Dean thinks, and he doesn’t have time to get further than that before Victor and the girl with him are on the first floor. Victor pauses at the top of the stairs and at least has that decency to look guilty when he sees Jo sprawled out on the couch. Dean prays that Jo’s fallen asleep or won’t notice that Victor had company over.

Jo cracks her eyes open and turns her head, and the entire room takes a collective breath as her gaze shifts from Victor to the woman with him. Jo’s hands curl into fists.

Instead of getting the hell out, which would be the smart thing to do, Victor puffs up. “Something wrong?”

“You’re an asshole,” Jo says. She pushes herself into a sitting position and looks for a moment like she’s going to puke before she recovers.

“Here we go,” Dean mutters.

Victor’s gaze snaps to Dean. “You have something you want to say? You want to judge me for living my fucking life, too?”

Hold up. How did Dean get in the middle of this? This is a run of the mill Jo-Victor fight. Dean shouldn’t be getting pulled into it at all.

Dean holds his hands up. “I want nothing to do with this. I’m going to get Cas, and we’re going to brunch. Pam, you coming with us?”

Pam looks between Jo and Victor and sighs. “Yeah, I’m coming.” She turns to Victor’s friend, a tall blond, and smiles. “You want to come with us too?”

“Uh.” The girl takes in Jo’s body position and edges backwards. “I think I might just head home.”

Dean hurries down the hall before he sees where that goes. It’s not like he’s out of earshot or even eyesight, but with his back to the trainwreck he can at least pretend it doesn’t exist. He knocks on the door and then cracks it open, letting some light into the previously pitch black room.

Cas is a lump under a blanket, and he doesn't stir even when the first stripe of light falls on his face. Dean would leave him to sleep, but he doesn't want Victor and Jo's inevitable screaming match to wake him up, and he doesn't want Cas to find himself alone in an unfamiliar place. So, waking him up it is.

"Don't you dare give her your phone number," Jo warns, voice low, threatening. Cas shifts at that and Dean wonders whether he should shut the door and turn on the light or if the yelling is a better way to wake up.

Dean used to wake up to the sound of angry voices, and he remembers how much it had scared him. His father's voice dropping to levels he wasn't used to hearing. His mother's voice rising, angry, panicked. He remembers the shouted words and then the terrible, empty silences that followed.

Dean steps into the storage room and shuts the door behind him.

Instead of flipping the light switch, he pulls out his phone and uses the light as a flashlight of sorts. This time, the light shines directly on Cas's face and he brings up an arm to block it out.

"What are you doing?"

"Waking you up."

"Why?"

"I'm going to brunch with Pam. Jo and Victor are about to have it out in the living room. You're welcome to go back to sleep, I just didn't want you to panic when you woke up and were either alone or stepped into a battlefield."

"Right."

"I'm not the one who found the most available piece of ass and dragged it back to the apartment last night!" Jo screeches, clear as day even through the door.

"Sorry," Dean says. "I was hoping you wouldn't have to hear any of this."

Cas shrugs. "So, brunch?"

They emerge from the room, both of them blinking against the sudden light of the apartment, and they carefully edge around Jo and Victor. They're now in the middle of the living room, in each other's faces, looking like they're about to start throwing punches. Dean ushers Cas out and they find Pam and blond chick waiting for them in the hallway.

Dean gives her an awkward wave. "Hey."

"Should've known," she says. "Victor seemed like a nice guy. Had to be something weird going on."

Dean forces a smile. It's a fucked up situation, but he's not going to go blabbing to outsiders about it. Even if Victor kind of dragged her into it.

"Don't you look deliciously disheveled." Pam smirks and runs a hand down Cas's sleeve.

It's true, Dean realizes. Cas's t-shirt is wrinkled under his coat, and his cheeks are sleep warm and there are lines on them from sleeping on the edge of his pillow, and his hair is a mess. Cas paws at his hair, trying to get it to lie flat, but it only makes it worse.

"Come on," Dean says with a laugh. "We'll get something to eat and then you can go back to your

room and get yourself pretty again.”

“Aw, Dean,” Cas says, slinging his arm around Dean’s shoulder. “You think I’m pretty?”

Dean groans and gives Cas a shove. “It’s way too early for this.”

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Dean gives the apartment a wide berth after brunch. He gets some work done in the library, tools around on Facebook for a bit, and then goes to CC to get some work done on his ceramics project.

There are a few kids from Ceramics I there, and their voices drop to whispers when Dean comes in. He holds up an iPod and some headphones and they pick their conversation back up. Dean gets his headphones in, tucks his iPod into his pocket so it won’t get in his way, and gets to work.

The difficulty with the vase is that it has to be done in pieces, and Dean doesn’t often have lots of little pockets of time to come down and work on it. He has to add a few inches, give the clay time to dry enough that it’ll support the weight of more clay, but not let it dry enough that he can’t add the next few inches.

He gets about four inches slapped on and then he has to thin out the clay so it matches the thickness of the rest of the vase, and then he has to shape it. Dean hums Elton John to himself as Candle in the Wind drifts through his headphones, and he works.

He puts aside thoughts of Jo and Victor’s fight and what the aftermath is going to look like. He puts aside thoughts of Cas, and his stupid smile and his hair. He puts aside thoughts of school work and volleyball, and he lets himself simply create.

Professor Mosely asked him once what his process was like. She’s into things like creative process, and she likes the class to share their experience, which Dean thinks is bullshit. If everyone’s process is unique and special or whatever then it doesn’t matter if they share. Dean hadn’t known how to say his process is that that doesn’t think at all so he’d made up something about being one with the clay. It got him a few laughs from the class and a stern look from Professor Mosely but Dean hadn’t cared.

Until the Sunday after that class anyways. Dean had shown up to work on his plate collection, and Professor Mosely was waiting for him. She asked him again what his process was like and told him she wanted a real answer this time.

Dean had grabbed a slab of clay and began to work it over as he talked. He likes ceramics in a way he never liked art or music or anything like it. He likes to get his hands on the clay, he likes to work it through his fingers. He likes to feel it, and he doesn’t know why he does, but Professor Moseley had nodded when he told her that, and Dean had opened up.

He told her about his need to build. It started in the backyard with stick huts and then it moved onto one room houses when he found the abandoned bricks. He made nests for the robins’ eggs he’d find on the ground during the spring, and he’d leave acorns and twigs and bits of dandelion fluff by the loose brick the chipmunk family lived under. He built tree forts in the air and huts on the ground, and he and Jo and Sam would play every version of house they could come up with.

And then Mom died. Dean, Sam, and Dad were out hiking for the day with their Scout troop. The fire took out the house and the yard. By the time they got back from their trip, there was nothing left but charred trees and the burned out shell of the house.

Dean joined Pop Warner football that summer. He put on padding that made him feel invincible and he ran into other kids and stationary targets so hard his shoulders jarred. He got into fights at school. He watched body building videos and started doing push-ups on the floor of the motel room they were

staying at until they could get a new place.

Dean started going to therapy, but it took a long time for things to get better. When he started looking for a spring sport, his therapist recommended that he stay away from lacrosse. She thought it was too much of a contact sport and that he could use something different after football. The only reason Dean even ended up at the volleyball demonstration was because his therapist had recommended it.

At first, Dean didn't understand. You got to hit a ball and the harder you hit it the better. It was like dodgeball except a volleyball hurt more than one of those things they used in gym class. And then Dean realized the whole point wasn't pelting someone with the ball as hard as you could but putting the ball where no one was. It was about finding the spaces that were empty and exploiting them. And then Dean was transitioned from being a hitter to a setter, but he didn't mind it. Football was about hurting. Volleyball was--is--about something else.

Dean had signed up for Ceramics I as kind of a joke, because he needed another class. The first Sunday he was down here alone and he got his hands on some clay he cried. He didn't tell Professor Mosely that part, but he thinks she knew anyways, because her eyes had softened around the edges, and she'd laid a hand over his.

Dean was never able to articulate quite what his process was. He likes to empty his mind and then create. Build. Take a block of unassuming clay--of dirt--of something you find in the ground and make something usable out of it.

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When Dean gets back to the apartment, there's no one in any of the common areas and all the bedroom doors are closed, which means if people are home they want to be left alone. Good. Dean doesn't feel like dealing with people right now.

He takes his reheated rice and chicken and veggies and carries it downstairs with him. The nice thing about working on his pottery project is that he can spend a couple hours relaxing, doing something he enjoys, and he can still say he's getting work done. The bad thing about working on his pottery project is that he still has other homework left to do, and he's used up his motivation to do work.

Dean props his feet up on his desk, drops his Tupperware container into his lap and grabs his Sports & Politics book out of his bag. They're reading about FIFA and its impact on both international soccer--football, Dean corrects--and global politics. Africa's about to get involved which Dean suspects is going to make things interesting.

He makes it about halfway through his reading before there's a knock at his door. Dean knows who it is even before Victor pokes his head in. Jo would've burst in without knocking, and no one else bothers him when his door's shut.

"Victor," Dean really doesn't want to have this conversation right now. He doesn't want to have this conversation ever, but he'd much rather have it once his homework's done.

Victor either doesn't hear the reluctance in Dean's voice or ignores it as he leans against the doorway. "She was unreasonable this morning, right?"

"You know I don't get involved." Dean's done a fairly good job of keeping out of Victor and Jo's fights. He has to. Jo has been his best friend since they were kids. If they were any closer they'd be related. And Victor is Dean's best guy friend, and he's Dean's co-captain and teammate. He's friends with both of them, and he doesn't want to be forced to pick sides. He doesn't want to lose either of them.

“You have to have some kind of opinion. She was a total bitch to the girl I brought back and then she fucking threatened me.”

They threaten each other all the time. If Dean actually thought they'd ever hurt each other he wouldn't leave them alone, but he knows them better than that. They'll shout and they'll scream and they'll get in each other's faces, but they won't throw punches at each other.

“She doesn't own me,” Victor continues like he's forgotten he's asked for Dean's input. “Just because we fool around every once in a while doesn't mean I can't go out and have some fun. She went out too, and I'm not getting on her case about it.”

“She didn't bring anyone home with her,” Dean points out.

Victor's head snaps up, his eyes angry as they meet Dean's. “What's that supposed to mean? I'm not allowed to fuck anyone anymore?”

“Of course not. All I'm saying is that you could've gone to her place. Bringing her back here is kind of a dick move.”

Victor crosses his arms over his chest. “You know what, Winchester? Fuck you. I thought you were supposed to be Switzerland or whatever and stay out of this. But you're on her side. You're always on her side.”

Victor storms out, slamming the door behind him, and Dean groans and tosses his FIFA book across the room. That could've gone better.

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Victor doesn't say anything to Dean at breakfast. They don't usually exchange more than grunts of acknowledgement, because Victor isn't capable of speech before coffee, and it takes Dean a little while to get going in the morning, but on Monday Victor doesn't even look at him.

Dean sighs, and his shoulders feel heavy and he's suddenly way too tired for this morning. He muddles his way through his oatmeal, barely tasting the raisins or the sunflower seeds he mixes in to give it a texture that's more varied than wet cement.

Seeing Cas between classes brightens his day, and they grab lunch per usual, and Dean's almost able to forget that everything isn't right in his world.

And then practice happens.

Dean had been hoping they could act like mature adults and have a fight without it messing up practice, but that's not the case. Victor leads the run and drills on his own and when they pair up to pepper, Victor grabs Strub which leaves both Dean and Shurley off balance.

“Trouble in paradise?” Shurley guesses.

Dean sighs. “Apparently.” He sorts through a couple volleyballs until he finds the one he wants. There isn't too much give when he squeezes it, but it's not rock hard either. He tosses it to Chuck to start their pepper. “Don't worry about it though.”

“I never worry about anything,” Chuck says, which is a blatant lie. He passes the ball, right to Dean's forehead and Dean takes two tiny steps-left-right-then sets it back.

He drops down in a defensive position, but Chuck doesn't hit it. Because Chuck isn't Victor. He's the libero. Dean bites back another sigh and rolls his next shot. He aims to the left and Chuck shuffles and

easily gets under the hit.

It's not that warming up with Chuck doesn't get Dean properly warm, because that's not the case. Chuck's a good player, and Dean gets his arm and his hands good and warm, but working with Chuck instead of Victor throws Dean off his routine. He doesn't like being off his routine.

The itch of not quite right settles between his shoulders, and it doesn't go away. It's there when they do their hitting lines, and Dean's sets aren't noticeably off, but they're not perfect. He sets a touch inside, and he tries to compensate and ends up setting too far off the net, and he needs to shut his mind off and stop thinking so much but he can't.

Usually he's a machine. He can take a ball anywhere and place it almost anywhere. He's the master of consistency. Except for today. This set will be a couple inches too high. The next one will be a couple inches too low. Which means the hits aren't as clean as they can be, and Victor's hit the tape three times in a row, because he's not adjusting, and he's starting to get pissed. And Dean doesn't want to have a shouting match on the court so he tries to get Victor's sets better but the more he tries the more varied the sets come out and it's a vicious cycle he can't break out of.

"Mirror blocking," Victor snarls after he hits a line shot way out of bounds.

It's by far one of the team's least favorite drills or, at the very least, one of the middles' least favorite drills, but no one dares complain today. The drill means they're constantly moving - either running or jumping, and everyone's exhausted halfway through.

Victor runs them through it twice, and he's pissed about sloppy footwork or something, because he orders them to do it again.

"The hell?" Strub pants. He bends over, hands on his knees as he tries to catch his breath. "At least let us get a drink first."

"There aren't drink breaks in volleyball," Victor says. "And if you think we're going to waste a timeout, because you're feeling a little parched then you're wrong. We're doing it again. Winchester, you're the fourth middle this time."

Of course he is, Dean thinks. He wants to argue or protest or something, but he keeps his mouth shut. The last thing the team needs is for the captains to fight in front of them, and Dean can do this. True, he's not a middle, but he can handle shuffling back and forth and blocking. Maybe. Possibly not after already doing the drill twice on the right side.

When they finish the drill again (Dean swears it lasts longer this time than it has on the others) Dean's lungs are burning, and his legs are jelly. He knows being a middle is hard. He has a healthy respect for the workout they get defending the net. He didn't need that drill to make him appreciate them.

He stumbles over to the cart where the 5 gallon jugs of water and watered down Gatorade are kept. Dean grabs his water bottle off the cart, and it takes all his self-control to take slow sips instead of chugging the whole thing.

"Dude," Stub says, voice low as he comes up beside Dean. "What the hell crawled up Henrikson's ass and died?"

Dean shrugs and takes another swig of Gatorade. "No clue."

"I'm fucking beat. How the hell am I supposed to make it through the rest of practice?"

"With your mouth shut and your head down?" Shurley offers shuffling over. He rolls his water bottle between his hands. "Is it time to start worrying now?"

“Worrying?” Strub asks. “About what?”

“Nothing.” Dean sets his Gatorade down so he can clap them each on the shoulder. “Everything’s fine. Now get your asses back on the court. We’ve got some training to do.”

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Dean sticks around to help take down the nets even though it’s technically the freshmen’s job. It gives him an excuse not to walk back with Victor, because Dean needs some time to cool off. They’re having a talk tonight. They’re having a major talk tonight, because practice today was unacceptable, but Dean needs some space. He needs to calm down so he can approach this rationally or this will blow into an even bigger mess.

When Dean gets back to the apartment, Pam and Ash are at the kitchen table. Dean looks around for Victor and Pam laughs.

“He made himself some ramen and fled downstairs. He knows I’m pissed at him, the coward.”

“Right.” Dean’s not in the mood to cook. He’s not really in the mood to eat, but he definitely can’t skip dinner. He settles for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich which is the epitome of laziness.

“That bad?” Pam asks.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Dean sets his plate down at his spot and goes to get a glass of chocolate milk, the carrots, and some pretzels.

“Don’t bullshit me. I know you too well.”

“Fine. Practice could’ve gone better.” Dean clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, but Pam doesn’t appear to be taking hints tonight. He turns to Ash. “How’s that programming coming along?”

Dean doesn’t actually understand most of what Ash says, but he likes listening to him talk. Because there’s noise but Dean can tune out the words and the meaning and just let it wash over him. He can eat his sandwich in peace, no Pam prying into his business or anything and everything’s good. The best part is, Ash knows he’s on a level above everyone else at the table. And he doesn’t care. He talks because someone’s shown interest and because talking through his projects gives him insight into things he didn’t realize before.

“Holy shit!” Ash’s plate clatters to the table. He grabs the back of Dean’s neck and plants a loud kiss on Dean’s cheek. “You’re a genius!” He gets up and runs downstairs, and Dean and Pam look at each other across the table.

Pam’s the first to shrug. “Guess we’re not going to see him for a while.”

“Guess not.”

“You’re in a mood,” Pam says. She gathers up her dishes and grabs Ash’s plate and brings them over to the sink. “Talk to him. Hash out whatever’s going on between you two.”

“It’s not that easy.” But they need to talk. They need to get practice straightened out. The team shouldn’t suffer because Dean and Victor are having issues. And really, Dean and Victor aren’t having issues. Victor and Jo are, and Dean knew the two of them living together was a bad idea, but he hadn’t spoken up last year when they were making plans. And now he has to live with the consequences.

“I know.” Pam squeezes his shoulder on the way past. “Good luck. And I’ll be doing boring reading

later if you want to hang out.”

Aka, if everything goes to shit and you need someone to talk to. Dean smiles, grateful for the support, and crams the rest of his sandwich in his mouth. “Thanks,” he says through bread and peanut butter and strawberry jam.

“You’re disgusting,” Pam says. She shakes her head and goes into her room.

Dean does his dishes and ignores the way his sandwich sinks to the pit of his stomach and goes downstairs to talk to Victor.

Victor’s door is closed so Dean knocks and waits for the gruff, “Come in,” before pushing the door open.

Victor’s sprawled out on his bed with his psych textbook and a notebook, and he glances up when Dean comes in then looks pointedly back at his book.

Someone’s going to have to be an adult here, and it looks like that falls on Dean. “What happened at practice can’t happen again.”

“I agree.”

“You what?”

Victor sets his notebook down. “I get that you’re pissed at me, but I expected better from you.”

Hold up. How is this suddenly about Dean? This is about Victor and his piss poor attitude. “Expected better from me?”

“You set me all over the place today. And why? Because we had a spat over Jo? I thought you were a better team player than that.”

“I am a better team player than that. What the hell, Victor? I would never--”

Victor smoothly cuts him off. “Then you must just be a shitty setter, because you sucked today. Get your act together, Winchester. We have a championship to win.”

Dean’s hands clench into fists at his sides, and he’s two seconds away from ripping Victor’s psych book out of his hands and hurling it against the wall.

“Could you shut the door on your way out?” Victor asks. “I’m trying to get work done.” He flashes an insincere smile and puts his earbuds back in.

Dean doesn’t move for a long moment, afraid that he’s going to snap. When he finally does leave, he’s stiff, and it takes all his self-control not to slam the door so hard it rattles the building.

Dean’s not a shitty setter. He had an off day but his off day is better than the best day Victor’s ever had. Dean’s off day is still a win for the team, and he’s allowed to have an off day every once in a while. At least he’s not a giant prick.

Dean stomps back to his room, throws his gym bag back together and heads upstairs. There’s no way he’s getting homework done right now.

Pam’s moved from the kitchen table to the couch, and she looks up from her computer when Dean comes barreling up the stairs. “Didn’t go well?” she guesses.

“I’m going to the gym. I’ll be back later.”

There's no one in the performance gym, the nice gym with the hardwood floors where volleyball has their matches and basketball plays their games. Dean flips on some of the lights and sets the net up himself even though it's a pain in the ass. And, because he's a captain and the coach's favorite, he has a key to the equipment closet. Which means in under fifteen minutes Dean has the setting target set up.

It's a funnel attached to one of the ball carts, and Dean sets it up in the outside position. If Dean's able to set within a certain ratio of perfect then the ball will drop into the funnel and fall into the ball cart.

Dean takes the second ball cart, the one full of volleyballs, and sets up in the setter's spot. He tosses the first ball up, takes his steps-left-right-and sets. The ball arcs, just the right height for a 15, and falls into the basket. Dean tosses up the next one. Left-right set.

Left-right set.

Left-right set.

Dean runs through the whole cart. Not a single ball misses the funnel.

Take that, Victor, Dean thinks. He switches the ball carts out so he has a full one and moves the funnel to the 32 position.

He starts the drill again.

He switches out the ball carts, moves the funnel to the middle position. Does it again.

When Dean moves to back sets, one set misses the funnel. He redoes the whole drill.

He's sweating, and his arms are shaking, but he doesn't feel settled yet. He goes over to his bag, takes a long swig from his water bottle and sets the funnel up on the outside again. This time, Dean moves his position to the ten foot line. He tosses the ball to the setter position and he has to run to get under the ball.

He sets into the funnel.

Fuck you, Victor, Dean thinks.

He rolls his shoulders. Picks up the next ball.

He tosses it up, runs, ends with left-right set.

The ball falls into the basket.

Dean finishes his full set of setting on the run, and he wipes his face on his sleeve. Should he set up to run some back row sets? Those could probably use some work. Speaking of, they should run the back row attack drill next court practice. The more options Dean has on any given play the better. And the more available hitters, the more people the defense has to focus on.

Dean likes to open games with a quick middle attack and then on the next play have one of his back row hitters go for a kill. It keeps the defense on their toes, keeps them guessing, and the second of hesitation it takes them to decide which hitter to commit to can be the difference between a kill and getting blocked.

"You're not serious are you?" a voice calls from the bleachers. Dean turns to see Cas standing in the bleacher aisle, and Dean wonders how long he's been watching for. "Can you really do it again? Don't your arms hurt?"

Dean shrugs but now that Cas has called his attention to it, Dean's arms ache. His shoulders and his forearms and his wrists, and Dean's not sure he can lift his arms over his head again. That'll make setting difficult.

"Why are you here?" Dean asks because that's safer than answering.

"Because I have no reason to be in the gym?" Cas comes down the bleacher stairs to join Dean on the hardwood.

"Not in this part of it." Dean rolls a volleyball between his hands. "Oh. Pam texted you, didn't she? Whatever she said, she's wrong. I'm fine."

Cas arches his eyebrows, because it's obvious Dean's not fine. "She said you were at the gym putting on a magnificent display of masculinity, and I should be sure to check it out."

Of course she did.

"If it's any consolation, I'm very impressed." Cas flashes a smile, but it falters when Dean doesn't return it. "I was serious earlier. If you keep setting your arms are going to fall off. Why don't we clean this up and we can head over to the CC?"

"I need to practice. You know how you run for miles? I set. Over and over. Repetition is key."

"Yes, but I have a specific mileage for each week and going over is bad. I'm sure you're not supposed to set for hours on end." Cas approaches one of the volleyball poles, and he fiddles with the net, but he doesn't make any move to take it down without Dean's go-ahead. "So, what do you say? We break this down, and we can get that razz-matazz smoothie you're so fond of."

Dean makes a face. "It's the Razzle Dazzle. Like the song."

"You've seen *Chicago*?"

Dean shrugs, but a flush sweeps through his cheeks. "What? A guy's not allowed to appreciate musicals?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I just didn't peg you for a *Chicago* fan."

Dean shrugs again. "The chicks are pretty badass." He drops his volleyball into the ball cart and goes over to the opposite pole to wind the net down. "Kind of remind me of Pam."

"I thought you were going to say Lisa," Cas says, and his lips quirk into a smile when Dean blushes again.

"There are a lot of women in my life I wouldn't cross," Dean says.

"Jo?"

"And her mother. You think Jo's bad? Wait until you see the source. Not that I don't love Ellen. Because I do. But you don't mess with her. Bunch of boys in high school learned that the hard way."

"Oh?" Cas asks, sensing a story there.

"She owns her own bar," Dean begins. He lifts up the pole with a grunt and carries it over to the curtain by the equipment shed where they keep the three sets of volleyball poles and the nets. He tells Cas about the time three boys tried to break in and steal some liquor as a prank while they finish packing up the net and then they head across the street for smoothies.

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Dean's arms ache the next day which is his own damn fault so he keeps his mouth shut and doesn't complain. Not that he would anyway. He's not a complainer. He does make sure to grab some extra ice and he spends twenty minutes in the common room chatting with Jo and Pam while he ices his shoulders and forearms.

The next day, he's still pissed at Victor, and this time he's intentionally a jerk at practice. Dean doesn't make it glaringly obvious, but he sets Victor less than usual. Anyone who has done any kind of scouting on their team knows that they're middle heavy. Three times out of five, Dean's setting the middle, and the glory of having a middle like Strub is that Dean can set a slide, a quick, a back quick, a 32 and each of them are equally good. The other team can know Dean's setting middle and most of the time, they still can't stop it.

So, the outsides don't get set a ton, and they're cool with it, and Dean doubts they usually keep track of how often they get set (that's Dean's job) but Victor's definitely keeping track today. And he's definitely noticed that when Dean doesn't go middle he's more likely to go back or even back row. Every once in a while, Dean'll even take a swing on the second ball. It keeps the other side on their toes and it pisses Victor off so it's a win-win.

Victor manages to keep himself in check until practice is over.

The team goes to break down the net but Dean waves them off. "Henrikson and I have got it," he says. He grins at the confused looks the team shares between themselves. "This isn't a test, I swear. Go, shower, grab some dinner. We'll see you tomorrow for conditioning."

Chuck is the only one who hesitates, eyes darting between Victor and Dean like he's afraid they won't both make it out of the gym alive if they're left alone. Dean smiles and waves him off, because Dean and Victor need to hash through a few things and they'll be fine.

Victor doesn't say anything while Dean dismisses the team or saddles the two of them with most of the clean-up. He stands off to the side, jaw locked, fury radiating off his entire person. As soon as the last guy is jogging up the stairs to hit the locker room, Victor rounds on Dean.

"What the hell was your problem today?"

Dean knew Victor was going to get angry so he doesn't flinch at the tone, and he doesn't let it put him on the defensive. "I didn't want you to have to suffer through any subpar setting."

Victor opens his mouth, snaps it shut. Before he can gather his wits about him, Dean presses forward.

"Look, I'm a damn good setter, and we both know that. And I promised you when you first started dating Jo that I wouldn't let your personal shit interfere with practice. So, you can ditch the attitude and start treating me like your teammate and your co-captain again or I will cut you out of the offense."

They stare each other down for a long moment. Victor's the first to break, looking away with a huffed sigh.

"I've been a proper douchebag," he says.

"Yep."

"No need to rub it in. I'm sorry. You're right. I got pissed and I took it out on you. I shouldn't have."

Dean nods, satisfied. "In that case, let's get some practice in. I've been wanting to fine tune your shoots. You think you have half an hour of ups left in you?"

“I should. I got a nice long break during practice.” Victor flashes Dean a smile, and it’s enough to put Dean at ease.

They grab a ball cart and get into their positions, and fall into the easy pattern of toss-set-hit.

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“Things are better?” Cas asks. He’s on his back on Dean’s bed, feet propped up against the wall as he works his way through *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

“Yeah.” Dean flips through his Geo book, looking for the diagram he wants. “Victor and I are good again. He and Jo are speaking which is good, because things are less tense, but it’s only a matter of time before they end up in bed together again. Which means it’s only a matter of time until another fight. I don’t know if the two of them make me believe in relationships or never want to be in one.”

Cas is quiet for a long moment before he holds up his book. “It could be worse. It could be like what’s happening in here. Martin Guerre gets married then one day picks up and leaves and he’s gone for like ten years and then this guy shows up pretending to be Martin Guerre and no one knows any better, because peasants didn’t get portraits taken so not even his family could tell that he wasn’t the real Martin Guerre. I’m pretty sure his wife guessed, but the new guy was a much better husband so she didn’t say anything.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah! I have a feeling everything’s going to fall apart soon, but right now it’s totally wild. Could you imagine living like that? This guy’s uncle has no idea that his nephew isn’t really his nephew. Isn’t that crazy?”

Cas laughs into his book, delighted in a way Dean doesn’t understand. He’s never met anyone who gets excited about books the way Cas does. Sure, Dean thinks some of the stuff he reads is interesting, but he doesn’t get invested the way Cas does.

Dean stares until the smile fades from Cas’s face and he gets absorbed in his book again. He stares as Cas flips pages and wriggles a bit to get more comfortable. He watches emotions flit across Cas’s face as he soaks in whatever’s happening in the narrative. He stares until it registers that he’s being a total creeper, and Dean goes back to geology, determined to ignore Cas.

It works better than Dean expected it to, and he gets through his entire geo assignment before he turns back to the bed. He grins when he sees Cas’s legs leaning towards the side and Cas’s book resting on his chest. Cas’s eyes are closed. He’s sound asleep, little puffs of air--not quite snores--coming from him every few seconds.

Dean shakes his head and carefully eases the book out of Cas’s grip. The guy pushes himself way too hard. Dean rearranges Cas so he’s lying down on the bed, and Dean holds his breath when Cas stirs, afraid he’s woken him up. But Cas just shifts, curling his arms around the second pillow Dean keeps for cuddling purposes, and sinks deeper into sleep.

Dean drapes the extra blanket over Cas and checks Cas’s phone to make sure the alarm’s set for tomorrow morning. He gets himself ready for bed, turns off the light in his room, and then heads upstairs to the mattress room. The air mattress isn’t quite as nice as Dean’s, but it won’t kill him to spend one night on it.

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Dean’s making pancakes when Cas wanders upstairs, hair a mess, messenger bag slung over one

shoulder. He rubs his eyes and frowns up at Dean, looking adorably lost and confused.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” he asks.

“Figured you could use the rest.”

“Where did you sleep?”

Dean jerks his thumb towards the mattress room, and flips the pancakes.

“I don’t understand.”

“Didn’t feel like hauling your ass upstairs so I let you sleep in my bed. Isn’t the mattress the best thing you’ve ever slept on?”

“But now it’s going to remember me.”

Dean shrugs. “So?” And then he realizes that’s not the sort of thing you say to your friend when you’re trying to hide a painfully obvious crush so Dean drops two pancakes on a plate. “You hungry?”

It’s mean switching topics like this, because Cas isn’t a morning person, and Dean knows he doesn’t follow conversations well before coffee, but on this subject, Dean’s willing to fight dirty. Dean wonders if his pillows smell like Cas. And then he decides that’s probably the creepiest thought he’s had in a while, and it’s time to switch gears.

“I can make blueberry pancakes,” Dean says. “In case you don’t like plain ones. Could make some apple ones too.”

“What about chocolate marshmallow pancakes?” Pam asks, grabbing a plate and helping herself to a stack of three pancakes.

“That was a good night,” Dean says.

Cas looks between them, searching for an explanation.

Pam snags the butter away from Cas before he’s had a chance to use it. “Towards the end of a semester or when we’re coming up on a break, we throw whatever shit we have together in a random meal so it doesn’t go bad. Which has led to things like chocolate marshmallow pancakes. One of our more successful experiments.”

“Unlike the chicken,” Dean says.

“The chicken was hit or miss.” Pam, once again, takes pity on Cas and explains. “At the end of last semester we went out to Woodcock for a picnic, and we brought the entire spice cabinet and what turned out to be an obscene amount of chicken that had been chilling in the back of the freezer. We mixed random things together and gave them ago. The lemon garlic chicken wasn’t so bad.”

“No, that one was good.” Dean turns to Cas. “You should come with us next time we go out to Woodcock. It’s a ton of fun. And we don’t always cook weird food.”

“And we don’t let Dean pick the melon anymore.”

Dean throws his hands up. “That was one time! And I thought twenty people were coming.”

“We had the biggest watermelon you have ever seen,” Pam says. “I have never eaten so much watermelon in my life.”

“Stop making him not want to come,” Dean says. Cas is still sitting at the table in stunned silence, his brain trying to catch up to everything going on around him.

Pam reaches over to pat Cas’s hand. “You need coffee, don’t you? Some people,” she glares at Dean, “don’t understand the importance of a stimulating drink in the morning.”

“I get all the stimulation I need in the shower.” Dean makes a lewd gesture, and Pam chucks a red solo cup at his head.

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Saturday night finds them getting ready to go to the cross country house for the Anything But Clothes party. Cas had at first thought it meant everyone was supposed to show up naked and had flat out refused to go. After Dean had gotten over picturing Cas naked and Jo had gotten over laughing, they explained to him the concept behind an ABC party. And Cas had been surprisingly on board with it after that.

He refused to let Dean come into his room for the whole week, because he was building his costume and didn’t want it ruined. Dean put a similar ban on his room and sat down to brainstorm, because he didn’t want his costume to be pathetic in comparison to Cas’s.

Of course, when Dean emerges from his room Saturday night and makes his way upstairs he realizes that no one’s going to be able to show up Pam. She’s made a dress out of tarot cards, and it looks really good.

Pam rolls her eyes when she sees Dean. “Really?”

Dean grins and swaggers into the kitchen. He’s wrapped himself up in yellow caution tape, making a skirt of sorts that keeps him decent. He’s got spandex on underneath for when the tape inevitably comes off, whether it falls down or gets ripped off.

Dean leans in real close to Pam and whispers, “You lookin’ for some danger tonight?”

Pam laughs and shoves his face away. “Want to take a few shots before we head over?”

“You better not be drinking without me!” Jo shouts from her room.

“Then hurry your ass up!” Pam calls back. She gets the vodka out of the freezer.

Jo stumbles out of her room a moment later. Dean’s mouth drops, because she looks like all she’s got are some leaves covering her enough to be decent.

“Please tell me those are being held on with more than a bit of glue,” Dean says.

Jo laughs, a little cruelly and snatches his shot out of his hand. “Relax. I’m in a sports bra and spandex. The leaves are sewn on. Look good, though, don’t I?” She does a little twirl.

“Ooh,” Pam says, eyeing Jo’s stomach. “That’s the kind of six pack I could drink out of.”

“You haven’t even started drinking yet,” Dean tells Pam. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and dials Cas. “Where the hell are you? The girls are getting rowdy.”

“I’m at the door,” Cas says. “I was about to text you to come let me in. Are they too much for you to handle?”

Dean glances over at the two of them. Pam’s mourning the lack of tequila in the house and debating

whether she's willing to do body shots with something as shitty as Vladdy. Jo smirks and preens under the attention.

Tonight's going to be a shitshow.

"Way too much," Dean says. "I'm coming to get you."

"Wait, don't bother." There's the sound of a door being opened in the background. "One of the nice people that lives in your building's letting me in. He's giving me a weird look. Probably because I have a winter coat on but couldn't figure out pants."

Dean's tempted to sprint out the door so he can catch a glimpse of Cas that much sooner. "You're not wearing pants?"

Pam and Jo look up from their conversation, definitely interested. Dean turns away from them, oddly possessive of Cas and his pantlessness.

Before Cas can answer Dean's question, there's a knock at the door. Dean's stomach skips and leaps, and Dean races Jo to the door. He wins, barely, and throws the door open to see Cas standing in front of him, bare chested and with a pizza box around his hips.

Dean's mouth drops.

"Delivery for Mr. Winchester," Cas says, deep and gravelly, and Dean's re-evaluating the wisdom of a costume that will do nothing to hide his erection if Cas keeps talking like that.

"Holy shit," Jo says.

"I like," Pam adds. She holds up a shot glass. "You want a drink?"

Dean, dumbly, steps aside and manages to shut his mouth by the time Cas has joined Pam by the table.

"How the hell did you come up with that?" Dean asks. He shuts the door and joins the girls and Cas.

"It's a bit of an inside joke," Cas says. "With myself." He contemplates this, takes a shot, then speaks again. "It's a nod to my first porno."

"Oh?" Jo pours him another shot. "Do tell."

Cas blushes, fierce and hot, but he keeps talking. "I was looking through the DVR one day, and I clicked on a movie I thought would be interesting and then the next thing I knew the pizza delivery man was spanking the babysitter, and I was incredibly confused."

"Bet your dick wasn't," Pam says, laughing as she goes to find the bag of pretzels.

Cas shrugs, all he has to say on that matter. "But then my dad walked in, and when I asked him why we had this saved on the DVR he got really uncomfortable and told me it wasn't something we talked about. And then my mom walked in."

Dean, Jo, and Pam groan in sympathy.

"She told him he either had to stop watching porn or rethink his position on birth control. It took me awhile to figure out what she was talking about." Cas knocks back his next shot. "Not sure I've recovered from that realization."

"Birth control?" Pam asks.

“I come from a conservative religious family,” Cas explains.

Pam nods her understanding. “I guess finding out your dad likes watching the naughty flicks was probably pretty traumatic for you then.”

Cas shrugs. “Wasn’t too bad. When I told my older brother Gabriel about it he laughed and offered to show me ‘the real shit’ next time he came back from college. I’m pretty sure he was in a few homemade videos; though, thankfully he never shared those with me.”

“You’re from a family of rebels, aren’t you?”

Cas smiles, but it’s a touched strained.

Dean jumps in with another shot, and he slings his free arm around Cas’s shoulders. “So, Cas, who you making the special delivery to tonight?” He waggles his eyebrows, and succeeds in chasing the shadows out of Cas’s eyes.

“Pretty sure he already offered it to you,” Jo says, sly, flashing Dean a smile when he glares at her.

Dean takes a double shot and checks his phone. He has five messages from Benny, all different variations of ‘get your ass over here’. They make decreasing sense as they go along. “Pretty sure the party’s already in full swing.”

“That your way of saying you want to go?” Pam doles out last shots and then they shrug on their jackets and head down to the house.

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It’s forty five minutes into the party, and Dean’s buzz is going strong. Jo’s in the other room kicking ass at pong. Pam is having a great time shutting down any advances that are made on her by telling whoever it is that this party is just a way for her to pass the time until her girlfriend gets into town.

Dean had forgotten that Anna was coming. He’ll have to time his return to the room right. He either needs to get back soon enough to fall asleep before they go at it or late enough that they’re fucked out and asleep. Because the two of them are loud.

Maybe Dean will avoid the problem altogether by going home with someone. He laughs as soon as the thought comes into his head. There’s only one person he has any interest in going home with, and he has no intentions of hitting on Cas tonight.

Dean’s eyes find Cas across the crowded room with ease. Cas is in the corner, pizza box effectively giving him a small bubble of personal space that Dean doesn’t have the luxury of having. Not that Dean really wants it. The caution tape is hot and sticking to his skin, and Dean’s tempted to rip it off and slink around in his spandex, but he’s not quite drunk enough for that. Maybe later.

For now, Dean’s going to enjoy the tight press of bodies, the way everyone’s all up on each other as they talk and chat and drink and, in a few cases, frantically make out.

“Having a good time?” Pam appears at Dean’s side, a grin on her face that Dean knows better than to trust but right now she seems friendly rather than conniving.

He smiles back, a little lopsided. “Great time. Forgot how shitty beer tastes a lot less shitty after a few shots.”

Pam presses the back of her hand to one of Dean’s flushed cheeks. “Dean, darling, how drunk are you?”

“Don’t darling me.” Dean tries to storm off, but there are too many people to make a dramatic exit.

“Do you like cupcake better?” Pam grins as she takes his cup away from him and sets it down on an end table that’s littered with half-full cups and empty beer cans. She loops her arm through his and brings him towards the center of the room, and Dean has a feeling he shouldn’t be following her, but it’s too easy to be led.

She motions to someone behind Dean, and he turns to look, but she directs his attention back to herself. “Don’t worry about it,” she says. “Now step.”

Dean steps and suddenly they’re on the coffee table, and his eyes narrow, but Pam just laughs. “Come on, cupcake, loosen up. Have a little fun.”

Over the sounds of the party, Glamorous filters through the speakers that are tucked into the corner behind the couch in the hopes that they’ll be protected from spilled beer and drunken accidents.

“Oh no,” Dean says. “I’m not getting down to Fergie. I have some self-respect.”

“That’s a lie.” Pam sidles close and gets her hands on Dean’s hips. “C’mon, Winchester. Show me your moves.”

Dean’s body is loose and pliant from all the alcohol he’s had. He’s warm and he’s happy, and he thinks *what the hell, why not* and he starts to move to the music. He’s vaguely aware of conversations pausing, of people staring, of a few catcalls, but he lets them feed into his mood.

He takes the slow roll of Fergie’s words and moves his body with them. He knows that Pam is moving, but he doesn’t realize until too late that she’s got one end of his caution tape in her hand, and she’s slowly unwrapping him.

Dean frowns and then shrugs it off. He keeps moving his hips in small circles, meets a few eyes across the room, gives them a slow smile. By the time Pam’s stripped him down to his spandex, the noise on the room is almost deafening.

“Winchester!” Benny bellows, his voice cutting through everyone else. “The hell are you doing up there?”

Benny’s in a gladiator outfit made out of Natty Lite boxes, and Dean’s rhythm falters and he stops and grins.

“Benny!”

He crouches down and has a moment to think that this is a terrible fucking idea before he’s jumping, flinging himself off the table, and Benny barely gets his arms up in time to catch Dean.

“Aw, hell,” Benny says, but he sounds more amused than anything as he sets Dean on his feet. “You’re in a mood tonight.”

Dean grins and grinds back on the bodies behind him. He’s drunk and he’s sweaty, and he’s mostly naked, and spandex slides even slicker than skin, and he wants to move. He wants to press himself up against someone else and close his eyes and just feel.

He has enough presence of mind not to try it on Benny, but it’s a close thing.

“Are you an idiot?” Cas demands, pushing his way through the crowd to reach Dean and Benny. “Jumping off tables, really? You’re going to break an ankle.”

“Spoilsport!” Even so, Dean moves away from Benny, and he tries to wind around Cas, but the pizza box gets in the way. Dean looks down at glares at it.

“Aw, you’re just mad he didn’t jump into your arms,” Benny says, and he ignores the stuttering he gets from both guys. “Here,” he reaches out and rips the pizza box from Cas’s waist, leaving him in a pair of navy blue spandex.

Dean tries not to stare.

He doesn’t succeed.

“Uh,” Dean says.

“You ripped my costume.” Cas looks from his unadorned waist down to the floor where his Little Caesar’s box is being crushed beneath the feet of ignorant party goers.

“Jerk,” Dean tells Benny. He wraps an arm around Cas. It’s a friendly hug. A hug of solidarity. It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that now their spandex can slide against each other. Dean shivers even though he’s sweating.

“Assbutt,” Cas adds. He sound so gravelly, so serious, but it’s such a ridiculous thing to say that Dean and Benny both burst out laughing.

Cas’s pout deepens. He tries to pull away from Dean, but Dean tightens his hold.

“I’m sorry for laughing at you.”

Cas doesn’t stop hanging his head. “My costume’s broken.”

“We can go home,” Dean offers.

Cas thinks about this for a minute then nods. “Okay.”

“Later jerkface,” Cas says to Benny, though there’s no real animosity in his words.

“Cya assbutt.” Benny laughs, a deep rumbling laugh, and Dean has to drag Cas away before Cas tries to fight him.

They stumble up to NVI together. Dean doesn’t question when they pass NVII, and Cas doesn’t break off to go to his own apartment. Dean’s pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to stand if they weren’t leaning on each other.

They weave through the hall to reach Dean’s apartment, and when they reach the door, Dean holds a finger up to his lips. “Shh,” he says in a too loud whisper. “We don’t want to wake them up.”

“Wake who up?”

“SHH!” Dean hisses. He scans his ID and the door clicks as it unlocks.

Dean tiptoes down the stairs, and Cas follows him down. They end up in Dean’s room. Dean turns his floor lamp onto the lowest setting so they can see each other but so it isn’t too bright. He flops down on his bed and Cas flops down next to him a moment later.

“That was a fun party.”

“Mmm.” Cas wiggles a bit until he can get under Dean’s arm and rest his head on Dean’s chest. “Definitely the best one we’ve been to so far. You’re a good dancer.”

Dean blushes, and the red goes all the way down his chest. Cas makes a pleased sound in the back of his throat and turns his head to press a light kiss to Dean's chest.

"Cas?" There's confusion in Dean's voice, but his hand immediately drops to Cas's hair, threading through the sweaty mess of it. If Dean's honest with himself, they've been headed this way for a long time. He's seen the signs, he's felt the slow burn. He never dared to think that it might happen. But, here it is. Happening.

"Dean?" Cas sounds uncertain, afraid like he's done something wrong.

Dean tugs on his hair. "Get your mouth up here and kiss me."

Cas laughs quietly and shifts over so he's half on top of Dean, a leg between Dean's, their chests touching. A moment later their mouths touch. Dean's hold in Cas's hair tightens. His legs squeeze Cas's thigh.

They kiss for a while, and their hips grind with a rhythm completely at odds with the kissing. Neither of them care. Dean pants into Cas's mouth when they pause to breathe. Cas slips his hands under Dean to get a handful of his ass and squeeze. Dean groans and tugs Cas's head back to nip at his jaw.

"Why didn't we think to do this sooner?" Cas asks. He arches his back which presses his hips more firmly against Dean. They're both hard in their spandex, nothing left to the imagination as they rub against each other.

"I've been think about this for a while," Dean admits. "Just too chickenshit to do anything."

"Glad you found some courage somewhere."

Dean bites, hard on Cas's earlobe. "Didn't see you making any moves either," he says over Cas's yelp of pain.

"I'm moving now," Cas says.

"You certainly are."

Dean goes in for another kiss when a startlingly loud thump interrupts them.

"Shit," Dean says. He sags against the bed, kiss forgotten.

"Uh?" Cas asks.

The thump comes again.

"Didn't time this right," Dean says. "Pam and Anna are going for round two."

"Round--" Cas's eyes go wide when he gets it. "Oh."

"There's no way we're going to sleep through this," Dean says. "Believe me, I've tried."

"Who said anything about sleeping?" Cas gives Dean's ass another squeeze.

A slow smile spreads across Dean's face. "I like the way you think." In a moment, he has them flipped, Cas on his back. Dean straddles Cas's knees, bends down to press a kiss to Cas's stomach. It's flat and trembles beneath Dean's lips. "You ever have anyone suck you off through your spandex before?"

Cas's eyes go wide, and he opens his mouth but no words come out.

Dean starts to pull back. "Too weird for our first blow job?"

Cas still doesn't manage any words, but he shakes his head vehemently and grabs a fistful of Dean's hair, guiding his head down to Cas's crotch.

"Okay." Dean huffs out a laugh, warm air blowing over Cas's erection. "I get it. You're on board. How do you feel about a bit of teasing between friends?"

Cas growls and jerks the fistful of hair he has. It's Dean's turn to groan.

"Fucking hell," he breathes, voice completely shot. They haven't even done anything yet. Dean's about to change that.

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Dean wakes up with an arm around his waist and a warm body against his back. It's not a normal occurrence, and he goes still as he puts together the pieces of last night. Party. Pam stripped him on a table. He danced on a table. Oh shit. He danced on a table. He's going to be feeling the shame of that one for a while. Walking home with Cas. Getting into bed with Cas. Kissing Cas. Oh.

Dean turns over, careful, and even though he knows it's Cas in bed with him, it still comes as a shock when he's met with Cas's face.

Dean smiles, a giant stupid grin he can't help, and he brushes his lips over Cas's eyebrow.

It's enough to make Cas shift, and Dean pulls back, holds his breath, because he didn't mean to wake Cas up.

Cas's eyes blink open, and he seems confused for a moment and then he seems to register the hand he has on Dean's hip and takes note of the smile Dean's sporting and smiles back.

"Good morning."

"Very good," Dean agrees. He leans in for a proper kiss, a touch of his lips against Cas's.

Cas slides closer, bends his head to kiss Dean's throat. "So we're good? I can do this?"

"We're good. And you can definitely do this."

Cas relaxes and the arm around Dean's waist slips under the elastic band on Dean's boxers. Dean vaguely recalls both of them changing out of their ruined spandex after a bit of fun last night.

"Cas," Dean whines. He catches Cas's hand before it can get too far. "Brunch."

"What about it?"

"It's Sunday. Sunday means brunch." Dean squirms as Cas manages to palm Dean's ass. "Stop that. We need to go eat."

"Seriously? You're choosing food over me?"

"I have to eat regularly or I get grumpy." Dean leans in to kiss Cas. "Besides, as much as I would love to spend the day in bed with you celebrating the fact that we're done being oblivious idiots, I have shit to get done today. And it won't happen if we're in bed until one."

"Fine." Cas throws back the covers, smirking when Dean immediately curls into a ball to try and keep

the heat in. "I'm borrowing your clothes since I came here in spandex that are now covered in jizz and drool."

"Beautiful image there. I can tell we're going to be all about the romance."

Cas laughs and goes through Dean's drawers with comfortable ease. He pulls on a pair of sweatpants with their college's name emblazoned down the left leg and a t-shirt. Cas turns to grin at Dean over his shoulder. "You sure you're going to be able to handle brunch with me sitting across from you in your clothes? I mean, even down to my boxers, everything I'm wearing is yours."

"Fuck," Dean mutters. He reaches a hand down to stroke himself a few times. "You are a cruel man, Castiel Milton."

"You're the one who insisted on brunch." Cas puts his shoes on without socks and runs a hand through his hair. "The hair's probably a lost cause."

"The hair's always a lost cause." Dean drags himself out of bed and pulls on a pair of loose jeans and long sleeve shirt from one of their volleyball tournaments. "I like the disheveled look, though. It's sexy." Dean ruffles Cas's hair and leans in for a kiss. He sighs happily as they part. "Is this a thing we can do now? Casually kiss each other?"

Cas smiles and reaches out to grab Dean's hand. He laces their fingers together and pulls Dean towards him for a longer kiss. They break apart reluctantly and head upstairs to see if anyone else is awake and brunch bound.

There are voices in the kitchen, and Dean and Cas let their hands fall to their sides as they round the corner up the stairs. That's a conversation for a different time. Figuring out boundaries and preferences. What's okay and what's not.

Dean thinks they may have rushed into things.

He's not sure there was any other way to do it.

Everyone's around the kitchen table. Victor and Jo keep looking at each other and then quickly looking back at their coffee. Anna's at the counter, mixing her coffee. Pam's plastered to her back, pulling Anna's hair to the side so she can kiss her neck.

Cas freezes next to Dean.

"Cas?" Dean turns to his friend, concerned. "You okay, man?"

Anna whips around so fast she almost knocks Pam over. Pam takes a step back and has to grab the kitchen table to stay standing.

Anna looks as shocked as Cas, but she recovers faster. "Castiel?" There's no warmth in her voice, and Cas cowers, his shoulders rolling forward, his head dropping down.

"Hey." Dean takes a step forward. He's never had a problem with Anna, but he'll be damned if anyone makes Cas feel like shit.

"You two know each other?" Pam looks between them, concerned.

Anna has a death grip on her coffee mug.

Cas clears his throat. "Yeah. We know each other. Anael--"

“It’s Anna,” Anna snaps.

Cas shrinks further into himself. “Anna is my sister.”

A stunned silence overtakes the room. Even Jo and Victor stop pretending they’re not ogling each other to look up at the drama unfolding.

“What?” Dean finally manages to ask. He looks between them. “What?”

“Anna is my sister,” Cas repeats.

A bit of Anna’s anger appears to fade with Cas’s answer, but it resurges with new force. “Surprised you’re owning to it.”

Cas frowns. “I don’t understand. Should I not?”

“I’m a lesbian,” Anna says. “I like painting naked people. I’ve started my own business where I paint couples having sex. I wear short skirts and high heels, and I don’t go to church every Sunday.”

“Is that why you left?” Cas asks. “You thought mother and father wouldn’t approve?”

“Left?” Anna slams her coffee cup down on the counter. “Left? They tossed me out of the house!”

It takes Cas a couple tries to get his words out. “You’re angry with me. Have you hated me for the past ten years?”

“I got thrown out of the house, and you never called me. You never wrote to me. You never tried to find out what happened to me.”

“They said you left. They said you didn’t want anything to do with us.”

“And you believed them!”

Anna’s shouting but instead of shrinking back this time, Cas stands up tall.

“I was ten years old!”

“I was sixteen!”

They stare at each other, both breathing hard.

Cas is the first to break. “Anna,” he whispers, and his entire body crumples.

Anna’s there in an instant, holding him up, running a hand through his hair. “Castiel,” she says. “Castiel, I never thought I’d see you again.”

Dean looks over at Pam. She’s staring, slack-jawed, and she shrugs at Dean’s questioning look. Victor and Jo don’t have any input either. So the four of them stand around, awkward as the impromptu family reunion takes place.

“Oh hey!” Ash wanders up the stairs, completely oblivious to the scene in front of him. He’s in his fuzzy green pajama pants and a brown shirt that has neon orange Cheeto cheese smudges on it. He smiles at the room at large. “You guys waited for me to go to brunch. You’re the best.” He goes right by Cas and Anna and picks up Anna’s abandoned coffee mug. “Ooh, coffee.”

Ash’s interruption is enough to break Cas and Anna out of their moment. They straighten, pulling away from each other, and Cas discreetly wipes at his eyes.

“So,” Cas says. He clears his throat and turns to Dean. “You promised me brunch.”

Dean flounders for a moment. “So I did. We all ready to go?”

The seven of them grab their coats and head down to Brooks. Per unspoken agreement, Cas and Anna walk together talking about everything and anything that comes to mind. Dean hangs back with Pam.

“This is bizarre,” Dean says.

“No kidding.”

“I wonder if Cas has realized he listened to his sister having sex last night.”

Pam punches Dean’s shoulder. Hard. “What the hell?”

“Ow!” Dean rubs his shoulder and glares at her. “It’s not my fault you’re so damn loud.”

Usually, Pam would act all smug when the others called her out and her and Anna’s nighttime enthusiasm. Today, she doesn’t. “What the hell was Cas even doing at our apartment? Doesn’t he have his own room?”

“We were drunk. It was late. We needed each other to walk.” Dean shrugs.

Pam glances up ahead. Anna’s telling Cas about her art thesis. Pam shakes her head. “Our lives. Fucking weird.”

“No kidding,” Dean agrees.

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Anna and Cas sit across from each other at brunch, and they don’t stop talking for a minute of it. Dean talks to Ash about his project, harasses Jo about getting a start on a paper that’s due this week, and talks with Victor about the plan for this week’s practices.

Anna and Cas come back to the apartment after brunch, and everyone decides to give them some alone time in the common room. Besides being the decent thing to do, it has the bonus effect of giving Dean time to get his homework done.

His brain keeps trying to tempt him into distractions like napping or surfing the web or checking his Facebook, but he reminds himself that he may or may not have a boyfriend now. If he doesn’t take advantage of alone time to get homework done then he’ll be stuck doing homework later when they could be having together time.

Speaking of together time, Dean gets up from his desk to toss their dirty clothes from last night into the hamper. He checks the height of his dirty clothes. He can probably get away with not doing laundry for a few more days.

He sits back down. They’ve moved from the bison book onto a book about Pittsburgh. This one is even worse. The only interesting bit so far is that apparently the pollution from the factories was so bad at one point that it caused a change in fashion. People started wearing greys and blacks, darker fabrics with less pattern, because nice clothes got ruined too quickly. Dean would hate to live in a world of grey. He’s not the most vibrant dresser, but he likes his color.

Dean fiddles with his pen. He pops the cap off, pops it back on. He taps it against his lips. He checks to see how many pages are left in the chapter. The answer is way too many. Dean groans and drops his head to his desk.

Together time, Dean reminds himself. He needs to focus so he's free later. He picks up the book and forces himself to read. It's going to be a long few hours.

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Cas and Anna spend most of the afternoon talking. Eventually, everyone ends up in the common room doing work. Anna sits on the couch, legs folded under her, sketch book on her lap. Pam's next to her, and she'll lean over to look at Anna's sketch or press a kiss to Anna's cheek or just to smile.

Dean wonders if he's allowed to smile at Cas like that. He adds it to the list of questions he has for when they finally sit down and talk about what happened last night.

Dean tries to hold back his smiles, but he doesn't stop stealing glances at Cas. He never catches Cas looking at him in return. If Cas isn't staring at his book then his gaze is flicking over towards Anna. Sometimes the look is sad. Sometimes it's confused. Sometimes it's hurt. And sometimes, there's a bit of a smile.

Dean watches Cas enough that he knows Cas hasn't flipped the page in his book once since they all gathered to get work done. It means he's not surprised when Cas tosses his book aside and pushes to his feet. The sudden movement attracts everyone's attention, but Dean's the only one who puts their work aside.

"Going for a run?" Dean guesses. He knows enough about restless energy, about having too many thoughts swirling in your head. Plus, he's pretty sure Cas hasn't gone for his shakeout yet today.

"Haven't done my shakeout yet."

Dean tries to hide his smile. "Awesome. I'll come with you."

"That's really not-"

"I've been sitting still too long. And I haven't exercised yet today. I promise that if I'm too slow or talk too much you can leave me in the dust."

"What if I told you I was going for ten miles?"

"I'd call you on your bullshit. This is a recovery run. You're not going to go that far."

Cas crosses his arms over his chest, but he doesn't have any more arguments to make. "Fine. I'm going to go change. I'll meet you outside NVII."

Cas gathers up his his books and doesn't wave or say goodbye or anything before he leaves. The door clicks shut behind him, the sound too loud in the silence of the room.

"Is he okay?" Jo ventures in the quiet.

"Lots to think about," Dean says. He carefully doesn't look at Anna. "A run will help to clear his head. And then he can get back to slogging through that ridiculous book." Dean frowns when he realizes everyone's staring at him. "What?"

"I'm glad my brother has such good friends," Anna says after a pause.

Dean shrugs. "It's whatever. I'm going to get changed and head out. Try to wait to start gossiping until I'm out of the apartment at least."

His roommates don't bother trying to deny that they're going to talk about him. Dean's not sure

whether he should appreciate the honesty or mourn that fact that his friends sit around and talk about him while he isn't there.

Dean pulls on a pair of running tights and a long sleeve shirt, and after a moment of debate he grabs his beanie. It'll wreck his hair, but it's a small sacrifice in order to keep his ears warm. He grabs a pair of gloves, slips into his sneakers, and heads out to find Cas.

There's a few inches of snow on the ground, and Dean rubs his arms as he heads across the small quad to NVII. He knows that once he starts running he'll warm up quick, but that doesn't make him any warmer right now.

Cas jogs across the bridge in running tights, a neon yellow long sleeve performance top, and a reflective ear band. He gives Dean a nod of acknowledgement and starts jogging down towards the Campus Center. Dean doesn't say anything, just follows. He's here to keep Cas company, to make sure Cas knows he's not alone, but Dean doesn't plan on interfering with his workout or pestering him by talking. Besides, Dean's pretty sure he isn't going to have the breath to talk.

They go down the street with the library and the QnA house, and they take a right on Highland. They pass the Phi Psi house on the left and the other school apartments on the right. They go down the hill, running by the Delt house and they keep going until they reach the end of the street, and Cas turns them left. They run by the hospital and CVS. They carefully avoid CoFair and head downtown. Dean takes note of the movies showing at the theater, but none of them look good.

Maybe he'll ask Cas to go to one on Wednesday night anyways. Two dollar tickets and free popcorn is tough to pass up. If the movie's bad they can always make out.

Now that they're downtown, the street's leveled out, and Dean has the depressing realization that since they ran down to start their run, they're going to finish by going uphill. This is why he doesn't run outside. Terrain is lame. So is the burning in his lungs.

Still, Dean has his pride so he does his best to keep up with Cas as they wind through the town. Dean even manages to keep within fifty meters of Cas as they head up back to campus. They end up on the opposite side of campus that they started in. They pass by the back of Brooks and the back of Carr, and eventually they run by Oddfellows and then it's one last uphill push before they're back at the apartments.

They stop outside Dean's apartment building, and he bends over, hands on his knees. Cas isn't even breathing hard, the bastard.

"You didn't leave me behind," Dean says once he's got the breath to speak. "Guess that means I wasn't too annoying."

"I'm going to shower and try to get my homework done," Cas says.

"Okay. You want company?"

Cas's eyebrows go up.

"For the homework."

Cas's expression doesn't change.

"Or for the shower?"

Cas grabs Dean's wrist and they pass by the entrance to Dean's building and head down to Cas's.

“Okay,” Dean says. Then, “This is okay?”

“Very okay,” Cas promises.

Questions later, Dean tells himself. He stumbles as Cas drags him along and barely gets his feet under him.

Samandriel is out which Dean supposes is why they came back to Cas’s instead of Dean’s, and Cas doesn’t waste any time, before he’s tugging at Dean’s shirt, trying to get it over his head. Cas’s fingers are cold, and Dean tries to wriggle away from them, but Cas pushes him up against a wall, pins him in place and cups his hands around Dean’s neck.



“Fucking hell,” Dean mutters. His hips jerk against Cas’s, a reaction to the cold. It’s not really a deterrent so Dean isn’t all that surprised when Cas doesn’t back off. “Your hands are freezing.”

“So are yours,” Cas says. “I still want them on me.”

Dean gets Cas’s shirt off and presses his palms to Cas’s chest. Cas sucks in a breath and then leans in to

kiss Dean. It's quick, messy, their lips too cold to move properly.

"Shower?" Dean asks breaking the kiss.

"Finish getting naked." Cas goes to turn the water on, and Dean strips down. He kicks his clothes into Cas's room in case Samandriel gets back. Not that it'll make much of a difference if he sees Dean and Cas coming out of the shower together but still.

Cas doesn't have as much regard for his clothes. His shirt is on the floor by Dean's feet, his leggings are outside the bathroom door. His compression shorts are on the floor of the shower room. Dean rubs his hands together and blows on them.

Cas turns to look imperiously over his shoulder. "You coming?"

"Yeah." Dean hurries into the bathroom, glad that the water's already started to warm up. Cas shuts the door, locks it, and drags Dean under the spray.

At first, Dean can see the water hitting his skin, but he can't feel it. He feels like the first inch of his body is solid ice. There's no feeling, no sensation, and then there's suddenly too much. He's tingling and itching and turning red as he begins to thaw out. He really hates winter.

"You look miserable," Cas says.

Before Dean can answer, Cas is kissing him again. Cas's hands scramble against Dean's skin, no purchase now that they're both wet. Dean grabs Cas's hands, anchoring him, steadying him. Cas's kissing becomes a touch less frantic.

Dean doesn't know what answers Cas is looking for inside Dean's mouth. He doesn't know what secrets he thinks are written out across Dean's skin. He doesn't know if Cas gets what he wants or not. All Dean knows is the slick slide of skin, the hot press of mouths, the water that runs down between them.

Eventually, Cas pulls back, panting, and he rests his head on Dean's shoulder. "She hated me for ten years. She spent ten years thinking I hated her." Cas tries to cling to Dean, but his grip keeps slipping.

Dean guides them out of the shower. He gets them to Cas's room, and he rubs Cas down with a fluffy yellow towel and guides Cas into his boxers. Dean dries off quickly and grabs a pair of Cas's boxers for himself, and they're a bit tight across Dean's ass.

"Come on," Dean says. He tugs Cas towards the bed. It takes a bit of maneuvering to get them both in, but he eventually succeeds. He even gets the comforter pulled over them, trapping their body heat in with them.

Cas rests his head next to Dean's. "I'm too old for my life to be flipped upside down like this. They told me Anael--Anna--left. I thought she abandoned me. They kicked her out. For being too rebellious. What are they going to think of me?"

Dean tucks Cas's head under his chin. "If they don't like you then they're stupid." Dean wonders if he's going to have to give this up only a day after he got a taste of it. He would. Dean knows what it's like to lose family. He would rather give up moments like this than know he was the cause of Cas's family disowning him.

Dean presses a soft kiss to the top of Cas's head, and he pretends that it isn't a goodbye.

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“So,” Pam says over lunch on Monday. “My girlfriend and your new friend are related?”

They’re in their apartment and, for the first time in a while, Cas isn’t with them. Usually Cas and Dean go back to one of their apartments for lunch, but Dean figured the guy could use a little space. And if Dean’s going to be seeing less of Cas, then he better start getting used to it now.

“Small world,” Dean says. He pokes at his sandwich. He’s not as hungry as he usually is, but he brings his sandwich up to his mouth anyways and takes a large bite. He can’t afford to eat only part of his lunch. Not if he wants to have a good practice. He chews methodically, because he has to, not because he particularly wants to.

“You don’t seem too excited about it,” Pam says. “I thought you’d be jazzed. Is Cas having a hard time with it?”

Dean shrugs. They’d run together, showered together, then slept together. There hadn’t been a lot of talking. “He seems okay.”

“Right.” Pam looks skeptical. “Speaking of Cas, where is he? I didn’t know you two were capable of eating lunch without each other anymore.”

Dean shrugs again. “What am I, his keeper? He’s probably eating lunch with Samandriel or something.”

“You’re grumpy this morning. Your run not go well? I figured since you didn’t come back last night things were good.”

“Yesterday was a bit of shock for him. He didn’t want to be alone. I stayed.”

“But he wants to be alone today?”

“If you want to go hold his hand you’re more than welcome.”

Pam doesn’t back down when Dean gets snippy. “Is that what you were doing last night? Holding his hand?”

Dean grabs his plate and gets to his feet. “I have some reading to get done before practice.”

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Dean successfully avoids Cas for two days.

On the third day Dean’s eating his lunch in his room (because he’s also avoiding Pam) when Cas shows up. He pushes the door open without knocking or a warning text or anything. Dean’s got a mouthful of sandwich and a handful of carrots.

“Uh,” he says intelligently. He grabs his water bottle and washes down his sandwich. “How’d you get in here?”

Cas shuts the door, locks it, and strides over to the bed. He grabs Dean’s plate and plucks the carrots from his hand and moves it over to Dean’s desk. Dean clutches his water bottle to his chest as a last defense.

“Stealing my lunch? Really?”

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Cas says.

It isn’t a question so Dean doesn’t know what to say. He takes a drink from his water bottle, the sound

too loud in the quiet of the room.

“Why?”

Dean fiddles with the cap of his water bottle. “I wanted to you to know you didn’t have to choose.” Dean hazards a glance upwards. Cas looks supremely unimpressed. “It sounded like your family wouldn’t be too happy if we were together. So,”

“So you made the choice for me?” Cas asks, a hard edge to his voice.

“That’s not,” Dean reins in his automatic protest as his brain catches up to his mouth. Because that’s exactly what he’d done. “Oh.” Dean hangs his head. “Shit. Cas, I’m sorry. I-”

Cas steps into the v of Dean’s legs and Dean falls silent.

“I’m gay, Dean. It’s not something that’s going to change just because my family may or may not approve. If you want to talk about choices, Dean, we can talk about choices. I chose to kiss you. I chose to spend time with you. You don’t get to unmake that choice for me. If we’re not compatible, if you’ve changed your mind and you don’t like me anymore, fine. Tell me to get out and I won’t bother you again. But if this is some stupid attempt to protect me or shield me then don’t. I’m more than capable of making decisions for myself.”

Dean stares. He opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out so he closes it again.

“Good?” Cas asks.

Dean nods. “Yeah, good. Does that mean we’re going to talk about what’s going on with us now?”

“Are you done ignoring me?”

“Yes.”

Cas kicks off his shoes and climbs up on the bed next to Dean. Dean hadn’t even realized Cas still had his shoes on. Like he was ready to turn around and leave. Like he actually thought Dean hated him. Dean’s stomach churns with guilt. He’s got another apology on the tip of his tongue when Cas leans in and kisses it away.

“This. Isn’t. Talking,” Dean manages between kisses.

Cas pulls back far enough that they can look each other in the eye without going cross-eyed. “I’ve been deprived of this for two days. We’ll talk later.”

“You keep saying that,” Dean says but he lets himself get pulled in for another kiss, because Cas is right. It’s been too long since they’ve done this. Besides, the important part of the talk is over. They’re together.

Epilogue:

For the record, Cas is the unreasonable one. He has no problem wearing Dean’s boxers. He has no problem with Dean wearing his boxers. He doesn’t mind sharing sweatpants or sweatshirts or t-shirts or anything.

Except socks.

The line is drawn at socks.

Cas won't put on Dean's socks. Fine. Whatever. But he also refuses to let Dean wear his. He has no problem sharing boxers or briefs or even fucking spandex, but oooh socks, that's where Cas gets uncomfortable.

Dean's learned not to complain about it. It's something he just has to accept so he keeps a couple spare pairs of socks at Cas's place. Cas writes a D in black permanent marker on the heel of each sock and goes over it whenever it fades from being washed. He's very particular about socks.

He's also very particular about the way Dean keeps his room. Which, by the way, is none of his business. Dean doesn't complain about Cas's terrifying organizational method. And he doesn't complain (much) about the sock issue. Okay, sometimes he complains about the sock issue, but it's weird, okay! The socks are washed. Dean can see being wigged out by sharing socks that Dean had practiced in for hours. That's nasty. But fresh clean socks that are going to be washed before anyone wears them again?

Anyways, Dean's room. Dean likes to call it organized chaos. Cas likes to call it a mess. Dean can find anything he needs in under three minutes which means it's not a mess. A mess means untidy, it means it's not purposeful, it means that things get sucked up and lost never to be found again. Dean knows exactly where whatever he's looking for is. He just keeps his stuff in piles that look to others like there's no method to the madness.

The problem isn't so much with Cas criticizing Dean's methods, it's with Cas's blatant disregard of them. He'll shrug out of his hoodie and toss it on the floor or toss his beanie across the room when his head gets too warm and suddenly there are unknown elements, and Dean's entire system is compromised.

Sometimes, Cas will roll his eyes and pick up whatever article of clothing he's carelessly thrown around. Sometimes, he'll call Dean a drama queen and refuse to pick up after himself. Usually, Dean reverts to extreme measures in this case and rubs his sock clad feet all over Cas until Cas gets up. On those occasions, Cas doesn't always come back. Sometimes he picks his jacket up, hangs it over the chair and gets back in bed. Sometimes, he picks his jacket up, puts it on, and walks out.

Usually, Dean chases after him.

Pam thinks they're pathetic. Jo's torn between mocking them and being jealous. Victor hasn't said much on the subject. And Ash? Well, Dean's not sure Ash has realized that Dean and Cas are dating. He's not even sure Ash knows who Cas is.

This makes it sound like they spend hours and hours in each other's rooms.

They don't.

In fact, they spend even less time in each other's rooms than they did before they were dating. Because rooms mean closed doors and beds and privacy and while that is a great environment for kissing and touching and sometimes a little more it's a terrible one for getting work done. And since Dean works, has a full schedule, and has practice every day he doesn't have a lot of free time.

They have to get their homework done or they aren't allowed to spend time with each other.

Which means a lot of meetings in the Campus Center. They get a booth at McKinleys or a table at the coffee shop, and they spread their work out and do it. Sometimes they brush legs under the table. Sometimes they glance up and smile at each other. But mostly they focus.

It's not a perfect system; Dean's homework doesn't get done as thoroughly as it should, and he doesn't

get to kiss Cas nearly as often as he'd like. But, they get nights together and when they're in bed, legs tangled together, tucked close to each other, because dorm beds aren't made for two grown men, Dean can't find a single fault with how things have turned out.

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