



# 1. Bad Company

"You're helping me with a case."

That's it. Not a question, or a request, or anything resembling a sentence where he's got a choice in this matter, just 'Hi, I'm a dick and you're gonna do whatever I want!' straight up.

Dean recognises Castiel Novak, station's golden boy, he with the currently unbroken arrest record, but they've never actually spoken to each other. Largely by Dean's choice, because Novak is a *cops* cop, the kind of guy who likes to bend the rules to nail the perp; and while he'd never call himself a goodie two-shoes, he at least thinks it wise to actually *respect* the law, and maybe not stick some dude who doesn't on a pedestal. Invariably, those kinds of guys are ego-driven assholes, anyway.

So, naturally, he's having none of this. "Am I now?"

"Yes."

That's it? Seriously?

"Uh, I think not."

Novak's mouth twitches weirdly, like he's somewhere between frowning and smiling. Probably frowning, it'd definitely suit his stone face better. "You're exactly who I need."

Dean looks at his desk, going for a blatantly dismissive expression, and makes a broad gesture to the stacks of paperwork he's fallen behind on. "As much as I really *wouldn't* love to help, I'm already bogged down with my own stuff. Go find some other patsy."

Novak, apparently immune to hints, taps one of the stacks deliberately. "This will be taken care of."

"Okay, look here -" and Novak does look, straight at him, which is entirely disconcerting. The man has the blankest face he's ever seen, but his stare is as sharp as a hawk. "Am I being really obtuse here?"

"No, you've successfully conveyed you're not interested."

"Okay, great. So why aren't you getting lost?"

Novak looks upward briefly - which, annoyingly, Dean takes great relief in; any longer under that gaze and he was worried his brain would rupture - then around the room, taking a few measured steps to the side of his desk. "You don't like me."

"Deduce that yourself, did you?"

"Yes." He steps back to his original spot. As pacing goes, it seems oddly affected, like it's something he's heard people do and reckons he should be doing it too. Well, it beats the still-as-a-statue vibe he'd been giving off moments ago. "I also know that you're currently not active on any cases, and that some friction in your department means usually you would be glad to step back for a few days." He leans in a little, conspiratorial. "It's romance related," he says bluntly.

Dean splutters. So Jo was mad at him for admittedly, a shockingly bad three dates, each somehow worse than the last, but she hadn't mentioned it to anyone, and he was *definitely* not owning up to it. Her mom would have his guts for garters in a heartbeat.

"Are you *stalking* me?"

Novak shakes his head, and says, simply, "Deduction."

He sits forward in his chair, aiming to change his body language from 'get bent' to 'no really, fuck off', but Novak gave no indication he'd noticed. "Y'know, as far as pitches go, this is by far the worst I ever heard."

"Dean," Novak says, and Dean's surer than sure he doesn't want to be on a first-name basis with him. "I am being required to ask advice from someone in your department to carry out an investigation. I am asking you. Say yes."

"Dude, there are like, seven other people down here who all don't have a problem with you, go talk to them!"

"I did," he says, with a small nod. "They all told me you were excellent at your job, and that you'd never agree to work with me."

"Damn straight."

Novak folds his hands behind his back, and seems to puff himself up slightly, as though he were about to make an expansive claim. "Then you are exactly who I need."

Dean leans back in his chair slightly, trying not to let his bewilderment show. What kind of guy marches down somewhere and says 'you hate me, let's hang out'? "If I say 'no', how many times are you gonna need to hear it before you get lost?"

Novak looks oddly thoughtful for a moment, and Dean has to wonder at the ridiculousness of this whole thing. Is the guy actually totting up his 'no' threshold in his head? He apparently comes back to earth quickly, and says "A thousand," in earnest.

"All right, that's it," Dean says, pulling his jacket off the back of his chair, getting up and heading round the obviously insane man. Though he stays largely rooted to the spot, Novak tracks him around the room until Dean's at the door, leaning back and saying, with as much aggression he can be bothered to amp out at this time of day, "Consider this a thousand no's. Seeya!"

Novak is after him like a shot, face like water about to boil. Obviously he's not used to not getting what he wants, but Dean honestly can't imagine anything worse than working a case with this douchebag. The impression he'd distantly formed of Castiel Novak, wondercop and arrogant asshole extraordinaire, now had 'massive creep' appended to it, and he was gonna stay as far out of his stalkery path as he could.

"Dean," Novak calls, and he's about ready to start jogging at this pace, "Dean, you haven't even looked at the case."

"And I'm not going to! You are coming off *waaaay* too desperate, man, *talk to someone else*."

"A man died," Novak says, and *whoopdiedoo* of course someone *died*, this *is* the station's best homicide detective he's talking to, what the hell else kinda case could it be? "He was shot. Looks like gang violence. Coroner concluded he had hard drugs in his system."

"And you actually need *help* on this?" Not that Dean was listening to what Novak had to say.

"Sounds like an open-and-shut case. Kid gets messed up in drugs, messes with the wrong dealer, bam, very tragic, very simple. Track the bullet, find the dealer, throw the book at him, done. Will you go away?"

"The tox report is wrong," and that genuinely gives Dean reason to pause. There's a surety in Novak's tone that bodes no argument, and when Dean stops and faces him, his expression is just as hard as he expects it to be. "Took samples on the scene, had them processed here. Same body, different results."

"So you botched the samples, big whoop. Preliminaries come out wrong all the time."

There was something very cold in Novak's glare this time, enough that Dean thought perhaps insulting that particularly skill set might be a shitty idea. "Not possible. Initial report suggested he'd used cannabis within the last 3 weeks, new report says heroin. Huge discrepancy. I believe this is a 'stitch-it'."

"Stitch-up," Dean corrects automatically, and then mentally slaps himself for being drawn into what the man is saying. He sighs, somehow feeling as though he's about to agree to something really, really stupid, and desperately willing himself not to. "So you think someone's trying to play this off as something it's not? I'm not seeing how I fit into this at all."

"I have been required to find help from your department. The intention is that you, or someone like you, will take one look at this and conclude as you just did. If I ask someone who has a higher opinion of me, their agreeing with me will be met with a stone wall." He holds the case file he's had clutched under an arm the entire conversation, like a kind of peace offering, and Dean knows, *knows* he'll be stupid to take it.

"Okay, sure, you've got a conspiracy on your hands, whatever. *Why me?*"

"You don't like me," Novak says, plainly, again. "But you're good at your job. You'll objectively listen to what I have to say, but you could never be accused of being biased toward me. It's a neat solution."

It is, actually. It also feels a lot like he's being played; Novak's obviously a smart guy, he could be trying to run rings around Dean by flattering him in such a weird way. He's gonna have to keep on his toes if he actually wants to *prove* that objectivity, because he *knows* Novak'll probably drive him crazy enough to agree to anything.

Like he's done *just now*. Aw, fuck, he's gonna agree, isn't he?

Dean takes the case file with way more force than is necessary, and tries not to look too browbeaten about it. "All right. But you're taking care of my paperwork, and you're explaining how

the hell you know about the 'romance' thing."

He doesn't smile, but Novak is practically glowing with how pleased he is. It's actually kind of frightening. "Done," he says amicably. "When I spoke to your colleagues, I noted Jo Harvelle looking at you when she was unobserved. When asked about you, she was a little more biting than necessary, but still gave you a fair review, meaning it wasn't work related. As no one else took note of her actions, it was likely a private matter between the two of you. Reasonable conclusion was that it was a romantic matter."

"Three bad dates," Dean mutters to himself. "And it *stays* a private matter, got it?"

Novak nods agreeably. "I think we're going to get along swimming, Dean," and he *really* has to wonder where the hell this guy learned idioms.

"Falsar words have never been spoken," he quips. "I'm not sure if this has comes across yet, but I *really* don't like you."

"Most people don't, after a while," he states bluntly. "It will be interesting to have that be the starting point, instead of the end."

With that, Novak turns on his heel, and strides off in the other direction, coat whipping out behind him. Dean's gotta admit, the guy knows how to rock a walk.

"Wait," he calls after him, without really thinking about it. "Was that meant to be a joke?"

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While Dean knows he's got it pretty good in his department - only desk on his side of their notice board, close enough to chat while being far enough from everyone else to actually get his head down from time to time, and closest to the door to their ill-visited section - he can't help but whistle at Novak's set-up.

"You actually have your own office? What, the guys on homicide get sick of looking at you?"

"Something like that," Novak says in way of greeting, ushering Dean in and shutting the door behind him. "I am not always known for my patience, and usually work alone. This was the neatest solution."

Dean'd kill for his own shut-off office, but at the moment it looked like this'd be a one-way ticket to nopesville. Actually stuck behind closed doors with this guy?

"You're all about the 'neat', I get it." And man oh man, wasn't he. The whole room looked like something out of a minimalist design catalogue, right down to the extremely neatly arranged pinboard. Which, admittedly, was pretty sparse, but Dean was sure he'd have managed to get those few little notes all skewiff if he'd done it.

"Those are for your benefit," Novak says, making a short gesture to the board. "There's very little to go on."

"That ain't exactly what I like to hear."

"As mentioned, I am at a stone wall." He gestures for Dean to sit, and points at one of the notes pinned to the board. "This is the victim. Andy Gallhager, 23, no confirmed address." He points to the next note along. "Shot in three places three days ago. Shooter unknown. Was found by a jogger in the park, hours after the incident."

"Always the joggers, ain't it?"

Novak narrows his eyes slightly in what Dean thinks might be confusion. "I don't believe so." He lingers for an awkward moment, then indicates to the next note. "Samples of hair, skin and a mouth swab were taken at the scene and analysed here. The body was taken to a regional pathology and coroner office. While there is no doubting the cause of death, there is a schism between the results of other test, as I mentioned."

Dean sighs. "So you don't know where he lives, don't know who killed him, and don't know where he actually *died*, but you're worried about some result discrepancy? Can't you just get a retest?"

"In a fit of unexpected competency," and at this he manages to look the tiniest bit peeved, "he has already been buried. His surviving family had no wish for a drawn-out funeral."

And, okay, that manages to tick up Dean's interest a little. "They didn't stick a spanner in the works after you waved your preliminaries at them?"

"No." And at this, the man's shoulder slump the tiniest bit. "They are 'unsubmittable'."

Dean waits for the clarification, but Novak just looks to the side awkwardly. "Uh, you gonna clarify

that?"

Instead of doing just that - or even actually looking at Dean again, Novak asks "What did you mean by 'three bad dates'?"

"Uh, none of your business right now? We're working."

"Humour me."

Dean drops his head in his hands. "Dude, I am humouring you about as much as I can stand by being here. Why is it 'unsubmittable'?"

"This is all part of a larger point. I said you had a romantic disagreement, but on further thought it seemed unlikely the two of you would have had such a relationship."

"Excuse you? The hell is that meant to mean?" It was *true*, sure, but where the hell did Novak get off thinking it was his business?

Novak says nothing, but turns finally look at him, eyes practically drilling into him. Jesus, if this was the look he gave perps, no wonder he always got the bad guy.

Eventually, he has to cave. "Look, *she* asked me to set her up, okay? I'm pretty much the Hitch of dating advice in this building but I somehow managed to screw it up with her and now she's mad! Now *why is it unsubmittable?*"

Novak regards him curiously. "Who's Hitch?"

"You know, the film?"

"No."

"With Will Smith? Ringing any bells?"

"Who-"

Dean grumbles loudly before Novak can finish. "Look, will you just answer my question already? I get it, you're awesome at noticing shit with people, so could you get to the point?"

Novak dials that glare up a little. "I'm explaining that I examine conclusions I've drawn after the fact, to be sure. This is how I *know* I am not wrong, why I am good at what I do. Having evidence I supply rejected instantly raises questions, regardless of why. That is what you should be focusing on."

Dean leans back, arms crossed. It is, admittedly, a stupid point to be labouring on, but if he's gonna have to work with this guy he wants everything on the table. "No, dude, come on. Why?"

Novak holds his glare for a moment, then looks away, almost embarrassed. "It was on the last day of a suspension."

That gets his attention. "Woah, you were suspended? *You?* You know part of your whole legend round here is how you get *away* with crazy stuff, not get done for it."

He flushes a little at that. "It was unavoidable. I... may have assaulted a suspect. Slightly."

"Woah, what the hell does 'slightly' mean?"

Novak purses his lips slightly; with the rest of his face doing next to nothing movement-wise, it stands out. "He cast aspersions on my family. It's not something I can tolerate. The result of the case was unaffected."

Dean's torn between laughing and just leaving. "So, got a bit of a temper? Surprising, considering how cool you look to play things."

"Momentary indiscretion. One that is costing me now."

"Alright, so, there's a discrepancy in the tox labs, and you can't get it sorted because someone's using some obscure code to nail you. That the gist? Because it just sounds like unhappy coincidence, not some big stitch-up."

Novak paces in that affected way of his for a moment. "That I am being asked to work with you is another indicator of this. It was made very clear to me that I was not wanted on it at all."

"I gotta admit, it's not something you'd usually look into, is it? Murder or not, this kinda thing usually falls with my guys or OC, not homicide."

Novak nods. "It was coincidence I found myself at the scene. Usually I would have handed the case away, but the manner I was asked to made me wish to keep it. Your father negotiated this arrangement."

"My dad?" Dean whistles. John Winchester, head of IA, rarely does so kind a think for anyone, sons included. "He tell you to talk to me?"

"No."

"What, you just picked me out of a hat?"

Novak paces again. The way it looks like a learned behaviour is really starting to irk Dean.

"Contrary to what you might think, I do pay attention to the performance of the people who work here. You do a very good job."

"Er, thanks."

"Now. What do you think is the most important aspect we should tackle here?"

Dean looks at the few notes on the board again. "Ballistics, I guess? Sometimes guys are stupid enough to use guns they bought on a real name, but even if they aren't there's always a way to track these things back. There still bullets in the kid?" And man, didn't a sentence like that make him feel extremely morbid.

"Yes, but that is something we have to wait on. What can we address straight away?"

"Uh, site of the incident? It didn't happen in the park, right?"

Novak nods, but he looks almost disappointed. "Yes, but again, we await lab results."

Dean groans. "I give up, dude, what're you angling at?"

Novak taps the little A.G note with his finger. "You said it earlier. Where did he live?"

"Seriously? That'd be pretty damn low on my list of *must finds*."

"It's important. If we don't know, it's likely very few people know. There is a strong likelihood we will find evidence there that ties the case together." He pauses, pulling a face. "However, the only link to him so far are parents, who also didn't know. It is something of a stumbling block."

Dean manages to smile at this. "Well hell, there's a reason for me to be here, then. Know why the DEA likes me so much?"

"Because you perform a timely job?"

"Because I got a good sense of humour and excellent snitches. Said he smoked pot, right? I gotta guy for that."

And hell if Novak doesn't manage to look a little impressed.

There are three people who owe him a favour, and it takes all of them to roundabout his way into Weems telling him Gallagher lives in a hokey van he parks near the park.

Well. Lived.

And if Weems sounds a little edgy telling him that, Dean has to chalk it up to someone he apparently dealt with regularly - "Not that I'm admitting to any *crimes* here, chief," - suddenly pissing off the wrong dudes and getting himself done in.

When they find it, and wasn't the little snot right about it being hard to miss - Dean kinda wishes he didn't care about maintaining the perfect sheen on his baby enough to get his own frigging huge polar bears done on the side - Novak shoves his arm outta the way when he goes to open the doors. Rude.

The guy looks inexplicably uneasy, and snaps on a pair of latex gloves he pulls from his Colombo coat's pocket.

"Do you seriously carry some of those around with you everywhere?"

Novak gives him a very condescending look. "Contaminating evidence is a cardinal sin."

"Alright, Somerset, but I'm pretty sure it's not."

Novak gives a confused gesture. "Why do you keep saying these people's names?"

"Are you serious? Do you ever watch tv?"

"I don't own one," he says, turning away in the face of Dean's disbelief and twisting the back door lock with more force than necessary.

Door open, the first thing that hits him is the coppery smell of blood, and a peek inside shows the floor covered. The whole place has been ransacked, looks more like it's been tipped down a cliff than the pristine exterior would say. "Looks like we found our initial crime scene."

"Yes," Novak says, but his brows are narrowed. After a long moment of Dean waiting for him to say something, he sighs heavily and shuts the van door. "This is useless. Anything of value to us is gone."

"You can tell that straight off?"

"Yes."

There's another long, awkward pause while Dean waits for him to expound on this, but evidently he just ain't getting the hint. "How?"

Novak shoots him a glare, shoulders and head lifting up like he's gearing for a fight. "Victim was shot in the back from someone higher up than him. Blood on the floor would suggest he was in the van, facing toward the front, therefore likely surprised by the assailant. Position of items left tell us

the ransacking was done after death, but before body was moved, meaning the assailant was looking for - and likely removed - anything of value to us. Whatever forensic evidence is found here will likely lead us nowhere, and yes, I can tell that 'straight off'. I know the signs."

"Yeah, well, I know guys like this." Dean walks over and pulls the passenger side door open.

"Anyone who lives in their car's gonna know every nook and cranny of it as well as they know their own hand." As he opens the glovebox, he can hear Novak stride round to see what he's doing. He ends up leaning over obnoxiously close, and Dean kicks at him until he moves back. "When I was at college I used to work at a junkyard. You could make a hell of a tip just rootin' through old hiding spots. Find a lotta skanky stuff too, but-" and *there*, there's just a little crack in the seal, and he can pull the bottom right up. "Hey Mandel, grab what's there for me wouldya? Wouldn't want to commit a sin."

Novak does as asked, pulling out a well-battered cellophane bag that looks to have cash, a wallet and some papers in. "I don't understand why you insist on calling me something other than my *name*," he grits out.

"Well I don't understand why the hell you don't know what I'm talking about. C'mon, what's in the box?"

"It's a *bag*."

"For gods sake," Dean mumbles, grabbing the bag off Novak. 'Sins' be damned. There's not much of interest in there; wallet's got a single out of date credit card and membership to about three different video stores, and he's got his license together with all the documentation. "Guess he was never worried about this thing gettin' stolen," he says, waving the insurance papers at Novak. The man grabs the bag off him and looks through the other papers, carefully unfolding what look like certificates. As he's studying one that has 'Lightbringers' printed prominently across the top with a look that might be consternation, Dean notices a note scrawled on the back. "Hey, take a look at this - R.W, 3pm? Think it means anything?"

"I think," Novak says, refolding everything and placing it carefully in the bag, "we may need to speak to his parents."

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"So, how's it going with Wonderboy?"

Dean sighs heavily for effect, over the phone. "Sam, he's even more of a dick than expected. Did you know he punched a dude? *That's* why he needs a patsy like me to investigate a pretty open-and-shut case. It pisses me off."

"I heard about that," Sam says, and Dean hears the joke in his tone. "Perp said something rude about his mom. It's the sorta thing you would do, isn't it?"

"Dude, *one time*, when I was a rookie, does not a pattern make. He's a grownass man, it's totally different!"

"He's good though, Dean. I've seen him give evidence a couple times, nothing really gets past him. I mean, *Dad* likes him, so he's gotta be good, right?"

"Yeah, and where the hell did that come from? Novak says Dad's the one who got him on the case at all, but he's exactly the kinda guy he hates."

Sam laughs, and Dean kinda wishes there was a way to inflict minor physical harm over the phone. Nothing big, just like, stepping on Sam's toe or something. "Dude, do you know anything about the guy? He's in and out of IA all the time. Always in the rule of law, but his boss *hates* him so he's always getting in trouble. It's kinda why he got a two-month suspension for a punch."

"Dad tell you this?"

"No, Jo did. Shows how much attention you pay to work gossip." Dean sighs, rubbing his temple, and pacing across the room, waiting for the inevitable. "So, she forgive you yet?"

"Apparently *not*, seeing as how Novak managed to pick up on it. How's the DA?"

"You know Pam, she just thinks it's funny you thought they would *ever* have a good date together. Did you pull that matchup out of your ass or what?"

"Hey, I am practically the Hitch of dating!"

"Yeah, the only way you resemble him is the bit where he gives himself hives on a date."

"At least you *get* that reference! I said that to Novak and I swear to god, he didn't even know who

Will Smith was." He slumps onto his couch, turning the tv on, but leaving the volume off. It was only polite.

"The only reason I get that is because you *made* me watch that dumb movie. You ever gonna admit your big love-on for rom-coms?"

"That was a horrible sentence and you should be ashamed. And for the last time, Grosse Pointe Blank is *not* a rom-com, it's about assassins!" He can tell Sam is trying not to laugh at him on the other end, and is resolutely unamused. "Hey, you ask Sarah out yet?"

"No," Sam says way too immediately for it to be casual, pausing before asking "You ask Novak out yet?" with what Dean *knows* has gotta be one of those 'I'm totally not fucking with you' innocent faces.

"What the hell have I just been saying, Sam? He's an ass!"

"You, but you have a record, Dean. Who was that guy at the DEA you 'hated' right up until he turned you down for a date?"

Dean, being thoroughly done, starts making fake crackling noises. "Oh man, looks like I'm breaking up going through a tunnel, gotta go!"

He can just hear Sam sound "I know you're at home, you dick!" before he hits cancel and turns the volume up. Doesn't matter if he's seen this episode before, there's nothing like Doctor Sexy to take the edge off an annoying day at work.

## 2. Ramble On

Novak apparently hates driving, but doesn't mind riding shotgun, which actually suits Dean just fine; his face would be under the definition of 'backseat driver' in the dictionary and he's pretty sure the tenuous relationship he has with this guy doesn't need to be stretched any further by him being pissy at the guys signalling or whatever. He also doesn't object to Dean turning his tunes up full-blast on the drive upstate - not that there was anything on this sweet earth that could stop Dean playing whatever he wanted in his baby, not even Novak's stubbornness. In fact, it turned out he had, if not good taste, a good sense of rhythm; Dean had noticed Novak drumming his fingers a lot when he was thinking, and while it was annoying almost all the time, right now it just blended in with the music.

He carried on like that for the next thirty or so miles, Dean unconsciously adding his own pata-pata in time on the steering wheel, as he thought about how they needed to play this Gallhager family interview. Probably best to let Novak do none of the talking, he had no idea how to play it cool without it being sub-zero.

He was thinking about it right up to when he damn near jumped out of his skin at a very un-Plant voice suddenly chiming in loudly on 'Ramble on!'.

Sure he must be suffering some completely bizarre auditory hallucination, Dean glanced over and lo and behold, Castiel Novak, Mr I-don't-own-a-TV-and-have-never-seen-Star-Wars, he who rarely says anything above the minimum word count to speak, is unselfconsciously belting out the chorus line to Dean's all-time favourite song like he was born to front some Led Zep tribute band with a shitty pun for a name.

Dean is through the looking glass now. Maybe it's time to cut back on the long hours. Like, way back.

Novak, to his credit, carries on gamely for a few bars, tailing off slowly only when his animated singing swings him round to look at Dean looking at him, and suddenly taking on a very uncharacteristic deer-in-headlights expression.

There is an excruciating, drawn-out silence as they gawp at each other, Plant singing on unawares, before Novak coughs and puts his pokerface back on with an 'apologies'.

Dean carries on staring.

Novak pointedly stares dead-ahead, doing his very best impression of someone who isn't horrifically embarrassed, and being betrayed by an obviously subconscious rub of the back of his neck, a nervous gesture if there's ever been one, and Dean can't help but burst out laughing.

It's that saying, right? You gotta laugh, or you'll cry.

Novak rubs his neck again, and looks like he's gonna break the windshield with his mind alone, and Dean can't stop laughing.

He jabs the pause button with a load more force than Dean appreciates, and turns that glass-breaking glare onto him. "I fail to understand what you find so hilarious."

Dean takes deep breaths. Deep, deep breaths. Gotta be serious now. Or at least semi-coherent. "Sorry, sorry man. It's just-- you're fulla surprises, you know that? Never woulda pegged you for a Zep fan."

Novak huffs. "Just because I don't understand your Trekking Wars references--"

"--*Star Trek*, *Star Wars*--"

"--doesn't mean I am a complete heathen when it comes to music taste. What exactly did you 'peg' me as a fan of?"

Dean can't help but snort. Hey, it's better than full blown laughter. "I dunno, baroque music? Nothing? No offence, but you come across way too serious to be into singing songs about hobbits." Novak is giving him that 'were you dropped on your head?' look he pulls out every time Dean references something he doesn't understand, and "Seriously? Even Lord of the frigging Rings

passed you by? Have you actually been living in a cave the past thirty years? Jesus Christ, you giveth and you taketh away in one fell swoop, man!"

He's doing the neck-rubbing thing again. "Let's just stop talking about this," he says pointedly, and no way, Dean is not letting this little chink in the armour get patched up before he finds out a little more about Novak.

"So, what, you sing a lot when you drive?"

"Nervous habit," Novak responds automatically, jabbing play again on the tape deck like it'll end the conversation fast, but Dean's having none of it, hitting pause again, and side-eying him expectantly. The other man sighs. "Hate driving, hate car journeys, and would rather not go into it. Singing is a distraction, and I forgot where I was." He gives Dean a look that obviously means 'that enough?'

Dean shrugs amiably. "Well, hell, don't let me being here get in the way of your ramblin' on, dude." 20 miles later they're both practically shouting the words to Whole Lotta Love, and Dean thinks working with this guy might not be so bad after all.

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Dean was very quickly proven wrong.

Novak didn't even *introduce* himself. Who the hell doesn't do that? Granted, when he'd marched down to Dean's desk and demanded his cooperation, he hadn't given the formal 'I'm detective dick Novak, pleasure to meet you' spiel but he'd at least had the excuse of a *reputation* to fall back on. No one in the PD didn't know who he was, but this was a pair of out-of-towners whose estranged kid had just died, you just don't be *rude* to those kinds of people.

There's a long awkward moment on the doorstep where he - and obviously the Gallhagers, given that Novak is stood in front of them, looking very official-like - waits for the guy to introduce them, and eventually he internally curses and sighs while making sure his best local friendly cop expression is in place. "Hi, thanks for agreeing to talk to us. I'm detective Winchester, and this is detective Novak."

"Of course," demurs Mrs Gallhager, unsubtly shooting Novak the same kind of dropped-as-a-baby look he himself forms almost hourly around him. "Do come in."

The Gallhagers are obviously pretty well to-do; their place is nice, very neat and filled with the sorts of esoteric nick-nacks you see on shelves in home design magazines. Not that Dean spends an inordinate amount of time reading them, just, he redecorated recently, and there's only so many ideas a guy can come up with on his own, y'know? He notices pictures of the unlucky kid, obviously taken from when he was a lot younger, dotted around the place.

Novak's looking too, a slight movement of his head back and forth, that somehow manages to look like he's paying little attention and scanning the whole layout into his memory bank at the same time. Creepy.

When she offers them a seat, Dean whips out his notebook all official like, and offers her his best reassuring smile. "I'm sure you've already spoken to some other officers, so we really appreciate your time and everything, Mrs Gallha-"

"It's a difficult time for you," Novak interjects woodenly, and Dean kinda wants to slap him, but apparently it's the right words for Mrs Gallhager.

"Yes, it is," she says, softly. "It's difficult for both of us. Andy was drifting away from us, and now-"

"-He's gone," Novak cuts in bluntly. She looks a little taken aback by how short he is, and hell, Dean is gearing up for the punching session, because he's not sure what lessons in detective training covered 'being an asshole to grieving mothers', but there's this little look in the guy's eye that makes him stop short. "Unbelievably, it gets easier to live with."

And damn if Dean doesn't know what the voice of personal experience sounds like.

She gives an involuntary nod, and Dean can see the way her eyes are shining, and thinks maybe they should get the show on the road quick and leave the poor woman to it. Just as he's about to explain what they're doing, Novak pre-emptively blocks him. "We will ask questions the other officers have probably asked you. Act as though you've never answered before, like it's the first interview. It will be a great help."

In order to mitigate how thoroughly uncharming the guy's being, Dean feels the need to interject.

"This guy here," he says, with an appropriately low level of enthusiasm, "has an unbroken arrest record. I know it's time-consuming to answer a buncha questions twice, but he likes to know everything first hand."

"I see," she says. "Anything that'll help."

As it happens, she doesn't have anything much helpful to tell them.

What's interesting, though, is the way Novak questions; while he doesn't pause, spouting of questions naturally, the words are carefully picked, and more neutral than any cop interview he'd ever heard, frankly.

Still, the only new detail they seem to get is that Andy was hanging out with some old school friends lately.

"That poor girl who passed away recently," she tells them, in response to a characteristically bland 'do you know who had met with over the past two months?' "He was very shaken up about it, I'm sure that's what made him..."

Unfortunately for Novak's dumb conspiracy theory, it makes the obvious case solution look even more solid, and he tells him so on the ride back.

"It's Occam's razor, dude, the simplest explanation is usually the best one. Kid was already a stoner, his friend dies, and he turns to something harder to get through it. End of."

Novak ignores him, fiddling with the speaker dial - which, Dean being in no mood for it at this moment, leads him to frustratedly shoo the dude's hands away. When Dean doesn't stop side-eyeing him expectantly, he eventually shakes his head.

"You're missing the details. Taking what you've been told and fitting it into a picture that suits you."

"Isn't that what you're doing?"

He shakes his head again, and stares out at the road ahead. "Two months ago, Gallagher starts spending time with someone from highschool. A few weeks later, she dies. Three days ago, he dies. That is the picture I have right now."

"Sorry to break it to you, dude, but that's the most *lacking* in detail thing I ever heard."

Novak looks at him consideringly. "When you draw, do you start with a detail and build your way around it?"

"Uh, what?"

"When you're drawing."

"Okay, dude, you're gonna need to just come straight out with whatever weird metaphor you're about to give me."

Novak looks more than a little put out that he ain't playing along. Eh, serves him right. "When working through a problem, the best method is to establish first what is known, undoubtably, and then build further assumptions cautiously. When you are drawing, you should start with a broad framework, and add detail sparingly. If you try too quickly to add details you think might look good, you'll become constrained by them."

Dean taps the steering wheel absently. "I don't get why you couldn't just say 'I don't wanna jump to conclusions', man."

"Inaccurate expression. I am jumping to plenty of conclusions, and I will explore all of them, until we can start seeing which details actually fit together."

"All right, so what, my idea sucks because I haven't 'explored it fully'?"

There's something that sounds so accidentally patronising in Novak's tone, that Dean kinda has no choice but to let it go. "Oh, no, you have a very neat idea. Quick judgement is helpful in most instances, just not this one."

"Because you say so?"

"Essentially."

"You know, you're really not winning me over."

"As it should be." Novak steepled his fingers, eyes narrow as he stares straight ahead. "I hope you already see a benefit to my method, though. We learned something not on any original report."

Dean sighs, because, yeah, they'd pretty much rehashed everything that'd gone before, except the addition of a tragedy, but he doesn't actually see how that'd got them anywhere. "So we know he was talking to a girl before it all went down, what's that got to do with anything?"

"It could have everything to do with it. If not, it's a novel anecdote that backs up your argument."

"I think you're reaching, dude."

Novak pins him with a sharp look. "Unlikely."

"Come on, you've gotta give me something here! What's so important about it?"

There's a little gleam in his eye, a hint of the conspiratorial, as though he's about to reveal he knows where a map to Atlantis is, or something equally weird. "Who was she? Why did she die, after weeks of getting in contact with him? Were they friends in school? Did he initiate their meetings, or did she? Were they close? Or did their meeting have another purpose?" He pauses for a breath, though it seems more for Dean's benefit than his own. How *thoughtful*. "Allow me a jump. I would suggest they attended the same school, but knew of each other only tangentially. I would suggest that he asked to meet her, because of some issue that involved both of them. Given their likely minimal relationship, this issue is related to something recent; and given his altruistic spirit, it's likely something that was a danger to her. I think she's related to why Andy Gallhager is dead, and why someone went to some lengths to make it look a simple issue. I think she may be the R.W we're looking for."

Dean nearly pulls over, because *what the hell*, the guy goes off on him about jumping to a pretty clear explanation but he comes out with *that*? "Okay, what the hell? You writing a suspense novel or something? That sure as hell doesn't sound like the 'broad picture' or whatever you were on about. I mean, where the hell did you get the *altruism* from?"

"Simple deduction. His mother doesn't have pictures of him as an adult around the home, but does have news clippings and certificates. Gallhager himself had copies of several certificates in his van. He has done good things, often, and recently."

Thinking about it, he *had* noticed the traditional kiddy pictures, but hadn't bothered to look too closely at the paper trappings, assuming they were probably someone's diplomas something. Fine, the guy maybe had picked up on something. "What's the next step then?"

"We prove that conclusion false, and move onto the next one." He makes a nuanced wave. "And to do that, we need to find out who this woman was, and speak to whoever survives her."

"Great," he says, muttering and not meaning it at all. "And how are we gonna do that?"

"Alumni newsletter." Apparently done, he turns the volume up again, and nods appreciatively when Thin Lizzy fills the car up.

If nothing else, Dean can't fault the guy's taste.

\* \* \*

To his surprise, the strike gold pretty quickly.

Rachel Ward, in Andy's graduating year, is an intern at the Mayor's office, and, a few weeks ago, committed suicide.

Novak is practically *glowing* with it.

It's because of this that they end up at her parents' house, which is a little out of town. Dean charitably lets Novak flick through his tapes, and is pleased when he goes with Metallica; he's kind of in the mood for something with a shitload of guitars in today.

Dean's decided that he's taking the lead in the discussion this time, because Novak seems a little too pleased with himself for coming up with the link for it to come across as properly sympathetic, and when he says something a little less diplomatic to this effect, the guy just nods amicably.

"Thanks for meeting with us," he opens with, and tries to take note in the way Novak had at the Gallhager house. While both Ward's look pretty down and out - and who could blame them, losing a daughter like that? - it's the father that looks the more distraught.

They nod amicably enough, Mrs Ward piping up with "I understand this isn't about Rachel."

"That's right," Novak butts in. "Do you know Andy Gallhager?"

So much for letting *him* handle it, then.

Surprisingly, they both nod. "Yes, Rachel mentioned him to us a few times. They bumped into each other recently, at the charity she does some work for. He was at the funeral."

Dean asks them general questions about Rachel, since they don't know much more about Andy - she'd been an intern at the Mayor's office, apparently, and had been helping out at Lightbringers because of it. Throughout the interview he can see how shocked they both are about her death, and he can't blame them; by all accounts, she had everything going for her.

Novak excuses himself to the bathroom, which Dean thinks is odd, given how much he goes on

about getting information first hand, so Dean keeps them talking, listening to them say about how she'd just been getting serious with a mysterious boyfriend they'd never met, how she'd seemed completely normal all the way up to her death, and he can't help but feel bad for bringing trouble to their door like this, but he notices one thing; at the mention of not having met the boyfriend, Mr Ward looks a little sheepish.

Novak blusters back in before he can follow the train of thought, though, and declares the interview closed.

He looks oddly pleased with himself, despite them not learning anything new.

"So, next stop Mayor's office?"

It's tantamount to how mellow Novak is about whatever he's worked out that he agrees without question, and Dean is suspicious, but there's not all that much he can do about it.

"Actually," he says eventually, about 10 miles down the road, "I was thinking dinner first."

### 3. Cowboy Song

Dean has been quietly convinced that Castiel Novak doesn't engage in things as petty and human as eating; in the week they've been working together, he's never seen the man with anything even remotely edible - and that includes the coffee he drinks, since it looks like it's the by-product of road surfacing. No way is that to be considered a foodstuff. He'd figured he must eat something gross, like a mouthful of oatmeal in the morning, and run off that all day like it's Duracell. It'd at least explain why he's so damn grouchy most the time.

As such, he forgives himself for staring when Novak scrunches his nose up and take the biggest bite he's ever seen anyone, himself included, take out of a burger.

And continuing to stare when the man directs his eyes heavenward and makes a noise that could only be described as rapturous.

Once he notices Dean's attention, he raises an eyebrow in the universal sign for 'what?' and keeps chewing.

There's no way Dean should be finding any of this attractive, but considering how none of his weird interest in Novak makes sense, he's not entirely shocked to do so.

When Novak lifts his shoulders in a more emphatic 'what?', still apparently completely not put off his dinner, Dean shakes himself out of this thought-pattern with a shrug.

"It's nothing. Just, you're fulla surprises, you know that? I mean, I was starting to think you just absorbed energy from the sun, but you're eating that like you found God in it or somethin'."

Novak gives him a considered nod, and takes a noisy slurp of coke. "I don't like eating when I'm thinking."

"What, a sandwich is gonna throw off your train of thoughts?"

"Other way around," he says, with small, lopsided smile. "Can't enjoy things properly if I'm puzzling clues out at the same time."

Dean nods in appreciation. It was pretty obvious to any observer that Novak was an all-in kinda guy when it came to work; it would be interesting to find out if he was the same with all his pleasures.

Nope. Not going down this thought avenue again, at least not for another couple of hours.

When a waiter walks by, Novak flags him up and orders another burger. "Dude, you think you can handle all that cholesterol in one go?"

Novak gives him an irritated look, but deigns not to speak until he's finished chewing. At least the guy's got manners.

Dean finally takes a bite of his own burger, and, okay, it's actually great. Score one for his awesome diner picking, and score two for conning Novak into paying for the whole thing. "So, you just take work breaks to stuff your face sometimes?"

"Yes," he says, and in characteristic fashion doesn't expand on it. It's just as well this isn't a date, given how shoddy a conversationalist Novak is.

Dean's not even halfway through his own meal before Novak's digging into his second, the waiter giving him the exact look Dean's imitating right now. "Jesus, you could give Adam Richmond a run for his money."

"Dean," he says, around a mouthful of fries, decorum momentarily ignored, "Stop talking about people I've never heard of."

"This one I'll let you off on. He's this dude who goes round the states eating stuff, it's pretty great." Sighing that this is the level of conversation he's reduced himself to, Dean figures he might as well keep talking. "I keep saying next holiday I'm gonna do it myself, just drive round checking out stuff like that. It's an age since I left the state, let alone the city."

"Me too," Novak says, after another obnoxiously loud slurp. Is he doing that on purpose? He's gotta be. "I haven't left the state in a very long time."

"You're totally not invited," Dean says. "I'd kill you within the first day." Admittedly, though, it probably wouldn't be that bad - dude's got good taste in music and doesn't spend time criticizing

some of Dean's more creative driving in the way Sam would. As long as they never actually *stopped* anywhere, it'd probably be a great road trip.

Not that he's gonna say that out loud.

"I have to ask," he says eventually, because the silence is starting to bother him and it's been weighing on his mind, and this new mellow Novak might actually answer the question. "Back at the Gallhagers, I got the feeling you were talking from experience."

"Ah," Novak says, putting the burger down and folding his hands. "Yes. I was."

Dean waits, but it looks like he ain't gonna say anything else unprompted. "Mind if I ask who?"

"I mind," says Novak, quickly. He bites his lip, looks down at the table, little furrows forming on his brow. "I'd rather not discuss it."

"This got anything to do with your car thing?" Novak nods, then glumly lifts his burger again, a sure signal he's not down to do more talking right about now. "Man, I get it. My house burned down when I was a kid, still feel uneasy when I see a fire now. Some stuff never leaves you."

He nods again, finishing up his food, and taking a much more polite sip of coke. See, knew he was doing it on purpose. "Thank you for your help today, Dean. I believe tomorrow will shed some real light on our case."

"Just doing my job, dude." As he waves down the waiter, he grins. "You *are* paying for mine, right?"

\* \* \*

Michael's secretary gives a Novak a knowing look, which automatically bothers Dean, and instantly buzzes through to his boss with a simple "Detectives for you, sir."

Despite the enthusiastic welcome, the guy is still instructs them they're going to have to wait a while, and since Dean just ain't in the mood to get arresty, he nods and agrees. Novak, cold fish as ever, neither sits down nor leans against the wall, standing ram-rod straight like he's been called to attention. Looking around, there's a weird number of people waiting around -- surely the office should have told some of these guys to get bent?

When the man himself finally appears -- smiling and shaking some sharp-looking older guy's hand, and looking, to his eyes, like a massive douche, Novak somehow manages to stand even straighter. Once the goodbyes are done, Dean can see the other marks waiting perk up, hoping they're next, but apparently law-enforcement trumps random guys off the street; Michael rounds on them with that crappy plastic smile and crows "Detectives," cheerfully, ushering them into his office.

When Michael takes a seat, somehow looking very pleased with himself, Dean plonks himself in the chair opposite, no fuss given to formality. Despite there being another chair, Novak elects to stand to his side, hands folded behind his back, and gives Dean a nod that he supposes is meant to direct him to take it from here.

Yeah, sure. It was totally his awesome idea, after all.

"So," Michael begins, leaning back casually. "To what do I owe the pleasure, detective...?"

"Winchester. And this --"

Michael gives him a smarmy little grin, looks towards Novak appraisingly, and says "Ah, we know each other very well."

If he hadn't been paying attention, Dean would have totally missed the way Novak's eye twitches; as it is, he's been spending far too much time staring at the guy's face, trying to decipher what the small movements of his face say emotion-wise, so it's more than apparent to him that the guy's annoyed. Still, he gives a nod and doesn't say anything to the contrary, Michael smiling once more in that grating manner.

Odd as the interaction is, he'll have to think about it later; they came here to see if there's a link between the Mayor's office and Ward's death, not to find out who Novak hangs out with in his spare time. Dean leans forward slightly on the desk, keeping his own diplomatic smile in place, and says "I'm guessing you know why we here?"

"To be honest, detectives, I'm not entirely sure. It's my impression that your colleague here," and he waves a generous hand at Novak, "is only particularly interested in murder cases. Unless he's then, perhaps, branching out?"

Suspiciously, Novak remained silent. The guy gets his hackles up real quick, Dean has noticed, especially in regard to his work ethic. Something about the way Michael speaks is biting

patronising, so whatever relationship they've got must be pretty antagonistic. When Dean had tried to riff him for his completely single-minded dedication to investigating only certain cases, he'd gotten the full stare down, scary quiet shouting voice thing. But no, apparently the Mayor is above all of this.

Might as well get straight to it. "Actually, we hear about the death of one of your interns; the name Rachel ring any bells?"

Michael leans slightly further back, steepling his hands. His expression is perfectly sombre; mawkishly so, in fact. His tone is equally faux sad. "That was a terrible, terrible shame. She was a very bright young girl, and we were all very surprised by her actions." Keeping his expression in place, as Michael leans forward, Dean can see a little glint of steel behind the facade. "But, I've already answered several questions about it to police previously. As far as I was aware, the case had been closed. What brings you to here?"

"We got reason to believe that it may have something to do with a different case we're working on; we're just looking into every option. You know this guy," and at this Dean points a thumb towards the standing Novak, who has moved not an inch, "so you probably know that this is the way he does things." He's not looking, but Dean can practically feel the way that Novak's eyebrows raised slightly at that; but hey, if he can use anything about the guy against him he's going to.

Michael's eyes shoot one small, appraising the, toward Novak, who seems to shrink slightly under his gaze. He still says nothing, but does give a brief nod, as though to back up Dean's assertions. The fact that the guy hasn't opened his mouth once since it went into the office is pretty weird, but after a few days working with the guy, weird seems like his *modus operandi*.

Polished smile back in place, Michael turns back to him. "Well, I am always happy to help our city's great police department in any way I can. But I doubt it would shed any more light on matters than I was able to with the other detectives."

"Don't worry, we'll be brief. Did you know her pretty well?"

"As well as I know anyone who works in my office. I knew why I hired her; I knew what her strengths in the workplace were; but if you were to ask me about her personal life, I would not be able to answer. She was definitely one of the brightest interns I've had through my office, and she seemed to be very cheerful, and dedicated to her work. If you're going to ask me if her unfortunate death came out of nowhere, then I would have to agree that it did; by all accounts, everything was going wonderfully for her."

At the corner of his eye, he can see Novak flex his arms; he'd consider it just fidgeting, but the timing seems a little odd. "So, no lateness, no drop in her work quality, no unexplained absences, nothing like that?" It's a pretty standard question that you ask people when it comes to cases like this; a lot of the time, even those trying their hardest to hide whatever problems they've got boiling beneath the surface will have a little steam rise out. Dean's sure whoever investigated previously would've asked that, but reading a paper report ain't a substitute for seeing *just* how Michael answers.

Aw, jeez, he's even agreeing with Novak's methods now.

Michael shakes his head. "No, nothing at all like that. If anything, she was more productive than ever towards the end." Michael swivels his chair slightly to the left, looking toward the wall, fingers still steepled. "It really is such a tragedy," he says, tone such well perfected misery that Dean feels his own hackles rise. It's so obvious that the guy doesn't give a damn about who the hell she was, or why she apparently killed herself, except as to demonstrate himself as a *feeling* man, as a way to score political points. It pisses him off, in the same way some guys he's worked with in vice act all patronising about some of the poor kids they have to deal with, kids who didn't really have much of a chance, a choice in the way their lives went off the rails; they say the right words, have the right sympathetic expressions, but past that they don't care about the real issues, about actually changing anything.

It makes him pretty dam mad, so he doesn't even bother to reign himself in. "So what, she works here for like a year, and you never even bothered to find anything out about her? No one did? You're seriously telling me that this is some terrible tragedy that happened, that absolutely *nobody* here saw coming? Bullshit."

Novak tenses up, turning to look down at Dean with an expression he can't entirely decipher; it looks like it should be reprimanding, but there's little glint underneath it, like he's psychically urging Dean to carry on with this admittedly pretty dickish line of questioning. Or maybe he's just imagining

it. Michael, on the other hand - while he still has that perfected plastic smarmy little shit grin, the glint of steel he'd seen has morphed into something way more threatening. Still, the guy couldn't give Novak's crazy stare a run for its money even on its mildest setting. "Believe it or not, Winchester, I do actually have a lot of work to attend to, and I speak to a large number of people on a daily basis. Forgive me for not being able to remember every single detail about every single one of them."

Dean almost can't control himself. There's a grin bubbling right up inside him that wants to burst out, because even though they're not getting anywhere with anything that even resembles an investigation, he's got the guy on the ropes, and hell if that don't feel good. They look each other for a moment, before Dean leans back, as though to back off. "Sorry, sorry, I'm sure you know how it is." As platitudes go, it's pretty much the worst he's ever given, but Michael looks a little satisfied. "We think she might have been in some trouble, and sometimes people don't like to say they notice that kind of thing."

Michael manages to look a little intrigued about this. "Honestly, detective, it seemed she had nothing troubling her at all. Ask anyone."

Dean leans in on the desk again slightly, looks towards Novak with faux conspiratorialness, and then looks back to Michael. "The thing is," and he hopes Novak is paying attention here, "we think she was being watched. More than that, we think she knew about it. That ring any bells?"

If he was expecting to see a change in Michael's expression, then he was instantly disappointed. The guys slightly curious expression remained firmly in place. "I'm afraid it doesn't."

"Haven't seen anyone suspicious lurking around? The amount of people in your waiting room, it'd be pretty easy for a guy to come in every day and never speak to you, right?"

A little crack damages the put-on look on Michael's face. "It might surprise you to learn that I do actually speak to every person who visits my office. And while I have several repeat visitors, I'd find it difficult to believe that any one of them were, as you say, 'watching' my intern. I'm certain I would have noticed that."

"Certain, huh?" Dean leans forward further, letting his smile become what he knows is a tinge dangerous, pressing his advantage. "Because, I mean, you don't seem to know very much about Rachel at all, and you worked with her for like, a year. So you're going to tell me that you know the motives of every person you speak to, but you don't know anything about your supposedly wonderful intern? Because something there just don't add up."

It's brief, but because he's watching, Dean sees it; just a tiny, brief, flash of rage on the pompous arse of a Mayor's face. He's about to crow his victory, but Novak suddenly lays a hand on his shoulder, and says, uncharacteristically quietly, "Dean, enough."

It's weird enough to startle him right out of kill-mode.

"Apologies," he says, looking at the Mayor with a blank, inscrutable look upon his face. "We won't monopolise any more of your time." After that he says nothing, and doesn't look to Dean at all, the grip on his shoulder tells him in no uncertain terms that they are leaving, now.

He tries -- and ultimately, fails -- not to grumble as he stands, and doesn't bother to put a hand out for the Mayor to shake. He can't quite keep the distain off his face as he says, "it's been a blast."

He all but storms straight out, frustrated at having been cut down on midstream by frigging Novak and his apparent diplomatic sensibilities, just when he'd really got the guy against a wall. He looks back a moment, to see Novak awkwardly shake the dude's hand, and apologise again. To his surprise, Michael's mask has completely disappeared, leaving him with a face so calculatingly cold that he suddenly understands the need to have so perfect a front in the first place.

"I won't humour this again, Ja-" Novak must make some face, or gesture that Dean can't see, but wherever it is cuts Michael straight off, the detective joining Dean at the door without a further word.

Dean leaves the radio turned down on the way back. He's waiting for the inevitable dressing down by Novak, and he's about ready to give as good as he gets; but the guy says nothing, just looks thoughtfully out.

Eventually, Dean gets bored, pops in a tape, turns the volume up loud, and they both scream along to Immigrant Song on the way back to the station.

\* \* \*

The station and dispatch have their own ringtone - Hawaii 5-O, for enquiring minds - so when someone calls him at two in the *freaking* morning after a long and annoying day, Dean hits cancel without thinking about it. Whatever it is can wait until the morning.

When it happens for the fourth time, Dean groans, hauls himself up to a sitting position, and tries to rouse himself enough to give this persistent nuisance a verbal beatdown.

What he managed was a sleepy "Fuck off and call in the morning."

When an unfamiliar, urbane voice answers "So this *is* Dean Winchester," he groans and tries gamely to rub the grit from his eyes, flicking the bedside lamp on. It was probably worth just dealing with whatever it was. "As much as I'd *love* to call back at a more reasonable hour, this is quite time-sensitive. I believe I have something you may want to collect."

A grin inched its way across his face when he asked, "This a bar?" and received an affirmative. Had Sammy finally done what he'd spent his entire time at college resisting and finally cut loose? Dean was so proud.

Or he was right up until he could hear a familiar gravelly voice slur "Who're you talking to?" somewhere close to the receiver. Seriously? *Seriously?*

He groans loudly over the responding "No one, Cassie," from the obviously massively mistaken bartender.

"No, he said emphatically. "No way, I have to spend all day at work with him, that's bad enough. Stick him in a cab if he's a nuisance, hell I'll even pay the fair, but *no*."

His complaints only earned him a patronising chuckle. "Well, aren't you a charmer? No, you really must come down. I *insist*."

And this is how Dean, against his better judgement, finds himself at 12 Measures at 2.30 in the *freaking morning*.

"Double whiskey," he says without preamble to the guy behind the bar, who looks like, dare he think it, a more attractive version of Gordon Ramsey.

He gets a smile practically dripping sark in return, along with an equally loaded "Do you think that's wise?"

"Who cares if it's 'wise'? You're a bartender, serve me."

"A *responsible* bartender, serving a cop, who'll be driving my friend home. No," he says, popping the cap off a bottle and setting it in front of Dean, "this is all you're getting. Compliments of the house."

Annoyingly, it wasn't a half-bad beer. A look at the taps and fridges revealed further not-half-bad-looking beers, considering the front of the place looked suspiciously like this was the kind of bar where everyone drank imported shit and talked bull about mergers.

"It's from a local microbrewery, based out in the boonies," not-Ramsey explains, wiping down the bar in what looks more like a compulsive action than anything else. He dials up the smile to a level that must have him rolling in tips every night, and offers out the hand not holding the dishrag.

"Balthazar, at your service. I, of course, already know who you are."

Dean shakes his hand, if only not to be rude. "Yeah, well, whatever Novak told you's probably a lie. *Especially* if he told I was a good guy to call when he's drunk off his ass. Where is he, anyway?"

"Ah, yes. I had to leave dear Cassie in the back room to stop a commotion. He's in an... *impressive* state, shall we say."

Dean wasn't sure he wanted to know what the hell 'impressive' meant in this context. "What happened to 'responsible bartending'? What, he slip by you and stick his head under a tap when you weren't looking?"

"That is, in essence, the jist of it," Balthazar says with a heavy sigh and a 'what can you do?' shrug. "If he'd come to see me whenever he started his bender, he'd just be swimming in root beer, not anything stronger."

"So you're not just his friend in the 'gives good tips' sense?" Dean asks, taking another swig.

"Why're you callin' someone else to sort him out?"

Balthazar wipes the bar down again. "I, unfortunately, have a business to attend to. My only other staff member - and *his* usual other compatriot - is out of town for the next week." He pauses in his wiping to give Dean a considering look. "He also wouldn't shut up about you."

Dean had to consider that Novak's life had to be pretty damn shitty if the number of people who would pick him up if he was blind drunk somewhere totalled two.

Dean had at least three people who would.

(Probably.)

"No family?" he asks, wishing Balthazar had given him the damned whiskey if he was going to start prying into his annoying colleagues life.

"That's rather the reason he's like this, I'm lead to believe. You had a run-in with our illustrious mayor?"

Dean drains the bottle in one at that. Man, that guy was a cast-iron *dick*. He had, however, been under the impression Novak had been fine with the interview, outside of the part where Dean shouted at him and was all but kicked out of his office. "Yeah, maybe didn't play it as cool as I should've, but what's that got to do with anything? Novak came outta that looking like the patron saint of patience."

"This is speculation," Balthazar says, with a tone that sits in the border between conspiratorial and 'duh', "but I think he may have been upset with baby brother questioning him at all."

"Baby- what?" Dean sits straight up at that, looking around as though something will jump out to make that make sense. "Seriously?"

"Well. *Half*-brother. Cassie is the only evidence of Daddy ever playing away, and Michael never did like anything that showed up how fucked the 'happy family' is."

That did explain a thing or two - how weirdly nervy the usually cool-as-Siberia detective had been beforehand, the way he'd been pretty urgently shooting Dean looks of 'shut *up*', the fact he'd been way more apologetic than necessary when shooing Dean out of this office. He hadn't *said* anything, though, hadn't even bitched Dean out about his technique, had just seemed kinda thoughtful on the way back to the station.

"That doesn't actually explain why he got blind stinking drunk," Dean mutters, absently swirling the one or two drops left in the bottle.

"And sadly I can't elucidate further on it. If you want the full story, ask him. *Tomorrow*," Balthazar added quickly, "because you won't be getting much sense out of him tonight."

Dean sighed, setting the bottle down and tapping at the bar. It probably *was* the least he could do to take the guy home. Maybe he'd get brownie points or something. Or maybe Novak'd be so hungover tomorrow he wouldn't come into work, and Dean could do some stuff on this damned case himself.

"Alright," he says, shifting off the bar seat, "I'll take him off your hands." Balthazar nodded to the back room with a knowing grin. "You still didn't explain why you called *me*, dude," he mutters.

Balthazar's smile gets a little softer. "Simple. He likes you, Dean."

\* \* \*

Novak has his head down on the table, dressed exactly as he was when Dean'd last seen him at the station, down to the dumb Columbo overcoat. Not exactly in the mood for pleasantries - it was still like, nearly 3am, and they both had work tomorrow, and he was still a bit pissed at being called out to help a guy he wasn't even on a first-name basis with, no matter how not-half-bad the free beer was - Dean thumped the table and added an entirely unnecessarily loud "Hey Kerouac, rise and shine!"

Novak shot up like he'd been shocked, eyes darting around the room erratically before finally settling on him. "Oh," he said, slowly, a confused-looking smile slowly inching it's way across his face. From a guy who looked pretty much the same happy or sad, it was really freaking weird.

"Hello, Dean."

"Didn't peg you for a drunk," he said wearily, gesturing with his hand for the other man to get up. "Seems like it'd mess with that thinkpan you're so proud of."

Novak drags himself to his feet, heavily leaning on the table, before gamely stumbling over to Dean, chuckling when he trips on his own shoes jostles into him. Up close he smells of the rolling tobacco his college roommate used to smoke and whiskey, but when he tries to say "sorry, sorry,"

into Dean's ear it ends up being more like talking to his nose. Novak's breath is minty.

Dean needs to stop thinking about shit like this.

"Alright," he starts, using the tone he keeps for unruly kids who think they know better than him, shifting them so Novak's arm is draped over his shoulder. "Let's get you home."

"No thanks," Novak slurs, but doesn't stop walking as Dean directs. They manage to make it out of the bar without incident, Balthazar giving them an altogether too cheery wave considering the time, and he manages to bundle Novak in the back without much hassle. He still has the dumb grin of a drunk on his face, and leans over the bench seat to pat Dean on the arm once he settles into the driver seat which, okay, weird. He so didn't come across as the kind of guy who got touchy-feely when drunk, but he also didn't come across as the kind of guy who got drunk period, so Dean chalks it up to 'weird night'.

"Didn't know you smoked, either," he tries, conversationally.

Novak makes a sort of gurgling, laugh kind of noise. "Don't usually do either, 'cept on special occasions."

"Today's special? Because of your dick mayor brother, huh?" Dean starts the car, pulling out and flicking his eyes up to the review mirror to keep an eye on Novak. To, you know, make sure he wasn't gonna puke in the car. "And how come you never mentioned the family connection? Did you, what, *forget* it might be important?"

He leans back heavily, staring up at the roof with a put-upon groan. "Don't wanna talk about it."

"Alright," Dean says, passing a hand over his face. It's way too early to be dealing with this guy's cagey bullshit. "What *do* you wanna talk about? Gonna tell me where we're going, since apparently I'm playing cab driver for you?"

Novak lays a palm across his uptilted face, in a gesture that mirrors Dean's own, and leaves it there. "This was a mistake. Apologies"

"Hey, it wasn't your idea. I'll at least give you a pass for that."

"No, not-" he waves his other arm vaguely. "The drinking was a mistake. Sorry you're left dealing with my," and he takes a huff of breath here, like it's a real effort to talk, and from the way he's slurring it probably is, "inappropriate coping mechanisms."

"Woah, big words from Bukowski there!" Novak gurgles again, but doesn't add anything. "You get like this every time you're getting stonewalled on a case? Because seriously, I did not sign up to deal with you being even weirder than usual." Dean keeps his tone light, but watches in the mirror again for anything out of the detective. He's been around the force long enough to know the dangers of a guy who hits the bottle too hard and too often.

Novak seems to get what he's trying not to say, because he leans forward again, lazy, weary smile still in place. "s'not like that, Dean, it's an... *impulse* thing."

"So, what, you're the proverbial pringles tube? Once you pop you just can't stop?"

His head bops up and down in an exaggerated nod. "I ate twenty burgers in a row once," he mumbles with a certain degree of pride.

Dean whistles appreciatively. "Seriously, dude? I gotta say, that's pretty impressive."

Novak's head bops up and down again in agreement.

"What was the occasion then?"

"Oh, no," says Novak, "you're not gonna catch me out like that."

Seriously, how the hell does the guy managed to remain so cagey, despite being so obviously smashed? That's some skill set right there.

"You at least gonna tell me why you didn't say a word to him in there? I mean, you cut me off pretty sharpish, but then you didn't even bitch me out after."

Novak makes that odd, gurgling laugh again. "You did great," he slurs, "it was hilarious. It's been a long time since I've seen someone talk to him like that."

Dean has to raise an eyebrow about. As much as he likes to take the piss out of his brother, he'd pretty much batter anyone who did it for him. Unless, of course, it was about his hair, or his taste in music, or the fact he ate dumb salads. He'd never let someone rag on Sam the way Novak thought it had been funny of him to rag on Michael. "Dude, dick or not, that is your brother we're talking about."

Novak says nothing, for a very long moment, and when Dean looks in the rearview mirror, he can see that the soporific grin has somewhat slipped off his face. "My family's not like yours, Dean. Not the same kind of thing at all." And then, just to drive home the point that the conversation is done,

he's slowly minute this himself to be lying flat on the bench seat; the stupid smile is back, even as he covers his face with his arm once more. "I owe you one," he mumbles out, and says nothing more.

\* \* \*

Dean is abruptly awoken the next morning by a crashing noise coming from his bedroom. It takes him a moment to remember he's not sleeping on the couch because of an argument, and another to remember it's his drunkass colleague banging about like he's just tipped the bed over. He lies back down. Doesn't matter that time it is, seven, noon, or night, it's still too early to be dealing with this shit.

Novak stumbles out in a flurry, holding up what looks suspiciously like Dean's bedside lamp, sans the shade, in what would be a threatening manner if his hair wasn't all smooshed and sticking up on one side.

Dean groans. "You're replacing that, man."

Novak drops it with a thump, his expression dropping with it. "This isn't my home."

"What twigged you, genius? You point blank refused to tell me where you live, where'd you expect to wake up, a skip?"

He at least has the sense to look a little abashed, if only momentarily. "I'm not sure how this adds up," he says, hands twitching abortively like he wants to rub his face or something.

Dean thinks maybe he should just pull the blanket back over his head and go back to sleep. Or better yet, hop into bed, now that it's free. He's getting a little old to be sleeping on couches.

"Guessing the blind stinking drunk part of last night is still a little fuzzy," he says eventually, stretching and padding over to his coffee maker. No way is he staying awake without at least a litre of java in him,

"Ah," Novak says stonily. "Yes."

"You gonna explain what that was all about? 'Cause, you know, great as it is to know you're capable of loosening up, I kinda would've liked to find that after the case. And preferably not at stupid o'clock on a work night."

Novak looks down at himself, fiddling with his half-open shirt. It looks like he pulled half the buttons off before giving up last night. "Apologies," he says eventually. "Wasn't my intention to trouble you with this."

Dean motions for him to come sit at his little breakfast bar. "Here, just how you like it. Tarmac-thick."

On anyone else that blank look would mean nothing, but Dean could see a hint of a rueful smile, and didn't that tell him he'd been spending far too long staring at the guy's face. Novak plonks himself down and drains his mug by half in one go, humming appreciatively. "Sorry for the lamp, too. Waking in foreign places is... troublesome."

"I'll bet," Dean snorts. "Now come on, don't leave me hanging. What did big bro say yesterday to get you all twisted up?"

Novak's head shoots up momentarily at that, but he then gazes into his mug with an expression Dean is pretty damned glad isn't directed at him. "Ah, he says again. "Balthazar."

"Yes, 'ah'," Dean shoots back tersely. "What the hell, man? Were you gonna tell me about the family connection there? Because before you say anything, it *is* a big deal. How're you meant to go at him objectively?"

Novak actually looks offended at that.

"Believe me," he says, voice fit to burn though metal, "Our relation will not impede me." Then, as if remembering who he was talking to, he dropped his head in his hand and continued entirely more wearily. "Trust me in this, Dean. I won't be further emotionally compromised by his involvement."

"You make yourself sound like a damn Vulcan," Dean mutters to himself, ignoring that Novak will have no clue what he means. "Wait, 'further'?"

At this, Novak leans forward slightly, and gives him a bright-eyed, conspiratorial look. "Michael is lying. Of that, I am *beyond* certain now."

Ignoring the non-sequitur, Dean asks "What, you find that from the bottom of a bottle last night?"

"Not entirely," he says, a slight flush of embarrassment painting his face. "His behaviour put me in

mind of a more difficult time. While everyone else always danced around what was happening, Michael was the only one who ever flat-out lied to me. I still haven't-" he pauses momentarily, empty hand drumming against the counter. "He did so then and does so now. It... got to me."

Okay, Dean could respect what Novak wasn't saying, at least for the minute. "So, Mikey is a big fat liar. But what about?"

Novak absently swirls his remaining coffee around. "Most likely, the fact that Rachel was being watched. Michael is very shrewd, and it's clear she was being monitored even within his office. I'd find it difficult to believe he wasn't aware of it." At this, he takes a thoughtful-looking sip. "The greater question is whether he thought of said observation as benign."

"Why the hell would he let his intern get stalked like that, man? 'Benign' or not, that is so not kosher."

"Likely he thought it a political opponent trying to dig something up on him. Not everyone in the city appreciates his popularity."

"No kidding," added absently, sipping his coffee a little, until his brain caught up. "Wait," he starts, going cold. "How'd you know someone was watching her at the office?"

Novak drops his mug with a clack, looking very much like he had earlier in the week when he'd been doing his Palmer impression. Must be too early for him too, if his poker face wasn't instantly intact.

"Novak," Dean asked, "How? Because I was shooting in the dark with that, and you can't have just guessed it."

"Extrapolated it," he says back blankly, looking resolutely at the wall, but Dean can see how his left hand is twitching, itching to cover the back of his neck.

"No," Dean says, getting up and walking round the counter so Novak's only choice is to look at him or to blatantly snub him. "I know enough of you by now to know you don't *extrapolate*. Not from just those two things, not so certainly. Ain't that the entire reason I'm on board?"

Novak continues staring straight ahead, like his silence is gonna take back the fact he's obviously messed up somehow in saying this.

Dean leans in, giving the other man no other option than to be looking right at him. "Novak. *Castiel*. How the hell do you expect me to work with you if you're gonna lie to me?"

That seems to twig him. Dean's noticed it over the past couple days, really. He has absolutely no compunctions about omissions and truthbending, but he can't stand a straight-out lie. Kvetching about Michael confirmed it.

"I didn't mean to *lie*," he says slowly, meeting Dean's eye. "But I needed to know if we could come to this conclusion *without* this."

"This?"

"A surveillance log." And it takes pretty much every iota of patience Dean possesses not to shout at or punch the guy, because seriously, *what the fuck*, why would *anyone* in their right mind keep evidence that important to themselves? "You mustn't think I'm trying to exclude you, Dean," he says hurriedly, as though trying to cover himself, though he makes no motion to do so physically. "But we *can't* use this without compromising ourselves."

That *really* does it. "Well fuck you, Castiel! When was I gonna get a chance to decide how 'compromising' whatever it is would be? You keep telling me you need *my* help, that I need to *trust* you, and you're giving fuck all trust in return! Am I just here to tick a box for you? Make sure you can carry on with whatever you want without your boss interfering? Because I'm starting to think they're right about you!"

Novak jolts up at that, that diamond-cutting glare focused entirely on him, but Dean's too pissed to be intimidated. "I have my reasons, *Winchester*."

"Oh, don't pull that shit on me. You wanna work with some patsy who just goes with whatever you say? Find someone else!"

"No," Castiel says sharply, getting up and pacing away. He should look ridiculous, with the hair and the shirt and the fact he's only wearing one sock, but the hard line of his shoulders and the set of his jaw make him anything but. "No," he repeats, "I won't find someone else."

"Something's gotta give then, man, because I won't work blind."

There's a slump to his shoulders, like he knows he's done wrong but isn't quite willing to be contrite yet, and Dean knows he can squeeze a little extra pressure in. "*Trust me*, Castiel. Let me decide for myself whether it's worth using what you've got or not."

Finally, *finally*, he nods. "Suppose I owe you that much."

"Damn right you do."

Without looking back, Castiel heads back into Dean's bedroom, probably looking for the missing sock, and Dean knows he's struck a blow for Winchester when he agrees to borrow a shirt.

## 4. Let It Rock

The drive over is tense, neither speaking to each other, and Dean leaves the radio on low. Once they're ensconced in Castiel's office, however, the man's eyes light up with that slightly manic, conspiratorial look he gets when he's gonna tell Dean something he's sure will impress. Considering how much he seems to relish these moments of smuggling, his reasons for keeping schtum must be pretty big.

"When you were talking to her parents," Castiel begins, kneeling down and noisily tugging at something under his desk, "I had a look around her room."

"Her?"

"Rachel," he says over a tearing noise, before springing back up and laying a thin silver case on the desk with aplomb. Dean can see the jagged edges of duct tape on either side. The man must've taped it to the underside of his desk, and if that didn't scream paranoid he didn't know what did.

Castiel gestures to the case, indicating for Dean to open it, before he continues. "She had it tucked under her bed. Thought it might be a note, but it's far more significant."

It doesn't escape Dean's notice that Castiel is essentially stating that the last words of a deal girl are meaningless, and he has half a mind to chastise him, but for the minute curiosity has a firm grip on him; he pries the case open carefully, as though something might jump out at him.

Inside, sitting perfectly innocuously, are what looks like several slim booklets, separated by the neon paperclips he remembers spilt on Rachel's desk.

"So she sorted them like this?"

Castiel gives him an almost pleased smile. "Well spotted," he confirms. "Likely, she received the case from someone in disarray, and took it upon herself to separate out the targets."

"Multiple, huh." Flicking through the first booklet, he notes it's covered in chicken-scratch writing. "These your notes?"

"No," Castiel says, affront obvious in his tone, "it's hers. She was matching up the surveillance log with her diary. Look," he leans over, tapping a line that says MET SAH 12.40, "she's written the names next to any initials."

Even from a cursory look, Dean can see just how detailed the surveillance was. Practically every minute of this girl's day was accounted for, and had been for several months.

"From about a month after she accepted her position," Castiel remarks, as though reading his mind. "Whether it only started then because of her settling in, or because something else changed, I'm not sure yet."

"I am," Dean states darkly. "This is when she started dating whatisname. Jeff?"

Castiel actually manages to look taken aback. Strike one for Dean. "What makes you say that?"

"While you were busy lifting stuff from a girl's bedroom - which, I have to note, is incredibly skeezy - I was actually *listening* to her parents. Girl had hooked up with someone a month in, seemed real happy, but never brought 'im home. Her folks were kinda worried he might not even know she was dead, since her phone went missing. None of her friends ever met him either. Thought it sounded kinda fishy."

Castiel hums thoughtfully. "She meets someone, doesn't introduce him to her friends or family. That's odd, isn't it?"

"Considering how close she was to the rents? Hell yeah, it's odd."

Castiel peers at him curiously, like he's not sure if he's impressed or not. "Someone they wouldn't approve of, then?"

"Nah, she'd keep the whole thing secret if that were the case. They knew his name, knew a ton about him, she'd just never brought him home."

The man nearly looks impressed. "That certainly puts things in a clearer context."

Dean can't help the grin that breaks out. "That's why you got me on this, right? To offer a little *human* perspective?"

Castiel either ignores or doesn't hear the casual insult, as he frowns down at the papers. "And

while it narrows the options down, it still doesn't point us in a direction."

"So, what, she was either seeing someone super-paranoid who started watching her, or her new bo was already being watched? It all comes down to the boyfriend."

"Or, her romantic relationship was a cover for something else. Selling secrets. She was watched to make sure she was doing as asked."

It sounded kinda possible. It *would* tie a few things together - seemingly happy girl offs herself; either she does it because someone found out what she was doing, or it was murder because she found out she was being watched. But the way her parents had talked about it...

He had a closer look through. If she was being watched, there had to be something saying who she was seeing.

"Hey, how do you know this is the start of the logs and that we're not just missing something?"

Castiel leans over again, flicking it back to the first page and tapping to a couple names. "The vernacular. Everyone she interacts with regularly are named in full the first few times, and abbreviated later on. The only ones who are already abbreviated are the other people being watched." He indicates to the other booklets. "She was smart to work it out, add up who was who. But she didn't come to the police."

Dean flicks through to confirm - most the people in the first few days of surveillance are obviously colleagues of hers, and all named. The first abbreviation without prelude - JAJ - has, weirdly, 'Detective Novak' noted next to it, and Dean gets a horrible sinking feeling.

"Hey, you're in here."

"Yes. I visited Michael's office three times in the past eight months, each occasion is noted."

"No," Dean grinds out, knowing Castiel is being difficult, "you're *in here*."

"Ah."

"Maybe should've waited to give me the tip-off about the names, idiot."

Castiel leans heavily against the desk, and fixes him with that famously caustic stare. "Look at the third booklet, *idiot*."

He does. The sinking feeling worsens. Flicking through, he can see it goes back the eight months Rachel's log does, but almost every name he spots is abbreviated.

Either every person Castiel sees regularly is being watched, or this has been going on a long, long while.

Something stands out, though. "Hey, there are *huge* gaps compared to the other one in here. What the hell?"

Castiel gives him that sly look once more. "I'm rather good at avoiding a tail."

"Wait, so you *knew* about this? And you never *once* went to the police about it? For god's sake dude, you *are* the police!"

"Not in the way you're thinking," he says, after a long pause, pushing up off the desk to walk to it's other side. "You must have noticed, Dean, that I'm rather good at what I do. Occasionally, a high-profile case attracts enemies. In those instances, I tend to assume I'm being watched."

"Jesus, I've met dealers less paranoid than you."

"Most likely, everyone you've met is less paranoid than me."

Dean could believe that. "And despite that, you didn't notice you were being watched for god knows how long? Didn't do anything about it?"

"You're putting words to my mouth. I did plenty about it." Castiel grabs the booklet out of his hands before Dean can so much as raise an objection, rolling it up and tapping the one on Rachel sharply. "This is not a new or interesting discovery. You're losing focus on what's important here."

"This is important! You can't just exclude yourself when this could all be connected. Come on, Castiel, why would someone be watching both our victim *and* you?"

Castiel made a vague gesture, looking around the office in what came across as a calculatedly absent way. "Michael. I speak with him often enough and he has done me a number of favours. To anyone seeking to tarnish him, I look a reasonable weak link." He lays a hand on the other booklets. "A preliminary look suggests all of these people had a connection to the mayor's office; Rachel managed to work out who they were, probably using the appointments book."

Dean grabs one of the other four booklets, flicking through. Rachel had made pretty extensive notes about the subject, and a quick look at the others showed she'd done the same for each.

He was tugged by a sudden, deep sadness. She'd obviously been an intelligent woman, putting all this together when anyone else might've been running scared; she would've had a bright future

ahead of her, and instead...

"She was murdered," he says, the words weighing on him.

"Yes," Castiel agrees easily. "That much is obvious."

"We have to use this." He stands up abruptly, staring Castiel down at eye-level. "We *have* to. A woman was killed for something, and this proves it. Why the hell haven't you passed this up already? Gotten the case officially reopened?"

Castiel stares back at him, and there's a measure of regret on his face as he shakes his head slowly. "Can't. Not yet."

"Not yet?" He stalks around the desk, resisting the urge to shake Castiel by his borrowed shirt. "*Not yet?* Her family deserve to know the truth, *now*, and you're worried about *timing?*"

To his credit, Castiel holds his ground, eyes gone dark and cold. "*This* is why I didn't tell you. You want to shout on the roof with this because it fits your idea of fairness." He leans in, voice low. "We cannot. This is a far more dangerous game than you are accounting for."

"This is someone's *life*. It's not a game!"

"It's *my life*, Dean."

At that, Dean does grab him by the shirt. "So that's what it boils down to, huh? You protecting your own back? What happened to your high-and-mighty attitude?"

Castiel grasps his wrists, but makes no effort to actually move Dean's hands. "You're misunderstanding."

"Then *explain*."

He nods, and lifts Dean's hands away slowly and without force, more a suggestion than anything. "You will have to submit all of these to back up your conclusions. The least that happens is I am taken off the case and put on watch to catch out the surveiller. They notice the police, fall back, and we miss any chance of catching them out." He leans in further, voice dropped to a rough whisper, his expression as dark as Dean's ever seen it. "The most, they hear straight away that someone may be on their tail, and we die in 'accidents'."

That completely throws Dean for a loop. Where the hell is he even meant to *start* with that? "What the hell are you on about?"

"I understand your frustration, Dean, but I am deadly serious in this. I fear passing this on to anyone will result in the surveiller hearing about it, and I don't think they have compunctions about killing anyone to keep their job under a wrap."

"It is *really* hard to take you seriously when you misuse phrases like that," he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face. He really hated messy cases. "Let me get one - no, *two* - things straight here. One, you're trying to use yourself as bait, and two, you think someone who works here is mixed up in this. Yes?"

"Yes," he nods. "We are on the same page."

"Can I tell you how *monumentally stupid* it is to try and draw out someone who might be a killer without backup?"

"You can," he says brusquely, "but I hardly see the point. I won't allow you to decide what risks are acceptable for me to take." And wasn't *that* a loaded statement?

"And the station being compromised, where are you getting that from?"

At this, Castiel finally drops his eyes, staring contest over. "Much as I hate saying such things, it is a... gut feeling. One that I can't dredge up firm evidence of. The way that we are having to investigate these cases could be proof of it, but not enough that it can be held to rigor."

"You think our finding a connection between Andy and Rachel means there's some big cover-up going on here? Because I gotta tell you man, it's pure luck we stumbled on it, but it wasn't exactly hidden."

"No, Dean, the fact that I had to beg help from your father to investigate *at all* proves it. The fact that the samples I *took* produced a different result to the official coroners report proves it. I do not ask for help, and I do not make mistakes in gathering forensic evidence. The fact that *you* are the one to assist proves it."

"Woah, wait, what the hell does that mean?"

Castiel shoots him an unimpressed look. "I asked you because your father assured me you would be an asset. It was allowed because you don't like me."

Dean shrugged. It wasn't like he'd been particularly vocal about not liking the guy, but it wasn't something he'd exactly kept to himself.

"You understand why I want to hold onto this for now? There will likely come a time we can use it, but right now we'd be endangering the investigation."

"So it's a straight yes/no to you? We use it now or we don't use it now? There's gotta be a way to game the system, Cas, you've spent practically your whole career doing it."

Castiel looks at him with an entirely confused expression, before frowning down at his desk again. "That's an interesting way to put it, but, no. We have to find a way to prove she was being watched without these, and finding the ones responsible for doing it is the easiest route. If we need to use them later, we will."

Dean nodded absently, his mind suddenly awlrr. There *was* a way to game the system, one that might just get the proof Castiel needed for his conspiracy theory.

He could swap the reports.

All he'd have to do was knock up a couple of fake logs on some prominent vice cops, leave the one on Castiel in and keep the others back, pass it up to Adler and say the kid had died for having it. It'd look like the gangland killing he was so clearly pushing for it to be, and they'd have more room for manoeuvring in an investigating.

It could work. It could *totally* work, he'd just have to play it right.

"All right," he said eventually, with a nod. "We use them only if the timing is right, and we find other evidence first."

Castiel bowed his head slightly, something like a smile crossing his mouth. "Thank you for trusting me."

"Think that trust can work both ways? You've obviously had a chance to go over these with a fine tooth comb, you gonna let me do the same?"

"Yes," he replies, with surprise colouring his tone. "Yes, you can do that."

"Well then, no offence, but I'm gonna go do that my own desk. I think we could probably do with a few hours away from each other. I won't let anyone else catch wind of this, scouts honour."

Castiel nods again, and sits at his desk heavily. "I have a few things I want to look over that are fairly tedious. This seems like a good time to split our energies. We'll discuss what you find tomorrow?"

"Sure thing." Dean gathers all the booklets into the metal case, taking obvious care to make sure each booklet stays paperclipped. "Listen," he adds, as he's leaving. "I didn't like you, that much is true. But I'm starting to. You're not who I thought you were."

Castiel doesn't look up, but Dean can still see the abashed smile that slips into place. "And you're exactly who I hoped you were, Dean. See you tomorrow."

He waves, knowing that tomorrow the man is either going to slap or kiss him.

Probably both.

\* \* \*

He takes the day to get everything in place; calls in a couple favours owed, allows Jo and Rufus to rip into him for their help, avoids looking in on Castiel for fear of giving the game away. If he can play at secretive plots then hell, Dean can too, as far as he's concerned.

All he needs now is a little drama.

He sets a meeting up with Adler in the least subtle way possible, knowing it'll make it's way back to Castiel at what he hopes is the right time. Castiel is no great actor; while he's a great obfuscator, he hates lying and looks obvious and awkward doing so, so the plan rests on him coming in *after* Dean's laid the false case to his boss. Dean, meanwhile, is pretty damn good at lying and wheedling and acting; it's the reason he's good at his job. He already knows what it is Adler wants to hear; he's just got to say it convincingly enough.

"Dean Winchester!" Adler says loudly, rising from his desk and giving him an open-armed welcome and a smile that rubs him the wrong way. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I think we've made a breakthrough on this case, sir, and figured it'd be a good time to come to you."

Adler's smile drops a tic, even as he gestures for Dean to take a seat, taking one himself and leaning back. The pose is so obviously meant to be casual that it comes across as anything but, and Dean has a baaaad feeling. "So, what's this big breakthrough? Novak find whatever 'proof' he

was sure existed?"

That sounded faintly ominous. "I'm not sure what you mean, sir?"

Adler gave a wave, adopting a smug and indulgent smile. "He's a good detective, don't get me wrong, but he gets all wrapped up in these *theories* of his. Some poor kid gets mixed up with drugs and gangs and whatnot, and he sees something 'bigger' behind it." Adler leans in a little conspiratorially, obviously pretty into bad-mouthing Castiel. "Higher-up's have been trying to get him desked for god knows how long."

Dean is fairly sure it's probably *Adler* leading the charge on that, but he nods slowly in understanding. "Actually, what he's found ties the case up pretty neatly, but he didn't want to submit it. That's why I'm here."

"Oh," he says, carefully neutral tone not exactly covering the look of glee threatening to break out on his face. Dude must *really* have a bone to pick with Castiel if he got this excited about what could be fairly negligible stuff. "Why, pray tell, does he want to keep it to himself?"

Dean lays the metal case with the fake reports on the desk, which Adler almost snatches straight out his hand in his haste. "He dug this up when we were investigating Gallagher's apartment, but didn't tell me until yesterday. It's a bunch of surveillance logs, and it's probably what got him killed."

Adler pauses abruptly with that description, smile tense as he says, "Go on,"

"They're of a couple vice and OC cops I know have been a pain in the ass to a few of our more illustrious gangs," and Dean can see the tension leak out of Adler's posture as he starts to actually flick through the booklets, "And of Novak himself. To me it looks a lot like Gallagher found this by getting mixed up with the wrong people, and once they knew he had it..." Dean makes a vague gesture. "It's a damned shame. By all accounts he was a good kid."

Adler nods vaguely, scrutinising the logs for god knows what. "So that's a wrap. Good job, Winchester."

"Well, not quite, sir," he says, leaning in a little. "We don't know exactly who's responsible for killing him, and there's still the matter of Novak being watched. The other guys I'm not too worried about, but with his involvement in the case-"

"I'm *sure* Detective Novak can take care of himself, not to worry," Adler says, the reassurance in his tone fake and grating. "Unless you have some suggestions?"

"It might be best if he takes a step back from this for a little while," Dean says, painting his words with a touch of uncertainty. "Not taken off the case, just not frontline. And if it's all right with you, I thought it might be worth sticking with him to make sure he doesn't get into any... *trouble*."

He lets the word hang there for a while, sure of what must be running through Adler's head. Doing what Dean asked would bench the guy, giving an excuse to stopping him taking on any other cases that might wind up a pain in the ass. And having him watched by the guy who'd come running straight to the boss the minute he'd done something a little fishy? If Adler went for it, Dean was pretty sure he either just really hated Castiel, or was pointedly working against him.

There was a sharp knock on the door before Castiel let himself in the office, ignoring Adler's shouted "I'm busy!" and proving himself a master of timing.

Turning to look at him, Dean wished he hadn't come in at all. The look of abject *betrayal* on Castiel's face makes his stomach drop out, and when Dean expects him to cover it with his ever-present pokerface, he instead glares at him furiously.

"Ah, just the man! We were just talking about you, detective." Adler waves one of the booklets at him, voice solidly sarcastic. "*Great* work as always! Just a *shame* your colleague had to tell me about it instead of you."

Castiel says nothing, and Dean is worried the desk is about to catch fire from the heat in eyes.

Adler keeps on grinning, clearly gleeful to press his advantage. "We were just discussing what to do with you, what with these *nasty* men stalking you. I'm surprised you didn't notice!"

Castiel's hand twitches, but he doesn't rise to the jibe otherwise, still staring Dean down. "Well?"

Dean glances back at Adler, who gestures for him to say it himself. Just to dig the dagger *right* in, he guesses. "For your own safety," he says slowly, knowing it's exactly those words that are likely to rankle the most, "I'm going to take over on the case for a little while, and set up a watch detail. Just until the danger's passed," he adds quickly, when it looks like Castiel is about to shout him down.

His hands twitch again, the way Dean's noticed they do when he's resisting the urge to pace or shout in frustration. "And I have no say in this?"

"Nope," Adler chimes in smugly.

It's obviously taking a huge effort for Castiel to not start flipping out - which, hey, kind of what he was aiming for - so Dean wraps it up quick. "Since he's here now, sir, I thought it might be worth popping by his apartment now to make sure there's no surveillance equipment there?"

Castiel looks fit to explode when Adler nods his consent, smug smile firmly in place as he shrugs at the guy. "Hey, can't argue with facts!"

Dean nods back, leaving the paper booklets with the man, and leaves with a 'Later, chief' that's almost drowned out by the angry stomping of Castiel following him. The guy doesn't even let the office door swing shut before he's all but screaming at Dean.

"How could you? I trust you like you ask, and *this* is how you repay me?"

Dean doesn't face him, doesn't move forward. He can almost feel the weight of Zach's ears on them. Let him listen.

"It's for your own good," he says. "Cas--"

"Don't even start that with me! I decide what's safe for me, you had no right-"

"Castiel, just- trust me on this, this is for the best."

"No," he says, and storms straight past Dean.

They sit in the car for twenty minutes, Castiel silently fuming, Dean prodding him at intervals for his address. Dean's never known himself to be patient, but he's pretty sure he's about two minutes away from being sainted for this, because seriously, it is taking every iota of his nerve not to rock up to records and have Chuck dig the guy's personnel file out.

Better yet, he could threaten to ask his dad.

It's the smallest of sounds - a hitch of breath, the kind that comes with a sudden alertness - that tells him he won't have to, because Castiel is suddenly staring at him, sullen pose forgotten, eyes wide, expression like the penny that just dropped weighed a hundred tonnes and hit him at terminal velocity.

"The paperclips," he says, and tells Dean where to drive.

\* \* \*

Considering the weird altar to neatfreakery his office is, Dean's half-expecting to walk into an apartment pristine enough to make even him jealous.

He trips as soon as he's in the door, only saved from a painful face-vault by a timely arm on his elbow. Dick doesn't even apologise for the state of the place.

And it *is* a state. Dean's fairly sure his room at college doesn't even match up, and he and Ash turned that place into a *dive*.

"Is that your bed?"

"Don't like enclosed spaces," is the only response he gets as Castiel divests himself of his coat and throws it at a chair. No wonder the guy always looks so rumpled. And here was Dean thinking it was all the late hours.

"What's in the bedroom?"

At this, his eyes light up, like a much younger Sam about to expound on dinosaurs or egyptians or whatever nerdygeek thing he'd been reading up on that week. He doesn't say anything, but there's a slight jerk of his head that's a clear beckoning gesture, and Dean picks his way around the books and shoes and other detritus to see what could get the guy so excited.

"Woah."

There are four computer screens set up in an array above a long desk, and Dean can only wonder what the hell anyone would want with that many, along with a little laptop and some beast of a machine whirring underneath. What really catches Dean's attention is the wall to floor shelving across one side of the room.

It's half full of books on stuff he has no understanding of - textbooks and manuals on what sounds like computer stuff - but the other half seems entirely dedicated to crime fiction.

Back when he was in college, Dean had used to consume thriller and crime novels like twinkies, everything from cerebral Atkinson to Cornwall's pulp and everything in between. But he had loved one series most of all, and if the entire shelf dedicated to various prints of it indicated anything, it was a love Castiel shared.

"How many versions of Sherlock Holmes is that?"

Castiel practically glows. "Enough," he says simply, and Dean can only agree.

"I have to know, which is your favourite? Mine's a tie between the guy with the thumb and the one with the fake banker who pretends to be two brothers."

The nod he gives, as though he knows exactly what Dean's talking about, is very gratifying. "I like the Adventure of the Yellow Face best. Even Holmes could be wrong."

"I suddenly understand a lot of why you work the way you do."

That small smile Dean liked seeing crept across his face. "His methodology is a sound one, even if it's impossible for me to spot things as quickly as he could."

"So," Dean begins, capitalising on the good mood, "Forgiven?"

Castiel nods easily. "That was very clever of you."

"Yeah, well, I figured we could get a kick in early there. Adler thinks I'll tattle on you on a moment's notice, whoever cocked up in letting those logs loose gets to look like they covered their tracks well, and you get to stay on the case. Everyone wins, sort of."

He sits on his desk chair - and the thing is enormous, and looks entirely too comfortable to be at any desk - and motions for Dean to take a look at his screen set-up. "Since you're here to see about surveillance," he says as way of preamble, clicking a few buttons before six camera views show up on one of the screens.

It's all views in the apartment. Dean even spots the back of his own head, but looking up he can't see a camera anywhere.

"You are *definitely* the most paranoid person I've ever met."

"Thank you." He points at each screen in turn, naming the rooms, and then points to a spot on the edge of one of the living room cameras. "This is the only blackspot. I engineered this so there would be a small gap. Useful if anyone else were to take control of it."

"Like a hidey hole?"

Castiel looks a little put off, like the cutesy phrasing bothers him. "Essentially," he agrees after a moment. "I like to put important things there. There's a box under the floorboard."

Dean has to be impressed at the level of trust the man levels at the world. Making a hiding spot in a hiding spot from his *own surveillance*? Really? "I gotta admit, I'm kinda surprised you're telling me this."

"Dean, you just risked your job to keep me on a case. I think you've proven yourself trustworthy."

"I try, he says with a smile. "Think that fulsome praise can extend to you fixing me a coffee?"

\* \* \*

"So," Dean starts, trying not to glance at the piles of stuff everywhere. It wouldn't take him all that long to sort it out, make this place look like an apartment and not a dive, even *with* the bed in the living room, but Castiel would probably pile-drive him through the wall if he touched anything. "Now that we're not having a shouting match over it, can we go over the logs again? I spent all that time with them making the fake ones, so I honestly got no idea where to start with them."

"As it stands, the only obvious link between each target is Michael's office. Rachel worked there, and the others had all visited a number of times. Unfortunately, that doesn't give us much scope."

"Really? I woulda thought that would narrow things down a lot. I mean, he's the mayor, there's only so many reasons someone's gonna want to talk to him, right?"

"Do you remember our own visit?"

Dean's pretty happy to remember it. Word-slapping the dumb mayor of your own city is kind of a once in a blue moon gig, but he's fairly sure that's not what Cas is getting at.

Castiel stares at him for a long moment, but Dean can't for the life of him think about anything particularly out of the ordinary about it, asides from the conversation topic.

"Dean, how many people were there?"

Oh. Come to think of it, it had been a fairly bustling place, all things considered, but he'd reckoned on that being related to the re-election campaign the guy had to be organising. Those things took at least a year to put together, didn't they? "Dude, that was the first time I've ever been there, spell it out for me?"

"It was busy."

"*Not* quite spelling it out for me there, Cas."

"That was a normal day. Each time I've had cause to be there, it's been like that. Michael meets with dozens of people every day regarding dozens of issues, so unfortunately, being there at all doesn't narrow it down by a wide margin."

"It gives us something to work with, though. Asides from you, I'm guessing they all had to be politically active somehow."

Castiel's expression is the least impressed Dean has seen it yet, by a wide margin. Good to know there are still new lows to sink to. "Asides from me."

"Well, yeah, he's your brother, I'd guess the family connection is what's got you in the loop?"

"The fact that we are *half*-brothers isn't something either of us are keen to broadcast too loudly, Dean. My meetings with him are strictly business."

"That's pretty cold, dude."

Castiel gives a prim little smile. "Exactly as we like it."

"The hell do you talk about if it's not family stuff? Police business?"

Castiel gives him a considering look, before nodding to himself. "He does me 'favours'. Zachariah Adler does not like me, and I find myself making 'trouble' a lot. Michael smoothes things over."

"Uh, I hate to break this to you, but that sounds suspiciously like a family thing."

"Not in the way you're thinking." Castiel gives a vague wave, as though to convey a whole lot Dean just isn't going to understand. "Michael entertains this because he likes giving Adler the run-about. The man's a sycophant, and Michael's only use for that kind of person is to see how far along he can string them."

Dean suppresses the urge to correct the misphrases. "He seriously only does you a solid because he hates that guy?"

"Essentially, yes."

"Cold." But entirely off the point. "You think he does those other guys favours too? I mean, Rachel's parents said she got the gig because of a family connection."

"Michael does deeds for many people," he agrees, "but that again might not make them stand out. He has his fingers in lots of pies."

The correct use of a phrase almost makes Dean cheer. "Shouldn't we just ask him if he knows anything about these guys? I mean, he might not be our biggest fan right now, but--"

"Would you like to know what Michael will tell you about those people?"

"Uh, *duh*, that's why I suggested it?"

Castiel gives him a look that all but demands silence. "He will tell you that they are upstanding members of their community, that he has met with them a few times, and while they have had their disagreements, they were generally able to work together. He will tell you that he cannot remember the exact details of meetings had with them, but that his diary shall illuminate. He will, essentially, tell you nothing, but you will come away feeling as though you've gotten somewhere by looking at the diary, and will have missed the glaring flaw in what he says."

"Hate to break this to you, dude, but that isn't exactly sinister-sounding. You already mentioned how many people are down there seeing him every day, that just sounds like the kinda bull any politician would spout of about some guy he doesn't remember all that well."

Castiel is, once again, practically glowing with conspiracy. "*That's* the flaw, Dean."

Dean is completely nonplussed. "The flaw is that a busy guy can't remember someone he spoke to a couple times?"

"The flaw is that anyone *believes* that."

"Okay, you completely lost me."

"I think I've told you before that he is a shrewd man, but that isn't the half of it. I have no doubt that he knew exactly who every person was at his office that day, and every day. He knows their names, who they work for, what they want." He does his patented, conspirator lean-in here. "It's a good strategy. Everyone who speaks to him sees how many others he deals with on a daily basis; they feel special when he remembers details about them. None realise he does the same for everyone."

"So we're just gonna have to dig something up on our own?"

He nods, with something close to a sly smile. "Paper trails are your favourite, aren't they?"

\* \* \*

It takes hours of plain hard slog through everything they can gather on these guys backgrounds, when Dean suddenly perks up. "Hey," he calls to Castiel, who has since retreated to his giant desk. "I've got a hit."

Castiel pokes his head out on a wheely chair, which is such a weird image he nearly double-takes. "Ditto."

He's tempted to say 'you first' just to find out what the hell the guy decided he essentially needed to sequester himself for, but he's spent so long staring at paper that he wants to just put this thoughts out there so the guy can say 'no dice' and he can take a nap or something. "They've all got a connection to this one charity, and get this -"

"-it's the one Gallhager recently volunteered at?" He looks considering for a moment, and then nods. "Good work. Is it obvious they're involved?"

"Nah, took a bit of digging. And dude, I don't want to know how you could get hold of all this info so fast."

"Public accounts," he waves off. "Men in their position don't tend to expect anyone to look too deeply into them. Not quite important enough for proper scrutiny, not unimportant enough to keep their business to themselves."

"You know anything more about it?"

"Surprisingly, yes. My brother set the charity up when he was 'turning new leaves', shall we say? It's a local organisation, and he is still a board member, but hasn't played an active role in decades."

"Another brother?"

"Luke," he says, standing and moving to the kitchenette to put his well-abused looking coffee machine on. "The only one who fits the term 'brother'." Leaning against the counter, Castiel doesn't smile, but there's a certain fondness in his expression. "He left the city after-- when I was young. But he wrote until I was adult enough to leave the house and change my name."

"You changed your name?" Dean asks, perking up. Was he finally gonna dig a little deeper into the master of cagey-ness' past?

"In so many words. Only to make official what I was already using."

Well, that answers exactly no questions, but it does remind him of something. "That got anything to do with you being 'JAJ' on the reports?"

He nods, somehow managing to convey an awful lot of distain in a small motion. "Both my names are from my mother now, as it should be."

"I'm guessing you've got other brothers, then?"

"Gabriel Svaha. I believe you've met."

"I'd ask how the hell you knew that, but it's *you*. He was my Crim professor, still hangs out with Sam, which frankly disturbs me."

"Yes," Castiel says, with an expression that spoke volumes. "He is a nuisance, but I didn't see much of him growing. He took his wife's surname to distance himself from them, much like me." He turns to glare at the machine, as though willing it to work faster, as a way to end the conversation.

Fair enough. From the little he'd managed to glean, life in the Areli household didn't sound like the kind of thing you'd want to stay wrapped up in. He filed the information away for later. "What about your hit?"

"Ah," he says, with a put-upon mystery. "Mine is very good. Gideon, the deceased one, died of digitalis poisoning. Was ruled an accidental overdose from heart medication. Would you put money on who did the pathology?"

"That was your hunch? That can't've taken *that* long to come up with?"

He pours two cups, stirs slowly, and Dean knows he's just trying to drag the drama out. "No. I was digging. It's very difficult to try and go through the database of a regional lab that's been active for nearly 30 years."

"I can imagine," he says, rubbing his eyes in sympathy. How the guy isn't squinting from eyestrain after a long time staring at a screen is beyond him. "So what's the verdict?"

He hands a cup over to Dean, and sits beside him, casting an eye over the neat stacks of paper Dean's rocking on the table. "Why are you so neat here, when your desk is usually so awful?"

"I could ask you the same question, dude. Now spill."

Taking a sip, Castiel sets the cup down, and this time he does smile; a small, sly thing. "You'll like this. It's a regional lab, so as you know, it handles forensics and pathology for smaller PDs without

their own facilities, and occasionally the overshoot from bigger PDs during busy times. There are thousands and thousands of reports in their database."

"And you sifted through all of them? What the hell?"

"No, Dean, as much as I enjoy a thorough approach, there is such a thing as going overboard." Dean snorts at that; he's pretty sure the guy has no idea what 'overboard' means. "Targeted anything sent over from our PD first. Narrowed it down to over 200 cases, which, while feasible, would take longer than I'd like to go through. Then, narrowed it down further by looking at date clumping."

"Okay, what the hell does that mean?"

"If cases are being sent over from another PD, there tend to be several within a period of a month or two; that would indicate our own lab was boggin up. Looked at the outliers instead, cases where it seemed there was no reason not to use our own lab. Less than 20 hits. Spread over 30 years, it's not something anyone would even be looking for, until now." He takes another sip, pensive. "Bar one, they all look as though any anomalies could be chalked up to a botched test, slight negligence, never anything purposeful or malicious."

"But you reckon it is?"

"Naturally."

"Wait, bar one?"

Castiel looks troubled at this. "A case in 1987. It's sealed by court-order, so the reports aren't on their database - since it's so long ago, it'll be paper-copy only. Considering what we're looking at, it's not important to view *every* report." There is an entirely out-of-character sullenness creeping over his face, though, and he breathes out heavily. "Frankly, I am not sure I'd want to look at it, either."

Castiel Novak, weirdly meticulously thorough detective extraordinaire, doesn't want to read a report? What the hell? "Any particular reason?"

He nods, but says nothing for a moment, looking conflicted. Eventually, he nods to himself. "Yes. It's *my* case."

## 5. Catch A Train

"Your case?" Dean repeats, incredulously. "Dude you were what, 10 in '87? How can it be *your* case?"

Castiel breathes out noisily, in irritation. "12, actually. And it wasn't a case I *led*."

Dean takes a sip of his coffee - and *jesus christ* that's strong - and side-eyes him suspiciously. "You involved in some juvie shenanigans you never mentioned?"

Managing to perfect a delicate balance between an expression that combines 'you're an idiot', uneasiness, and his customary poker-face, Castiel shakes his head. "I know you would only have been young at the time, but do you remember the kidnapping that year?"

"Yeah, the-" and there go the cogs, how didn't he add that up a minute ago? "You're the Areli baby?"

"Not a baby, obviously."

"I think every kid my age remembers that, dude, everyone's parents were super-paranoid for the whole *year*. Dad wouldn't let us go anywhere without supervision. *Wow*."

Castiel looks rather distinctly like this isn't the sort of thing anyone should be saying 'wow' over, which, fair enough, no one wants to hear you whinge about how you couldn't chill in your secret base one summer because they had the gall to go get themselves abducted. It adds a few things up about the guy, too, like how disconnected he is from a load of films and shit that should have been his *childhood*; big guy like Areli probably wasn't going to let his kid out the house for years after that. "I don't even remember who went down for that, it was so hush-hush after the first couple weeks."

"No one did," he says reedily. "Not officially, anyway. It was 'taken care of'." He hunches down a little, stares at his coffee like it might answer some universal questions for him. "I think Luke took care of it. He turned his leaves a little afterward, set up the children's charity, and then he was gone." His tone turns bitter at that. "The following years are why Michael and I are at such odds. He felt is *necessary* to dictate how my life was led from there. I did not approve."

This is so big, and so weird, and probably the biggest chunk of Castiel's past he's ever gonna learn at this stage, but he can't help but swing it back round to the task at hand. "Don't you wanna look at it, then? If it's gonna be another hit for your conspiracy, surely it's worth looking into?" Castiel looks at him a little blankly, but says nothing. "If it's about the court-order thing, I could probably swing it. Having an ADA for a brother has its benefits."

Eventually, Castiel shakes his head. "No, I-" and it's maybe the first time he's ever heard the guy stumble over his words when sober and not hungover, "I think we can do with what we already have. It's not a big enough puzzle piece."

"It might be. I mean, you were being watched, what if it's all connected?"

"I doubt it."

"Because it involves you? Your framework ain't being broad enough right now, man."

"Dean," he says sharply, "We are trying to solve one murder here. One with several threads linking it elsewhere, but ultimately, *one murder*. Time is paramount." He deflates again, and looks dejected enough that Dean's tempted to throw an arm around his shoulder and reassure him. "I don't want to look into it."

"Okay," Dean says quietly, and nods. "You've already got a load of 'emotionally compromising' stuff going on with this, I don't wanna add to it if we don't have to." He takes a sip of his coffee, and is pretty glad for how strong it is now. "Think you can look into the charity from here, and I'll talk to our lab guys about this?"

"Yes, Dean," he says eventually. "For now, though, I am thinking dinner and sleep. No good working on a tired brain."

Dean couldn't agree more. And later, when the guy sets a surprisingly comfy campbed up for him in the computer room, he pretends not to notice that Castiel leaves his hall light on to sleep.

\* \* \*

"It's rather obvious why you're here, Mr Winchester, and I am afraid I can offer little illumination," Mort states, not bothering to look up from the slides he's studying when Dean walks into the lab with a knock and a 'do you have a minute?'

Mr Mort is probably the second scariest sonuvabitch Dean knows, the top spot only taken by Ellen because he knows from experience that she'll bean him, whereas the pathologist has only ever looked down his nose at Dean. He has the air of a grand professor, or a 30's noir film villain, and Dean always feels a little off-kilter talking to him, like the rug is about to be pulled from his feet. The fact it's first thing in the morning after a really weird night doesn't help, either.

"So you know it's about the report?" he asks, doing his best to not sound too eager or too nervous. Seriously, why couldn't Bobby be around this time of day? "Novak says when he got it off you guys, the kid was clean. That right?"

Mort carefully removes a slide from the scope, replacing it with a hum. "That is correct. However, as it was not the report that was signed off for that case, it's rather irrelevant now, wouldn't you think?"

There's an edge to the guy's voice that marks it as a pretty damn relevant piece of information, but Dean understands what he's saying. Castiel's version is unofficial; inadmissible.

But who the hell decided to send the case to another lab?

"An unnamed station chief," Mort answers his unasked question. "It isn't unusual, during busy periods where time-sensitive material is being reviewed, for a department to outsource forensic reports. It is unusual for them to do so during one of our drier spells."

So Castiel was right. Chalk one up for paranoid detectives everywhere. "So what, you guyses report just wasn't good enough or something?"

Mort sniffs. "Without wishing to blow one's trumpet, the work myself and Mr Singer do here is of the utmost quality. We would not make so glaring an error as this. Our report is accurate." When he looks up from the slides, Dean feels a little like he's being scrutinised, peered at like an interesting bug. Well, a lot like. "Which begs the question; who wished to doctor the facts so boldly? Your friend would never allow such an oversight, nor would he settle for the report of a pathologist he does not know, no matter the time cost. His meticulousness in this is well documented; it makes one question why someone would go to the trouble of fabricating something that would so obviously be spotted by him. What purpose could it serve, Mr Winchester?"

He has to think about it. Dean knows that Castiel's original theory rests on the data from the samples he collected, but his suspension at the time means it's inadmissible. All the other evidence they've found is based on hunches, or is circumspect; without the hard physical evidence to tie the lab into dodgy business instead of just occasional negligence, they can only shout and hope someone listens. Unless they got permission to exhume the kid's body, there's no way to refute the official report, and if Castiel insists on pressing it, they'll string him up as a crackpot.

Well. More of a crackpot.

Was someone just going out of their way to discredit him? Surely not for a case this small-time; it was just some kid who looked like he'd got mixed up in some bad shit, whether it was drugs or something else. Why would someone be going out of their way to push the drugs-and-gangs perspective?

"The whole thing stinks," he says, studying Mort for a reaction. The guy had to know more than he was letting on. "The whole suspension thing is the kinda hokey deal defenders wheel out in court, not something our own guys should be saying this early on. And his superiors have gotta know better than anyone how anal he is about the whole sample collecting thing, there's not a snowball's chance he woulda contaminated them. And it's for some case that shoulda been wrapped up quickly by a guy like him, but he's running into roadblocks like this everywhere, it's enough to make anyone side-eye it. It's like--" but he can't say it, not in his own station's lab, he can't. Dean wants to believe he works for an honest force. He does.

"This is far bigger than you realise, Dean," Mort intones quietly. "Something is brewing, and this small case is a spill-over. Someone didn't cover their tracks well enough in the first instance, and isn't doing well enough in the second. Keep digging."

And just like that, it's as though he's been dismissed; Mort is back to looking over his slides with disinterest. Dean shrugs and gives his thanks, heading out, and Mort calls to him with a carefully casual tone. "And Mr Winchester? If you could provide new samples, we'd be happy to test them."

Well. Guess he was gonna have to get a body exhumed.

\* \* \*

Calling a grieving woman up to ask if she'll let his body be re-examined doesn't exactly sound like an easy task, but Dean's still surprised how much he has to psych himself up for it. How the hell is he gonna play it? 'Hey, Mrs Gallhager, remember me, the guy who didn't say much during that interview? Well, I need a HUGE favour.' Not gonna work.

It's frustrating, because if he could just nail this one thing, that'd be another crack in the drugs-and-gangs theory that'd already been accepted by Adler, and wasn't *he* just starting to look entirely too dodgy? As a station chief, he could easily have ordered forensics at other labs, and Castiel had said he was all but in the Mayor's pocket; who else could he be sucking up to big time?

Mort was right, just as Castiel had been right, just as all the evidence piling up at their door was saying they were right; this was way bigger than just one murder - hell, maybe just *two*, if the lab was that dodgy, hadn't Cas said something about digitalis?

Fuck. He was gonna have to do it.

"Hi," he says eventually, when Mrs G picks up. "I'm really sorry to bother you, but I'm the other guy who's investigating your son's death. We've got a really weird break in the case, but I need your permission for something pretty extreme."

If there was one thing Dean knew, ultimately, it was that he could be a hell of a salesman when the need came.

\* \* \*

Dean gets what he needs, because it turns out Mrs G is a tough lady who's more than dedicated to getting her son justice. It'll take a couple days, sure, but it's one ball he's managed to get rolling, and he's starting to feel a little hopeful.

Less so, however, when he calls Castiel for a check-in and the guy tells him to meet up at Balthazar's bar.

It's not even 12 yet!

When he arrives, he's pretty surprised to see Sting Ramsay greeting him with a cup of coffee and directing him to the bar. "Give it a couple of minutes, is all he says, before hopping over to his side of the bar, doing something on a little netbook. "Accounts," he says, to Dean's curious gaze.

"So I'm not here to pick his drunkass self up again?"

"Luckily not. I understand last night was a little rough on him, but he's just *burning* with glee today."

Dean sips the coffee which, like the beer he'd had last time, is annoyingly good. "All right, why am I being kept out here then?"

"He's meeting with one of his 'associates'. You wouldn't get on, I believe."

"He has 'associates'?" If there was one thing Castiel had demonstrated during their partnership, it was the fact he was willing and able to handle pretty much any aspect of a case himself, and more than down with grinding on the details until he found what he was looking for instead of turning to someone else.

"Oh yes, rather like your little ring of thieves-" and he smirks at the 'hey!' Dean gives in protest, "he's made a number of... let's not call them friends, but people who appreciate his work. I think you know who he's talking to right now."

As if on cue, a woman walks out of the back room and Dean has trouble keeping his volume down when he recognises her. "*Bela?*"

The woman in question gives him a smirk. "Always a pleasure to see you, Winchester."

"Yeah, well, the pleasure ain't mine at all. I thought you went down for something or other?" His brain's just about short-circuited, because Bela used to be top of everyone's list in OC, before she went white collar. Or legit, no one was entirely sure what she was *actually* doing now. She had also been joint top of his 'crushing-on-but-way-outta-my-league' list, a list that featured only her and a fed called Hendrickson that he'd met on a particularly hairy case.

"Now, Dean, you know as well as I do that I'd never be *caught* doing something illegal." She gives him a smirk, and offers a friendly wave to Balthazar, before striding out.

"Okay," he says, "what the hell?"

Castiel, ever the master of timing, chooses that moment to emerge from the back room too, looking both harassed and pleased with himself at the same time. He holds up a little pen drive with a flourish. "My morning has been very productive. How about yours?"

"I'm getting a body dug up. Was that *Bela*? How the hell do you know her?"

"She's very good as an anonymous whistleblower," he says mysteriously, sitting at the bar with him. "Thank you for accommodating us, Balthazar."

"Oh, you know me Cassie, I can't say no to you when you make that face."

Dean's not sure he wants to know what kind of face that is, considering how hard it is to say no to the man anyway.

"So, what did it cost you this time? Trip to the Bahamas? Booking at *e/Bulli*?"

"Dude, that's been closed since 2009."

Balthazar grins at him. "She does like to demand the impossible."

"So you pay her?"

"Only in favours," Castiel says gruffly. "This one is easy enough. I'm to demonstrate the evidence against her in a case is flawed."

"Seriously? Dude, whatever she's in trouble, she probably did. Isn't she all into corporate espionage now?"

"In this case, no, it wasn't her. It's a stitch-it."

"Stitch-up," he and Balthazar correct at once.

"In any case, this could be a good break on another front. Good work on getting the exhumation, by the way."

And that is totally a sentence he never expected to hear from *anyone*.

"So, what is it?"

"Data from computers at the charity headquarters. I called Bela last night for the favour, and she tells me there was one computer not connected to the network. Very suspicious."

"All right, well, that sounds more your bag than mine." He tries to think of what else he can be getting on with - waiting around for bodies to appear isn't really his thing.

"It is. And it might take a while. I thought you might appreciate the chance to catch up with your brother, considering we're at an impasse elsewhere."

That's not actually a half-bad idea. He can always ask Sam if there's any rumblings in his office about the charity, or any of the guys involved; Pamela might come off as a pretty right-on lady, but she was probably the toothiest DA Dean'd ever seen, and she was always getting her guys to keep an eye out for corruption.

It's then he notices, under the bluh of negotiating with terrifying women, that Castiel has a kind of happy buzz about him, and Dean wonders if he is maybe paying way too much attention to the guy's mood. "Something good happen this morning, dude?"

He nods, the biggest smile the guy's probably ever pulled in his life coming out. "Luke contacted me. He's in town, wants to meet. It's very exciting. The intention is to make headway on this and then perhaps meet later."

"Good for you, dude. So, we splitting up for the day?"

"Yes. I'll contact you if anything comes up. Everything seems to be coming together well." His smile softens a little. "Thank you for working with me, Dean. I know I've had moments."

"Hey, this's been a collab clusterfuck all the way, Cas. See you later?"

With Cas and Balthazar waving him off, Dean calls Sam to meet up for lunch. Sure, he's probably gonna get teased to shit, but right now he needs to confide in someone about the way his heartrate shot up just because he smiled at him.

\* \* \*

It feels like an age since he's really spent any time at his apartment, despite it having been about a day, so Dean throw his keys on the table and takes in the nice, neat, tidy sight of home, grabbing a beer out of the fridge and plonking himself down on the sofa. Definitely time for some shitty daytime viewing, no matter that it ain't daytime anymore.

It's only by chance he notices the answering machine blinking; sometimes he forgets he even has

a landline, considering how much he relies on his cell for everything. Shrugging to himself, and fully expecting to hear a telemarketer's blurb, he's surprised when it's Cas' voice that speaks.

"Dean," he says, in very Cas-like style, no introduction, "*The lead is good. As suspected, this is a lot bigger than us, and everything we've been pulling together is connected. I've emailed you the details of a woman I have an interview with, she used to head the charity, but there's another lead I must look into first.*" He pauses, and Dean can hear a huff down the line; he can picture Cas looking around the street, like anyone could be listening to whatever super-secret thing he's about to divulge is. "*Meet me tomorrow morning, at mine. If I'm not present, there will be a gift for you in the usual place.*" And, equally Cas-like, he hangs up.

The number on his caller-ID isn't a cellphone, and when he dials it it rings out, so he shrugs. Must've been an office number or something.

Weird and mysterious as the call is, it drifts to the back of his mind under the force of vegging out to Adam Richmond looking for the country's greatest sandwich.

\* \* \*

When he gets to Cas' place in the morning, Dean wants to shoot himself.

The door being ajar tells him right off that something's amiss; and since, despite this being a mostly papertrail-based case, he's still a cop, and he still carries, he draws his handgun and slowly pushes the door open.

He reholsters it immediately, because whoever was in here isn't now. The place is a tip - and considering what a tip it was *before*, that's saying something.

He treads carefully, wary of disturbing anything, well aware of evidence-gathering procedure, but he can tell what's been taken straight away; the computers.

Something bubbles up in him. This was *targeted*.

A look in the room confirms it; a couple of screens have been pulled off the wall, and the beast itself is missing; otherwise, there's books and cd's pulled out of the shelves, and to him it looks like someone trying to *make* it look like a smash-and-grab; it'll just be seen as part of a crime spree or whatever, but he *knows* it's on purpose.

Dean tries to think what the hell the 'usual place' would be as he dials first Cas' cellphone, then his desk, then his *other* cellphone - then he remembers the camera set-up the guy had shown him when he was giving the tour. It was right up there with his Holmes collection as his favourite thing in the place, but he'd shown Den how there was a little blackspot just by his living-room bed where he liked to hide things.

Looking at the computer room now, he sees one of the vintage Holmes books has pages torn out. It seems oddly malicious.

In the hiding place, naturally, is a little netbook. He calls the PD to get someone to look at the break-in, pleased that whoever had tried to shut down what Castiel was doing had missed it, and trying to use the satisfaction to bury the pit of worry growing in his stomach.

Had Cas known this was going to happen? Is that why he'd hidden the computer for him to find? Or was this just random, and the stash just part of his normal paranoia?

Dean knew he'd be able to put some of his worry to rest if the guy would just *pick up*, but no.

Once he's handed off to the guys who show up, keeping the laptop carefully hidden under his jacket, he tries Balthazar - just in case - and asks the guy to call anyone who might've seen him, because he can't shake the fear that Cas investigating something and the break-in are linked, the same with him not picking up *anywhere*, and he knows, empirically, that Cas is more capable of taking care of himself than Dean is, frankly, but the more he's thinking about it the more he's starting to freak out.

He tries the number the guy rang him on again, and still, nothing. It suddenly dawns on him, though, why he recognises the number; a quick search on his phone tells him it's one of the public payphones in the city, and *why the hell would Cas call him on a payphone?*

Somewhat on auto-pilot, he makes his way to his car, opens the laptop, and is greeted by the most heart-sinking thing he's ever seen.

It's a login screen, he reckons, with the space for a password, but all it says, otherwise, in big

letters is 'I WAS WRONG'.

*Fuck.*

Dean pins for the first wrong thing he can think of, and all but speeds to the PD. Time to get the files on his abduction fucking *re-opened*, like he should've pushed for originally. *Of course it was related.*

## 6. Gone, Gone, Gone

He's staring to think Chuck is being obtuse on purpose, but at least that tells him something. As far as records guys go, Chuck doesn't come across as particularly reliable but he knows his job better than most people give him credit for; Dean's often swanned in trying to get case notes for investigations he's only really had the vaguest of information on, and Chuck always seemed able to pluck out the right files with a shrug. So if he was flat out saying 'we don't have that case on file,' Dean would happily believe it.

But he wasn't. Chuck was choosing his words with far more care than a simple 'no' should afford, and that at least told him *something*.

"We both know what I'm talking about, and you're seriously telling me there's no 'Cas Novak 87' case files? Really?"

"Yes," Chuck replied, with a sigh heaving with ire. "There's no file under *that name*. And for the last time, you can't just look at the guys HR file 'just because' either, Dean, because I don't have it!"

"You keep saying 'that name'. The hell do you mean?"

Chuck sparked up, but it was obvious he still wanted to hit Dean. He had to be missing something big. "It means what it means, detective. You give me a case number, or a name, I can pull it out for you, but I can't do anything if you just ask me for whatever it is you *think* you want."

The 'why the hell not?' stayed firmly on Dean's tongue. No point making Chuck want to slap him further. "So it's not under that name?" Chuck gave something that was probably meant to be a surreptitious nod but looked more like some kind of weird neck spasm.

Surprise, surprise, the guy had managed to put more crappy roadblocks in his way, even when Dean was trying to save his life. Did he ever get tired of this shady bullshit? Dean remembered the conversation he'd had with Chuck the week previous, where he'd called Cas 'all kinds of scary' and wondered if he'd threatened the guy to keep quiet about his weird history. Even if that was true, surely Chuck wouldn't obstruct Dean if Cas' life was in danger?

Dean thought back. Cas had a thing about his name; he pulled a face every time Dean shortened it, and corrected the few who referred to him as an Areli, and there had to be a reason for that fervency. *Think*.

Michael, he'd overheard when Cas had been awkwardly apologising for 'wasting his time' and he'd almost called him something else, but Dean hadn't been paying that much attention and had dismissed it. *Think*.

When Dean had asked why he wasn't 'Castiel Areli', Cas had said both his names were his mothers, and gone no further. It'd been like a wholesale rejection of his father and his connection to that family. Had Cas changed his name? The news articles had only referred to him as the youngest Areli kid, no name to speak of. Had he always been Castiel?

"Okay. Okay. Is there a 1987 case for James Areli?" Maybe his dad was the best direction to go.

Chuck sighed dramatically, but nodded. "The James Areli *Junior* case. It's sealed, like, properly locked tight, you need a court order to see it. *Even if it's for protection of life*," he added quickly when Dean went to protest. "You'd need at least an ADA to sign off on it. Not your brother."

"The hell do you take me for?" Dean asked, already pulling his phone out and dialing his second favourite person at the office. "Sarah! It's Dean. Listen, I need a favour like you wouldn't believe."

Thank heavens for small favours. Or, well, huge, jock-off, sell-your-brother-out-on-blind-dates favours anyway. Eh, Sam already had some massive thing for Sarah, he could pretend to have set them up from the goodness of his heart.

"I know strictly speaking this was *sealed*," Chuck was saying, "but you wouldn't believe how crazy this case was. Is. I mean, wow, they are one messed up family! You know no one was ever prosecuted? Goes to show you what having a big-time lawyer for a dad can do for you."

Dean hadn't even opened the files yet - Sarah had threatened something fairly painful-sounding if he didn't dot the i's and cross the t's on the paperwork and fax it back to her immediately - so what

Chuck was babbling about made zero sense. "Wait, what the hell? Why didn't he throw his weight around to get the kidnapper bang to rights? I thought he was real big on the family thing, lovechild or not."

Chuck gawped at him.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

Dean lifted his pen in a show of exasperation. "Do I look like I've read this yet?"

Chuck carried on staring, before grabbing the file in a flurry, flicking straight to the charge sheet. Before Dean could reach for it, he held it back for a moment, and gave Dean the most serious look he'd probably managed in his life. "Dean, when you asked for this I thought you knew what you were getting into. You seriously didn't know who was responsible?"

Dean shook his head, suddenly very apprehensive. "I was following a hunch. When we were looking at all those sketchy forensic reports, this case popped out. Cas thought it was related at first, and then changed his mind when I said we should check out the history."

"Yeah, I bet he did," Chuck bit back. "If he didn't already know who was responsible, I doubt he'd *want* to. Seriously, Dean, this case is messed up."

He relinquished the sheet, and at a cursory look Dean knew whoever fought to keep this out of court had to have had a damned hard time of it. Kidnapping, false imprisonment, endangerment of a minor, assault and battery... even *with* the botched forensics it couldn't have been easy.

"So what, Areli just gets the charges dropped? I know he gets a say, but surely the City shoulda brought further charges?"

"Have you *seen* the guy in court? Even now, he's *terrifying*."

"Still doesn't make any sense," Dean muttered.

Why the hell would he be at pains to keep this out of court? Was it the media circus? Dean had gone through the newspapers out of curiosity when Cas originally brought it up but after the first week of appeals from the family it was like no one cared about the story; even when Cas'd been returned, it'd only warranted a short article buried in the middle of a midweek, slow-news-day paper. Areli had obviously gone a long way to make it a quiet business, and he was surely fierce enough to keep it up through a court case.

Dean thought of what Cas had said about his brothers in the aftermath, about how his dad had said one had 'taken care of it', and wondered if it'd be kept out of court for that reason. To be dealt with 'personally'.

He gave the sheet a closer look, and felt his stomach drop to his feet.

Well then. That put *that* theory to bed. "Oh, shit."

"What'd I tell you? This case - this whole *family* - totally nutso. Uh, no offence to Novak."

"No, Chuck, *oh shit*. Cas doesn't know about this. He said he got in contact with the guy a couple days ago, and suddenly he vanishes? Tell me that doesn't add up how I'm thinking."

"Oh, *shit*," Chuck reiterated.

Dean ran his palm over his face and tried to *think*. Off the back of their last encounter - and considering how it looked increasingly likely he was implicated in this nastiness too - there was almost zero chance Michael would talk to him. And a less-than zero chance of Areli deigning to speak to him. He bit back a curse, pulling his phone out again; there was a pretty low chance this would pan out, but he was desperate.

"Gabriel, hi. Listen, I don't care if this is a bad time, and I don't have the patience for any bullshit, so *please* tell me you know where your brother is."

Dean stared at the sheet again as Gabriel made a snide comment about Cas, the crucial detail staring back at him.

*Plaintiff; Areli, L.*

"Not that one, idiot, *Luke*. Please, *please* tell me you've heard something, I am frigging *beyond* desperate here."

Dean hoped against hope that Cas had never got round to meeting his estranged brother, but the practical part of his knew better, knew this all added up into something awful. Christ, the guy had been *excited*, had practically sung Luke's praises, had gone to such lengths to try to prove he had nothing to do with the duff charity, and he had no fucking clue.

\* \* \*

Gabriel is a dead end.

Dean's heart is in his throat. Usually when he gets a solid lead it doesn't dissolve within five minutes, and he can practically hear the clock ticking in his head. The payphone hasn't paid off either; given how long ago the call was made, he has no idea if the area is a good enough starting point, and he can't afford to cock it all up by having uniform search the whole area when he's got zilch *evidence* of any foul play.

"...I'm aware you can't do anything official yet, but please, keep an ear out. I do worry."

Michael?

*Michael* is at the station?

What the hell?

Rounding the corner, he can see that the mayor is talking to the desk sergeant, who's nodding sympathetically and saying "We'll call you as soon as we hear anything," before heading back to his desk. When he turns, it's uncanny how quickly he's putting on the politician megawatt grin.

"Detective Winchester! I was hoping to speak with you." Dean can't help but shake the hand proffered to him, so completely thrown for a loop by this guy showing up *now*, of all times.

A small, but extremely loud, part of him is suggesting slamming the guy's face into a wall and demanding the scoop on where the hell Luke is, because if *anyone's* gonna know, it's gotta be him. Instead, he gives an unsteady "Uh, hi."

"I apologise for us getting off on the wrong foot last time we met. I'm sure you know all about how stressful things can be in times of tragedy, and I get the feeling I rubbed you the wrong way."

"Don't sweat it," he finds himself saying. "Uh, you were looking for me?"

"Yes, I understand you were the last person to speak to my brother? He missed a check-in with me, some issue with his boss he wanted me to clear up for him." At this Michael makes a face that seems to fit so *perfectly* on his face - a vague, eyerolled 'what're ya gonna do?' kind of face - that it puts Dean instantly on edge.

Beyond that, he *knows* Cas would never call in a favour over the Zach debacle, given how well they'd choreographed it.

Abruptly Dean is sure of how Michael must see him - someone who betrayed his brothers confidence, who doesn't know him all that well, who's probably looking to cover his own ass after his jobs gone awry. A perfect pawn, but god knows for what. He nods. Fuck it, he can at least play along to work out why the hell the man's all gung-ho about finding Cas. "It's me who's gotta apologise for that, sir, I kinda landed him in hot water with those surveillance logs." He leans in, lets his eyes dart around for any listeners. "I know he's a great investigator, but he was dragging the case out by holding onto them. Still, sorry."

"I'm guessing you two didn't see eye to eye on that."

"Among other things. And yeah, I guess I was the last person to talk to him. He kinda bugged out after the break-in."

Michael gives a nod that is so perfectly part understanding and part concern that Dean almost pukes right up on his shoes. Jesus *christ* this guy was born to be a politician. "He's very particular about his space. I imagine that shook him up quite a bit, but he wouldn't usually go to ground for so long."

Dean is fairly sure that, circumstances being different, Cas would have 'gone to ground' for the five minutes it'd take for him to pick up the thief's name before taking them down with extreme prejudice. Still, he nods. "You guys close?"

"Of course," says Michael. "I practically raised him."

The fact he doesn't start calling the guy a liar straight off - the fact he manages to keep his well-practised vague-interest expression in place - is a work of such strength of will Dean reckons he should get knighted for it. Or fuck it, canonised, why not go the whole hog? Instead, he nods, eager to get this all wrapped up and get away from the lying skeevebag. "Family's pretty important to you, huh?"

When Michael nods with that perfect polished smile, Dean thinks of how he's got a brother and a *half*-brother who won't even consider sharing a surname with him, how Luke had obviously gone off the rails enough to do what he did to Cas, how he must have sat back, happy to help wherever it might score him points, and wonders if he can punch the guy hard enough to spell any number of descriptive curse words out on his smug dick face.

"I'll be honest, if he was gonna call anyone I don't reckon it'd be me, but I'll let you know if I hear anything." He sure as hell won't.

Michael nods again, the picture of understand. "I know you have other things to attend to, detective. Don't let me keep you any longer."

He walks off, easy as can be, and from the back he looks pretty much carefree, despite his words dripped in saccharine worry.

It strikes him, then, that the guy failed to mention that his creeper brother is in town, the one who was impossibly acquitted for something pretty damn shady and pretty damn relevant in the face of a disappearance, and Dean doesn't think for a *second* that Michael doesn't know it. So why the hell hasn't he mentioned it?

Something, Dean thinks, is rotten in the state of Denmark. And just *maybe* it ain't Luke.

\* \* \*

Sam, naturally, disagrees.

"Dean, look at his records. He got busted for a couple possession charges, one count of assault, the charity he starts after 'turning a new leaf' is probably embezzling funds, and he basically dropped off the map after the court case. He's an all-round shady dude, I don't know what else you want me to say."

Dean shakes his head. The lead had felt right when he'd dug the case file out, but he felt a weird unease about it. "Nah, Sam it's too obvious. I don't even think the kidnapping was him, to be honest." He rubs a hand over his face, trying to shake the queasy nervousness out of his mind.

"Cas would've pulled like five random details out of all this by now, and what are we doing?"

"Well, right now, you're pining over your big man-crush."

"Shut up, man. Time and a place."

Sam gives him a reassuring little grin, and Dean knows it for what it is.

"I think what you need to do is focus a little more. You're all over the place with this, so just pick one aspect, and focus on that."

Dean shakes his head. "I don't even know where to start, dude. The laptop is what's bugging me the most, I just feel like if we could open it everything would start making sense."

"Still think you'll be able to work out his password?"

"He hid that thing in the only blind spot in his apartment, he wanted me to find it, I'm *sure*."

"So we just have to work out what he was wrong about, huh? You think that's the key?"

"No, that'd be too short. We type in 'Luke' and I don't think anything's gonna happen." He stares at the screen, like maybe winning a glaring contest with the thing is the answer. Who knows, maybe it's got crazy face recognition? "The wording bugs me, dude, Cas was never wrong about anything."

"Uh, he was, he was dead wrong about something *massive*, evidently."

"No, no, I mean he never admitted it. He always says 'mistaken' or 'misinformed', never 'wrong'. There's gotta be something in that."

"Or, it's just that he was dead wrong about it. You said he didn't know Luke was involved in that mess, right? So he was wrong to trust him?"

"Seriously, Luke isn't the answer."

"What about Michael, then? I know you said he was being all vulcan about the family thing, but he must have let it colour his perspective a bit."

"Hell no, he was about as objective as you can be when it comes to that guy. He *hates* the dude."

"He tell you that?"

"In so many words. Objectively the guys' nothing but a skeevy politician, and we treated him with as much suspicion as anyone. If Cas was being all emotional about it, I think he would have tied the guy in knots with circumstantial stuff from the get-go. Thinks he's capable of just about anything, man."

Something abruptly clicks, like a dislocated joint sliding back into place, jolting and uncomfortable. "Sam, you're a genius. We spent all that time treating him like he was just another guy tied up in this because Cas didn't want to put his own spin on things, but what if he was wrong? What if his brother is exactly the terrible shady bastard he thinks he is?"

He tries a couple permutations of 'Michael', each one coming up nil, and he hadn't realised his heart had climbed out of his stomach until it was swandiving back down there.

This was heart-achingly frustrating. The guy could be lying in a ditch somewhere, or up to god knows what, and need his help, and all Dean could do with the clues he'd been left with was think through dead ends. Not that he was being helped, particularly, because all Cas had really left him with was an admission of fault like that was supposed to be some big revelation. If - *when* - he tracked the guy down, he was gonna tell him just how wrong he-

Wait.

That *bastard*.

It wasn't some unknowable cryptic key, it was Cas thinking off the cuff, and it had taken him this long to figure it out. And he told Cas off for not being quick on the mark reference-wise.

"Norbury," he blurts out without thinking, ignoring Sam's look of confusion, and typing the quote in quickly. The little chime of success was the best sound he'd heard in fuck knows how long. "It's a frigging *Holmes* reference, Sam, it's his favourite one. Holmes spends the entire case thinking a load of crazy stuff and he's so completely off the mark at the end, he tells Watson to say the place name any time he's getting too sure of himself. That is so Cas."

He faced with another problem, however, in what appears on the screen is just a ship load of Excel spreadsheets spelling out stuff he has no idea about. Disgruntled, he hands the little laptop back to Sam, with a vague instruction to "work it out."

All right. One down. Now he just has to work out what the fuck is wrong with the whole Luke kidnapping picture. There's something in there, something in the report, that he knows just doesn't add up. It has to. He decides to do what Cas would do; work from the start, not from the end. The result was obvious; Luke got picked up for doing the deed, and obviously he didn't go to jail. The way Chuck had spelt out, it made it look like his dad had maybe been covering up for him. But what if he'd actually known the real deal?

Augh, he was already getting ahead of himself; it'd do no good to start rambling conspiracy theories before he'd even really considered things.

Okay. Police reports. Kid gets in a fight with his older brother, apparently not that uncommon, and nobody notices he doesn't come down to dinner that night. Only, the next morning, he's vanished to fuck knows where, with no sign of any kind of forced entry. Family reckons he's ran off on his own; there's a whole lot of subtext that says this too is not abnormal. Appeals go out; whole lotta sad faces the newspapers saying "please come home, you're making us look bad "in so many words. Luke is practically missing for two weeks, and while no one says out loud, they assume that he is somehow responsible for helping the kid run off. Michael opines loudly to the police, and the media, how sorry he is, and how he's the last person Cas spoke to.

Then, suddenly, there's no media interest whatsoever; it's like there was never some missing kid from some big rich family, and the abruptness of it seems a little impossible to Dean.

Then, suddenly, it gets interesting again; one day, out of the blue, about two months after the original disappearance, the police get a call from none other than Luke. He's at some derelict apartment complex, and he's found his baby brother. The report is a little sparse here; and he gets why, there's nothing he hates writing more in a report than writing about some awful abuse some poor kid has suffered. The best that could be said of the little place he was holed up was that it had running water; otherwise, all the windows were boarded up tight so was pitch black inside. It was obvious why the guy had called the cops, too, does the front door was barricaded shut from the outside.

That stands out to him slightly. If he was behind it, and he'd called the cops because things got out of hand, surely he would have opened the door himself? By all reports, he never even went into the room.

Now this, this must be the juicy bit. The forensics report. He and Cas have already established that the place is dodgy as all hell, the only reason they hadn't gone down this route already was because the guy was so touchy about it. There are not. He skips over the doctors report; it's only Gonna make him angry, after all. It reads pretty comprehensively that there was obvious evidence of Luke having been in the place. Big stuff, too. Not the kind of skin flakes to go after these days, but long hairs, fingerprints, obvious drops of blood; all great sorts of things an up-and-coming crime lab to be digging their teeth into. And yet, Luke swore blind he'd never even seen the place before that day, insisting that he'd been sent an anonymous letter tipping him off. The letter never appeared,

and after that he kept crowing that it had been stolen. Seemed pretty open and shut, apart from the fact that he was so convinced of his innocence in the face of pretty overwhelming proof.

"Hey, Sam," he says, glancing over to his brother, who seems way deep in concentration. "Listen to this. Luke fucks off for two weeks while Cas is missing, doesn't tell anyone where he is, and when he gets back Michael seems to call off the whole press junket thing. He finds the kid because of some hokey letter, which immediately goes missing. His prints and shit are all over the place, but he just leads the cops right there. Is it just me, or does this sound like a stitch up? An inside job?"

Sam gives no indication of having heard him, his brow furrowed deeply. "Dude, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, sounds fishy," he says eventually, distracted.

"You could at least sound a little convinced."

Sam waves vaguely at him. "Yeah, I'm sure you're onto something, but so am I. Like, something huge."

That perks him up a little. "How huge?"

Sam turns the little screen around towards him, looking a little like he can't quite believe what he's seen. "How about 20 to life huge?"

There, right there -- and judging by what is around it Sam must have had to trawl through a metric shit ton of e-mails to notice, ever the sharp kid -- is a single, damning sentence.

*Ward situation taken care of.*

Dated the night she 'died'.

"Shit."

"There's more."

"Of course there's more."

"He did it because she found out about this." And here, he can see how Sam is actually practically thrumming with excitement. "Check it out. Full accounts of how the bastard got elected. And he just had this all together, can you believe it?"

Dean sure as hell could. The guy was more than arrogant enough to believe that no one would go looking for this sort of information, let alone find it. Oh god, he was gonna have to buy Bela a drink. "Wait, what do you mean 'how he got elected'?"

Sam has that kind of face on him, the pyramids and dinosaurs and whales and wherever else it was he was interested in when he was a kid kind of face. "Well, if this stuff is anything to go by, it wasn't entirely legitimate. That charity you were whingeing about? A front. A cash laundering front." He's practically buzzing now. "It's electoral fraud, dude. On a pretty big scale. And it's pretty much fully evidenced. I think the DA is gonna flip!"

Great. *Great*. The whole murder thing'll take a hell of a lot of time he just doesn't have right now to hold enough water to get an arrest; but if the DA is about ready to hound Michael on anything, then something as corrupt as this was pretty much guaranteed to get him into warrant city, and at least get the guy in a holding cell for a while. Still. *Still*. That gave him no help as to where the hell to find Cas.

"Hey Sam, reckon you can handle this bit from here? Call in every favour that woman owes you to get Michael indicted like, *now*. I just saw him at the PD, he ain't skipped town yet. Cas having this and dropping off the grid have gotta be related, and we gotta see if we can put any pressure on him to work out how."

Sam nods, pulling out his phone, and thumbing through his contacts before pausing. "What're *you* gonna do?"

"Think."

\* \* \*

Standing on the balcony, Dean kinda wishes he'd taken up smoking at some point in his life; sure, it's bad for you, but it'd give him something other than this gnawing unease to focus on.

Great. They've cracked not just the Andy Gallhager case, but the Rachel Ward no-one-knew-it-was-murder case, and they've broken something massive on a guy who frankly deserves an even bigger shitstorm than the one he's about to get come his way. Fantastic! Back pats for everyone! All in a days work for a Winchester and all.

But it doesn't get him any closer to Cas, and why he was going to meet Lily when the woman had almost nothing new to tell him; Dean had spoken to her over the phone, and she'd told a bitter tale of how Michael had muscled her out of having an active role in Lightbringer's direction, at the same time as hiring some new accountant she didn't much approve of and, in a fit of uncharacteristic *charity*, made public the accounts that showed everything had started turning up roses after Michael had taken over. Lady had a chip on her shoulder as big as a boulder, sure, but he couldn't see where Cas'd get a good lead out of that.

Fuck. He was missing, and he'd known he'd go missing, because he'd set everything up for Dean to work out and share with the world the results of their investigation. Which he'd done, so, fuck you Cas, leave some more fucking clues and where the hell you've vanished to, why don't you?

Dean picks his phone out of his pocket, ready to replay Cas' famous last words again. Why from a *payphone*? He was a clever little bastard who never left anything to chance; Dean had no doubt that, had the guy stayed gone long enough to miss his appointment with Bela, the files Sam was currently wetting his pants over would've got circulated some other way, because the dude had a contingency for everything, but he hadn't thought to take his own cell out with him? There had to be some deeper meaning to it.

He was tempted to ring it back again, just to see if anyone happened to pass by and could maybe tell him if his friend was dead in an adjacent ditch or not; hovering over his recent calls, he spotted Ward's parents number and *bam*, just like that, one little detail, the kind Cas would never think to pick out.

Dean's pretty pleased when it's her dad that answers, sad as that is, because she'd seemed a bit of a daddy's girl and this whole thread he had bubbling away in his brain relied on her confiding in *someone*.

"Hey, Mr Ward, this is detective Winchester. I know this is pretty weird, but have you got a few minutes for a couple questions?"

The man sounds weary - and who can blame him? Some douche detective keeps trampling over his being able to *not* think about how his daughter's not in the world anymore - when he says, "I'm sure there's nothing else I can tell you, detective."

"Seriously, this'll only take a couple minutes. I just need to be sure about a couple of things, dude, and then I reckon you'll finally be getting some justice for Rachel."

There's a thin, whistle-like sigh, and Dean knows he's seconds away from losing the guy and having him hang up, cop or not, so he says, feeling like a huge duck, "You were lying when you said you never met who she was seeing, weren't you?"

"I-- what? I'm sorry, detective, but--"

"She was having an affair, right?" Let him be right. Please, let him be right.

There's a long, long pause, before Ward sucks in a breath and says, thinly, "Yes."

"I can guess how it went," Dean starts, hoping he's not crushing the poor guy into the dirt with this. "She get's this great new job, courtesy of the family connection, and then she starts talking about seeing some guy so patently false you end up confronting her about him. And she tells you, and you're happy that she's happy, but you know it'll end in heartbreak. The Areli's are old friends, and you know Michael for what he is, but Rachel's a grown-ass woman, and you're gonna let her make her own mistakes, and make sure you're there to pick her up when it all goes to pot. Am I hitting the mark?"

"Yes," he repeats readily.

"Then, a couple of weeks before-- you start noticing. She ain't as happy as she used to be. You figure it's just her getting wise to the kind of relationship she's got herself in, but suddenly she's gone, and you never bother to tell the cops she was seeing the *Mayor* because you don't think it matters who broke her heart. Well, let me tell you, it weren't like that. He broke her heart, but not in the way you're thinking."

"Look--" Ward starts, sounding flustered, and obviously not impressed with having to put up with Dean's eulogising, "Have you called me just to tell me how much I didn't know my own daughter? I'm already *well* aware of that."

Dean breathes, and tries to dial it down a bit. Ward's got no cause to be caught up in the end of his tether. "Sorry, I'm-- listen, this is really, really, probably life-and-death important. Did she ever mention them going anywhere special to meet? Guy as public as the Mayor, they'd want to do their wooing somewhere private, right?"

He's gotta appreciate how game Ward is in not hanging up on him, or bitching him out, or any of the kinds of things Dean would do in this kind of situation. Maybe he sounds a mite more desperate than he thinks. "She did mention a few things," he said eventually. "I told her she'd get the press hounding her if anyone every saw them together, and she told me they'd meet up in some of the old offices he still owned." There's a tinge of wistfulness in his voice. "She made it sound like he was a huge romantic, sneaking her off to places to be together, but you know what men like him can be like."

It clicks.

The payphone.

Michael.

Yes.

He manages to tamp down the loud eureka crow of 'yes' down the phone, but can't hold back the sigh. "Thank you, dude, thanks so much, seriously."

Ward sounds entirely confused, but still says "You're welcome," politely.

"Listen," Dean starts, before the euphoria of *working it out* runs out, "Your daughter didn't kill herself. And the guy who killed her is gonna get banged up for a long, long time, I guarantee. Avoid the papers for the next couple days." With that, he hangs up, dialling Chuck before he has a chance to take another breath.

"Listen, dude, I know I've been asking a lotta favours, but this is the *last one*. The payphone number, can you find out if any of the buildings nearby are let to the Mayor's office?"

## 7. The Chain

He knows he's hit jackpot the moment he hits the right street.

It's a practically deserted area of town, letting signs on almost every office he walks by - including the one he's after. There's two entry points from what he can see, but whatever Michael's doing here, he's doing it alone.

Dean treads his way as carefully and quietly as he can through the side entrance, left lovingly unlocked by some kind soul, but his heart's hammering loud enough he's pretty sure anyone within a ten-block radius can hear him.

It's a great set-up, he has to admit. There's old campaign stuff dotted around everywhere, desks all pushed to one wall and chairs stacked up. It makes a pretty good sound wall, and if his hunch is right, a great place for Michael to hole up. His DNA and prints would be over everything for perfectly legitimate reasons.

He hears a dull thud somewhere above him and thanks whoever'll listen for thin ceilings.

Drawing his gun, he gives the transmitter three taps for Jo, and really hopes he hasn't just stumbled into some place with giant rats.

Upstairs is more of the same; old office equipment stacked up towards the sides, boxes in odd places - however, there's a row of closed-off offices, and from the one furthest down the hall - furthest from any windows or doors - he can hear a low murmuring.

He inches closer, wary of the boxes around - seriously, this was a *great* set-up, any idiot blundering around would knock at least *one* thing over - and his heart all but stops when he hears a rough, familiar voice saying "Luke?"

And Dean had thought he was over dreading the sound of Cas' voice.

"I'm afraid he's not coming," says Michael, and it takes everything in him to not bust in all guns blazing at that voice. "In fact, he never was. Did you *honestly* think he'd want to see you after what you did?"

There's a pause, and Dean takes the moment to poke his head round the door surreptitiously. He sees Castiel straight off; he's tied to a sturdy-looking office chair, hands behind his back, still wearing his dumb coat, which look suspiciously like he's been rolling down hills in. Asides from some scuffs and a sluggish-bleeding, ugly looking cut on his temple, he looks all right. Well, he looks in one piece.

His eyes are blinking slowly and his head lolls to one side, probably meaning he's just coming out of an entirely involuntary nap, and when he eventually speaks again the words are slurred. "I didn't *do* anythrrgh--"

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," Michael cuts in loudly, shoving his head back and tying a handkerchief round his mouth. "I swear, every word out of your mouth is a lie, James."

Despite being beat up, drugged up, and tied up, the look Cas gives Michael then is pure *murder*.

And evidently the wrong move to make, as his head jerks to the side sharply, loud *thwack* of something solid beaming him in the side of the head ringing out loudly; he doesn't make a sound, but the cut on his temple bleeds afresh, and he seems to struggle to move his head forward.

"I'll tell you what's going to happen," he says softly, pulling a second handkerchief from his top pocket and daubing the cut lightly, "you're going to stay here for a few days to cool off, and when I come back, you're going to say sorry and agree to never mention this *nasty* business again. And if you won't, well." He takes a step back, and Dean's heart nearly stops when he sees the gun. "You always did like the dark, didn't you?"

Fuck protocol. Dean hastily taps out a 'go' on the transmitter, swinging round and up from his watch spot, gun trained on Michael. "Drop the gun and hands up!"



Even in the gloom, he looks comically shocked at the interruption; he follows neither of Dean's commands, but doesn't point the gun, either.

Fine, whatever. As long as he keeps Michael's attention, it doesn't matter what else he does.

"You all right there, Cas?" he calls back, not taking his eyes from his target; from his periphery he catches the firm nod and the overwhelming look of pride and relief splashed across Cas' face.

Michael doesn't seem to have quite recovered from the sudden interruption, so Dean presses his advantage. "Was this *seriously* your plan? Baby bro catches onto something big and you think tying him up in a creepy office for a couple days is gonna keep a lid on things? Dude, your *name* is still on the lease for this place, you really thought no one would find it?"

"Now listen here," he starts hurriedly, voice trying to hide a knot of panic Dean hears clear as day, "this is just a misunderstanding."

"He's not a kid anymore," Dean states bluntly, hoping to push a button. "You can't just disappear him and expect no one to care. The guy may not be top of anyone's Christmas card list, but it'd still be noticed pretty damn quick!"

If the shade of red Michael's face has just turned is any indication, he's hit bullseye with that, the only evidence of the man's anger the ice-cold tone he takes. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"25 years ago? Whisking your kid brother off the face of the earth for a couple months? What was it, Daddy paying more attention to the new baby than you? He kick your ass at Monopoly too many times?"

"He *stole* my *brother*!" is all but ripped from Michael, his anger a physical presence in the small space. "*Him!* I *raised* Luke, but the *minute* this- this *mistake* shows up, suddenly I was worth nothing!" He turns to Cas, voice low and insidious. "It's *your* fault he left."

"No, I think it's yours," Dean says, taking a step forward. He can see movement in the corner of his eye, and knows keeping Michael's attention in him is the best shot he's got at getting through this without actually shooting anyone. "After you tried to pin the whole thing on him. Good plan, that one. He was going off the rails, getting into trouble, it would've been easy to make it look like a try at swindling some cash outta Dad. But he *knew*, didn't he? Couldn't prove anything, but he worked out it was you, and I'll bet he couldn't *stand* it."

"Things just- got out of *hand*."

"Like they did with Rachel, right? You thought she would be reasonable about what she found, but *no*. Your relationship didn't mean *enough* to her, did it? So things just *got out of hand*. Could've happened to anyone, right? Only, you had to dress it up as something else, in case anyone else came poking around. This was your *future*, after all!"

Michael looks fit to blow a gasket, until a calm clicks over him so rapidly Dean almost steps back. "Alright," he says simply. "I see what this is. Name your price."

Dean is so thrown for a loop by the change in demeanour he can only stutter out a 'what'?

Michael, however, is back on form, simpering smile sliding on easy. "Come on, Dean, you work all this out, follow me out here, and you don't *want* something? Come on. Name it."

His head's spinning. Of all the things he expected to get out of the man, a bribe hadn't even entered his thought process. But he had to think back, to what Cas had told him about the man, both textually and between the lines.

Michael was certain of two things; that every man had a price, and that no one could lie to him.

Well, he'd already done the first, might as well make it a twofer.

"I'm a cop," he says, after a pause, trying to balance his voice with the right balance of nerves and curiosity. "I can't take a bribe."

"Not to worry," he replies, and though his smile stays thoroughly saccharine, his eyes have the glint of a predator. "You wouldn't be alone in it. I've been *reasonable* to a number of officers in your station; I'm sure we can work something out."

"You're serious," Dean asks, schooling his expression to something a little more on edge. "What about Novak?"

"All you have to do is forget you saw him. I know how *well* you get on, it shouldn't be a problem for you, should it?"

Hit it out of the park. "Anything?"

"Anything at all. Money, power - I'm sure there's a promotion you're after, and all I have to do is make a call. We can put *all* of this nastiness behind us, forget it ever happened."

Dean smiles, nervily, and if the ugly grin he gets in return is any indication, Michael's taken it as an assent. He lowers his gun and takes a few steps forward, smile staying in place; he chances a look behind the other man, and sees he was right to keep Michael's attention. Cas is making good time sawing at the ropes around his wrists with something he had to have stashed up his sleeve; and man, the guy should've known better than to put a paranoid man's hands where he can't see them.

All he has to do is drag this out a little longer, let Cas get home free, and call it in. He's already heard the confirmation signal from Jo; she and her guys should be ready to move at a moment's notice.

"What I want," he says slowly, keeping his smile bright and his tone conspiritous, "is for you to come with me to the police station, and repeat everything you've just said. I'll keep my mouth shut if you spill your guts. Sounds fair, right?"

"Very funny," Michael replies, smile a whole lot more dangerous. "You think you're 'principled', is that it? Every man has his price, Dean, and I'll *happily* meet yours."

"Pretty sure you'd let a bullet find me before I could collect, man."

Michael gives a short, hysterical burst of laughter. "So you're going to run on back to your station, tell them the mean old mayor is a killer? I have the force wrapped around my *finger*, boy, no one will believe a word out of your mouth."

Dean can already see his gun hand twitching, like he'd just remembered he was holding the weapon, and lifts his slightly in response. "You *jackass*. I'm recording everything you say, not to mention I've caught you *red-handed* in a hostage situation. And everything Cas managed to dig up on you? All those *nasty* little bits of evidence? The DA's been after nailing you for months, I hear she was pretty happy to have them hand-delivered."

The gun hand rises up, but Dean's got a bead on him quick as anything. "What, so this is the new plan? Shoot your way out? Dude, you are in a *world* of pain already, I think my back-up might take issue with you nailing a cop."

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you?"

"It's over, man. Just come quiet before I add resisting arrest to your long-ass list of misdemeanours."

Michael laughs again, hysterical edge of it sneaking into his voice. "I misjudged you, I think. You really *are* all about your principles, aren't you? Still," and he's moving faster than Dean can blink, grabbing Cas by the hair and shoving the gun to his bloodied temple, "Everyone's got a price."

All he can hear is *fuck fuck FUCK* in his head on repeat, heart well and truly stopped, defibrillator needed, grip on his own raised gun like a dead man's. It's Cas, though, that grounds him; he looked profoundly perturbed, like someone's just messed up his coffee, not like his completely fucking

insane half-brother is trying to use his life as a bargaining chip, and it's so insanely Cas that Dean nearly drops his gun at the ridiculousness of it.

Hell, he's got an audience, might as well give him a good show. "Put the gun down, Michael."

"Work with me here," he says, mad hatter's grin doing a terrible job of covering his desperation.

"He's worth *nothing* to me, but surely his life is worth something to *you*? You don't seem the type to let someone die for the *big picture*."

"Put it down before I *make you*."

"Do you *really* want to try that?" he says, jabbing the gun hard.

Dean's heart seems to have restarted itself, because it's thundering in his ears, the adrenaline coursing through him failing to cause his arms to shake, but trying on gamely. He has to wonder if this was how every guy he'd ever seen with nerves of steel felt; is Cas, he who looks as though a gun to the face is a minor annoyance, stuttering along with him, head light, limbs shaking, heart ready to burst?

"I'm going to count to three," he says as calm as he can manage, impressed there's not a word out of place. "One,"

Michael doesn't move a muscle, except to grin wolfishly at him, expression screaming *you don't have the bottle*.

"Two,"

"The minute you fire that gun, it's all over," he says, confidently.

Time drags out, because Dean knows he's right, knows the minute he shoots, Michael's hand will tense up anyway, and at that range, it's not going to end pretty.

It doesn't matter what happens, Michael's gonna get his, and he must *know* it; what's another life on the list? He's holding all the cards, and he knows it, and Dean can feel his arms trying to drop with the weight of it, but what can he do? What the hell can he do?

Cas.

Cas is staring at him.

And that little conspiratorial gleam, the one that'd yet to lead him astray, the one he gets when he's showing off some *brilliant* solution, *that* gleam, is sparkling up at him clear as day.

*He must have cut the rope.*

Castiel nods, a short, barely there tip of the head, and Dean smiles, because everything is gonna work out.

"No, Michael," he's saying, barrel aimed straight and true, "It's over for you. Three."

Two shots ring out.

\* \* \*

For a moment, it feels as though time has stopped.

Dean has no idea if he made the shot, if Cas moved in time, because all he sees is his partner laying still on the floor, tied to the chair that's flipped with him, all he sees is the *stillness* and that *can't* be right, because Cas *nodded*, he had to have an escape plan, he *had to*.

He looks away. Lets himself move on autopilot.

Michael is slumped against a wall, hand to his shoulder, and Dean kicks the dropped gun out of the room as he moves to cuff him, blood still thundering through his ears. Hell, at least he made the shot.

Jo finally, *finally* moves in, and whatever she says is lost to him as he drags Michael over to her, handing him over, and moving back to the prone Cas, limbs heavy like he's walking on the bottom of a pool.

When he kneels down, the world suddenly rushes back to him, because Cas is giving him his most impatient glare of all, hands still trying to work through the rope, and it all *clicks* for him as he undoes the gag and starts on the other ropes.

"That was your plan? Tip the chair over?"

"Thinking on my feet," he croaks out.

"Dumbest thinking I've seen you do," Dean replies, pulling the little blade out of Cas' hands and quickly sawing through the ropes around his wrists. "You could've dived straight into my line of sight, let alone his."

"I trust you," he says plainly, slowly pushing himself to sit upright with his freed limbs. While his usual poker face has slipped on where it belongs, up this close Dean can see the trembling in his fingers, how pallid his skin's gone, and has to give him a good look-over before he sees the shock of red against the sleeve of the tan coat.

He grabs the arm before Cas can argue with him, lifting it up and breathing his relief out loudly when he sees it's little more than a flesh wound. "Looks like he clipped you, dude."

"Small oversight," Cas mumbles, weight leaning toward Dean like he's given up on the notion of staying upright alone. So much for the tough guy act. There's a ghost of a smile on his expression, though, and he says "Well done," as earnestly as he can manage.

Dean feels a laugh bubble out of him, sounding more strained then he was aiming for. "Well, you didn't make it easy. Next time, don't be so clever, got it?"

"Can't guarantee anything."

All the stress of the past two days spent worrying, of the tense stand-off, slough off him like dirt under a spray, and Dean really, really wants to be in bed. With a beer, and a cheeseburger, and some shitty home design tv shows, and a warm weight pressed up against him. Yeah, that would be amazing right about now. As it stands, he can settle with not moving much for a good long while.

Dean balances the injured arm across his shoulder, careful not to jostle it too much, and uses his own to pull Cas in for an awkward, tired one-arm hug. "Sorry your brother's a psycho."

"Half-brother," Cas amends dreamily.

They sit quietly for a while, leaning against each other, watching Jo hustle about the place, until Dean can hear the distinctive sound of paramedics arriving. "Come on," he says, shifting until he can find a comfortable way to heft both their weights up, "let's get that bandaged up."

Cas sighs. "Then paperwork, yes?"

"Fuck no. They can wait for a statement. I'm taking you home and we're gonna sleep for three days and eat a shitload and get colossally drunk. We just took down *the mayor*, I think we earned a rest. Besides," he adds, leaning in so their faces are close, like he's telling a great secret, "I've got three Star Wars DVDs with your name on."

As kisses go, it's fumbling, awkward, tired, and unexpected, and is instantly Dean's number one kiss of all freaking time.

Cas breaks off like he'd never initiated the damn thing, expression serene. "Good plan," is all he offers Dean.



## Epilogue. Rock & Roll

"So," Dean begins, closing the car door with a little more care than needed. "'Administrative Leave', huh? Guess they can't have us running round showing anyone else up."

Cas was giving him a smile, a small, soft one Dean had seen once or twice and committed to memory. "I forget that most people don't get told to 'cool off a while' after every case."

"And thank fuck for that! There'd be no force if we were all getting paid holidays every time we did a good job. Seriously man, I'm gonna go stir-crazy before the two months is out. I'm already missing work *now*." And wasn't that a sad pronouncement on the state of his life, if he had pretty much nothing outside of his work? "What do you do, Cas?"

He gave a small shrug. "Work on some new security project, usually. Re-order my music collection by different parameters. Tidy my apartment, when things get *really* boring."

"And god forbid that place doesn't have clutter on every surface." Dean sighed. Really, he was grateful for the time off. Everything had been so messed up by the case, he knew it'd take him a while to really sit down and process it all. Re-evaluate his priorities, maybe. He tapped his fingers across the steering wheel, but made no effort to start the car. For the first time since this mess started, he didn't have anywhere to be. *They* didn't.

*They.* Huh. Maybe he could start the whole re-evaluating business with *them*.

"Listen, Cas. I—" he *what?* The pause hung in the air long enough to make it uncomfortable for most, but Cas had never really got to grips with which silence were comfortable or not. Dean closed his mouth, resisting the urge to sigh again, and really thought about what it was he wanted to say.

*'I've had this really inappropriate crush on you since forever'* didn't seem the way to breach this, and didn't cover the way his heart had stopped when Cas had fallen off the map, the effort it had taken not to just pull the trigger the minute Michael had been in his sights, the *relief* that had washed over him not when Cas had said it was over, but when he'd smiled and said *'Well done'*.

Cas strung him around, and lied to him more often than not; insulted him without meaning to; he had no concept of personal space, and he couldn't cook, and his idea of tidying was like blowing the settling dust off a bombsite, and when he got in a mood he ate and drank and smoked too much; he'd never seen *Ghostbusters*, for Christs sake! Cas hated cars, and he hated driving, and he hated Dean's favourite beer, and he made all Deans old favourite songs seem new again, and he was so damned earnest it broke Dean's heart a little, and he could quote any adaption of *Sherlock Holmes* back to front, and when he smiled or laughed it was like the dawn breaking after a long, dark night, and *holy fuck*.

"Listen," he repeated, and can feel the flush in his cheeks, the wobble in his tone. "I liked working with you. Like, *really* liked. It was horrible, and you suck at teamwork, and this whole case was fucked from the start, but it's been the most fun I've had in *years*. And seriously, how are you single? I mean, *look* at you! And you're funny. And you know, your kissing is a little hokey, but hell, we could work on that."

"Dean," Cas says, with a face and tone somewhere smirking and confusion. "Are you propositioning me?"

Dean dragged a hand over his face, and couldn't contain the little shock of embarrassed laughter. "Man it'd be a hell of a lot easier if that was all I was doing." He put a hand to his mouth momentarily, trying to work out how he was going to say this, but the moment he opened his mouth to say "Cas, I—" he was silenced by a finger on his lips.

Who does that? Seriously, *who does that?*

Cas smiles, smaller and closer and softer than before, and removes the finger. "I watched the thing you told me about, with the man eating everything," he says, and *what the hell*, that is the most inappropriate non-sequitur Dean has ever had the displeasure of being interrupted for. And he's had Sam bust in on him mid-coitus. Dean gapes at Cas, whose smile is unchanged. Was he being shot down before he even got that chance to say anything?

The silence stretches on, Dean feeling the flush that had painted his face draining to his shoes,

Cas looking at him expectantly with a hand caught between rubbing his neck and staying resolutely on his knee. *Oh*. He was meant to *respond*. Dean hardly recognised his own voice at the choked-out "And?"

The hovering hand stands down, and Cas taps out a pattern on his knees. Dean thinks he recognises it. "There's a place in Maine that does good lobster rolls."

All Dean can think is *where the hell is he going with this?* Something of this must show on his face, because Cas abruptly faces away, looking straight ahead like they're going somewhere. "I've never had a lobster roll," he says placidly, and there is something of the 'definitely dropped on your head' in his tone, but his eyes are twinkling as he glances toward Dean. "Never been to the coast, either."

And just in case it hadn't twigged already, "Driver picks the music?"

Dean puts his foot, and the handbrake, down with a little more force than he intended, and his baby jolts to life. "Damn right I'm picking the music if you're picking the destination. 'Sonly fair."

Cas nods in agreement. "If nothing else, I have faith in your tastes."

Dean wants to say something more. He wants to find it in himself to ask if there's a future in this, if Cas understands just what Dean wants to say, if this is a diversion or the first mile on some great emotional journey they're going to have together. He wants a solid stance on this. Instead, he pulls out of the carpark and aims for the highway. If they don't have everything they need for this trip already, they'll just have to pick it up along the way.

"Y'know, there's a chocolate moose in Maine, too," Dean says, glancing over. "In some ice cream shop. Think it's on the way?"

Cas leans over to jam a tape in the stereo, fastforwarding it unbidden. "If it wasn't before, it is now."

They haven't traveled a mile before they're singing what a long, lonely time it's been to each other.