### Duty And Devotion

by Cerdic519

**Summary**

Pride And Prejudice with our dynamic Destiel duo. Dean in a cravat, alphas and omegas, and lots of balls. What more could you want.
A Truth Universally Acknowledged

Chapter Summary

Samuel Bingley is Dean Winchester's former charge and best friend, even though their characters are very different. But his fellow alpha can be really trying at times, especially when it comes to affairs of the heart. Dean never lets his emotions get the better of him....

October 1800

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single alpha in possession of a good fortune must be in urgent want of a mate. Whilst it is indeed true that such alphas as a rule do want children to bequeath their wealth to, it is equally and regrettably true that (over-)ambitious parents tend to think that their omega or daughter, provided they are adult (or close) and breathing, would be ideal for any single alpha who is unwise enough to enter their territory. It often comes as a surprise to said parents that the alpha in question, most unreasonably, tends to have rather more exacting requirements.

As the eighteenth century in England drew on to its last few months, few marriageable alphas looked more appealing to prospective parents than the Earl of Hexhamshire's twenty-six-year-old nephew, Mr. Dean Winchester, master of Pemberley House in Derbyshire, and worth a very solid ten thousand a year. Of tolerably good looks (although with ten thousand it might fairly be remarked that he could have looked like a horse!), he was assured of the attentions of ambitious parents anywhere he went. Though they all had to give up their efforts sooner or later, often citing their target's aloofness and clear disinterest. The heart of the master of Pemberley was, it seemed, not to be easily won.

It was not that Dean (he disliked the honorific 'Lord') did not want to marry; at barely three years shy of thirty, he knew the time was fast approaching when he would have to choose someone to be Pemberley's next Lady or Laird - more likely the latter; he preferred omegas to females. The social ascent of his late mother's family had been both sudden and astronomic, and Dean would soon need to marry and continue the Winchester line, especially as he had no brothers to fall back on, only a solitary sister not yet of age. His Polish grandfather Dmitri Tippens had built a fortune in trade, moving across Europe via Austria and the Austrian Netherlands before settling in London and becoming truly Anglicized as Mr. Demetrius Winchester. His financial and social standings were by this time such that his eldest son, John, was able to marry socially far above himself, to Mary Fitzwilliam, sister to Rupert Earl of Hexhamshire. The earls, whose pedigree stretched back to the creation of their county in the twelfth century, were one of the few of the old nobility to have done well in recent times, but more money was always welcome, and the earl and the now ennobled Sir Demetrius jointly bought Pemberley, a large house in Derbyshire, for the happy couple. They had had six children, but of the first five only the eldest, Dean, survived, and Mary had died giving birth to the sixth, Anna.

His social position notwithstanding, the young Dean had grown to view society in general with some distaste. The death when he was just fifteen of his father had thrown the boy into life at the deep end, and he had spent the next three years sleeping with anything that had a pulse. But shortly after his eighteenth birthday, his life had been sharply turned around when his late father's friend James Bingley MP had died of a heart-attack, and his will had entrusted his three children –
Samuel (15), Margaret (14) and Ruby (12) – to Dean’s father, and in the event of his death, to Dean himself. The late Mr. Bingley had also held the guardianship of Dean’s much younger sister Anna, which because Dean was not yet twenty-one devolved along with the responsibilities for his children jointly to Dean and his uncle Earl Rupert. Dean had inherited full charge of the three children on his twenty-first birthday, whilst his uncle had passed on his role in Anna’s guardianship three years back to his own youngest son, Lord Adam.

The three Bingleys were a study in contrasts. Sam was a tall alpha, far too open in Dean's opinion and always imagining himself in love. Although his guardianship of the young man had ended on the latter's twenty-first birthday, he had continued to watch over him, and had helped extract him from more than one undesirable relationship both before and after that date. Sam was in many ways a wonderful human being, but far too prone in believing the best of people when too often the object of his affections or friendship was more interested in his five thousand a year.

Ruby had last year been safely married off to a Mr. Gordon Walker – not the most pleasant of characters, but then, neither was Ruby. Dean had been tempted to oppose the match, but the news that Mr. Walker would one day inherit an estate in the Far North of Scotland to which he hoped to move too had persuaded him to say yes. Margaret remained a problem, and clearly entertained ideas of enticing Dean into the marital bed. Frankly he would rather have stabbed himself with a long knife, but he tolerated her for his friend’s sake, and ignored her flirtations as best he could.

Dean’s dislike of society in general had only been hardened by the events surrounding his sister, some ten years his junior. Three years ago, when she was barely yet fifteen, she had secretly allowed the courtship of one Metatron Wickham, the wayward son of Lord John's steward. Henry Wickham had been a good man, and before he died Dean's father had promised to find a living for his son. But in this case the apple fell very far from the tree, and despite Dean providing the young man with a generous settlement in lieu of the living (which he did not want), he had spent his way through it in barely a year, and then, finding he could not have the living as well, had fixed his sights on wooing and eloping with Anna and her fortune. Only a chance visit to his sister by Lord Adam on his appointment as co-guardian had prevented a major scandal, and Wickham had been warned off in no uncertain terms. What had particularly angered Dean was that he had subsequently discovered several of his acquaintances had either known or suspected of the affair, yet had done nothing to alert either himself or his co-guardian. He had no idea what had become of Wickham since, but he hoped it was fatal.

Sam had recently taken a lease on Netherfield Park, a fair-sized house near the village of Longbourn in Hertfordshire, his late mother’s home county. He had invited his former guardian over for some shooting and, somewhat reluctantly, Dean had agreed to come. Sam was his best friend in the world, but he feared the young romantic might try to set him up with some local omega or girl. The younger alpha was a wonderful human being, but he thought his friend should fall in love as often as he himself did, and Dean could not help fearing the worst.

His friend quickly proved his worst fears all too justified when, just moments after Dean had arrived, he casually mentioned that he had arranged for them to go to the county ball at the end of the following week.

“Damnation, Sammy!” Dean groused. “You know how I hate these things. We won’t make it three feet through the door before every mama in the neighbourhood will be sizing us up for matrimony!”

“Many of the locals have called round already”, Sam said cheerfully. “I like them a lot. I really would like to meet with more of them, and I think you would enjoy it too.”
“No! Absolutely no way am I going to some infernal ball!”

Sam stared pleadingly at his friend. Dean winced.

“No, Sammy! Do not try those puppy-dog eyes on me! I. Am. Not. Going!”

“Please, Dean!”

Dean huffed indignantly.

“Please?”

He scowled at his younger friend.

“I hate you!” he snapped, though he was smiling as he said it. “You so owe me for this!”

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The ball was to held the following Friday, so Dean had some time to discover what he could about local society. Fortunately he was well acquainted with Mrs. Wellow, Sam's elderly housekeeper, and she proved the usual mine of information about who to watch out for (which was quite impressive, given that she had only been there for just over a week). It would have surprised many who knew him, but Dean could be charming to people he thought worth the effort. It was just that there were few people he deemed worthy of putting into that category.

The ball was to be held at Lucas Lodge, just this side of the town. Despite the name it was a grand place, home to Lord Zachariah (Mrs. Wellow had pursed her lips at his name, a bad sign indeed) and Lady Amelia Lucas. He was heavily invested in the West Indies, whilst she did good works in the neighbourhood and seemed to prefer her dogs to her children. They had two sons, Inias and Uriel, of whom only the elder had been presented; Mrs. Wellow spoke of Inias with approval, saying the omega was tall and rather plain, but quiet and well-mannered.

To get to Meryton one had to pass through the village of Longbourn, where the principal house of the same name was inhabited by the Bennet family, Mr. and Mrs., with (amazingly) five omegas. Even stranger, all of them had been presented, despite the youngest not yet being sixteen. Most irregular, Dean thought; it suggested Mr. Bennet (who was a writer, apparently) was either straitened or very careful with his money. Mrs. Wellow did not think Mr. Bennet would attend the ball, but she confidently expected all the others to. Mrs. Bennet was quite sociable (could talk the hind leg off a donkey, Dean translated), and devoted to her sons. The two eldest Bennets, Gabriel and Castiel, were, in Mrs. Wellow's opinion, very attractive, and nice boys as well, especially Castiel. The third son Michael was quite accomplished ('boring', Dean guessed) and the other two, Raphael and Balthazar, earned a second purse of the lips.

New to the area and residing in Morecambe House in Meryton itself were the Kings, an uncle and niece recently arrived from the United States, but quite nice despite that (Dean suppressed a chuckle at the elderly housekeeper's xenophobia). Miss Maria King had also just been presented, and was said to be very wealthy in her own right; her uncle was also her guardian, and very protective. Mrs. Wellow considered Miss King a 'quiet young lady, attractive but far too pale'. She was unsure whether they would attend, but thought given their recent arrival it was unlikely.

The other families of significance in the area were the Beachams from Berkhamsted and the Brownes from near St. Albans. The former had several young children, one of whom currently had the colic, and Mrs. Wellow considered their attendance unlikely because of this. The Brownes consisted solely of the brothers Mr. Bartholomew and Mr. Gideon, whose parents had both passed
on quite some time ago. Mr. Gideon was away in London, and Mrs. Wellow as unsure if his brother would attend or not. Something in her tone implied she hoped not.

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The day before the ball, Sam came back from his walk and encountered Dean in the library.

“I have been out to return the call Mr. Bennet made on me the other day”, he explained, folding his ridiculously long limbs into a chair.

Dean raised an eyebrow.

“Leaving it a bit late with one of the principal families, aren’t you Sammy?” he teased. “They’ll feel put out that you didn’t visit them first.”

“I would have”, his friend explained, “but Mrs. Wellow advised me Thursday would be the best day to go.”

“Why?” Dean asked curiously.

“Less chance of meeting the frightful Mrs. Bennet!” Sam laughed. “Though I am glad I went. I saw a drawing of Mr. Bennet and the two eldest sons whilst I was waiting, and they both looked quite attractive.”

“Most people do when being drawn, or the artist doesn’t get paid!” Dean quipped. “I bet they’ll turn out to be country yokels, just like everyone else.”

Sam laughed at him.

“Who knows?” he teased. “You may be less than twenty-four hours away from meeting the future Lady or Laird of Pemberley!”

Dean threw a cushion at him.
Mrs. Bennet is delighted that two wealthy young men have come into her neighbourhood, and immediately starts her battle plans for the forthcoming and inevitable marriage(s).

October 1800

Castiel Bennet sighed when his mother bustled in from her shopping trip to Meryton. She was clearly brimming with all the latest gossip, which he knew was really the only reason she ever went into the town, rather than sending a servant. Normally she preferred to stay home and complain about the rising cost of everything – the interminable war with France, now in its eighth year, had made everything much more expensive – but today she was clearly bursting with excitement.

“Mr. Bennet!” she exclaimed, more than a little out-of-breath, “Netherfield Park is let at last!”

She announced it as if it were a personal triumph. Her husband sighed, and raised a quizzical eyebrow at her, clearly expecting more. She did not disappoint.

“To a Mr. Samuel Bingley, just arrived from the county of Derbyshire. And he has five thousand a year! Is that not wonderful?”

“In what way, dearest heart?”

“Why, for our sons! He is a single, handsome alpha, and rich! It would be wonderful if he married one of our boys.”

Charles Bennet glanced past his wife to where his second son was reading by the fireplace. Castiel made the slightest shake of his head.

“Do you think Gabriel is ready for... a relationship?” he asked his wife.

“Oh, pish and tush!” she snorted. “It has been years since all that happened. Water under the bridge, my dear husband!”

“I am sure our neighbours can still see that water”, Mr. Bennet said dryly. “But if Mr. Samuel Bingley is to settle in the neighbourhood, then calling on him in the fullness of time would indeed be the polite thing to do.....”

His wife looked at him aghast.

“No no, Mr. Bennet!” she insisted. “You must go there this very day, otherwise that dreadful Lord Zachariah will be in first, pushing his own sons forward.”

Perhaps it is just as well that I called on Mr. Bingley this morning, then.”

Castiel had the rare pleasure of seeing his mother stunned into silence, though not, of course, for long.
“Why did you not tell me?” she demanded. “What is he like? Did you mention we have five sons? Does he....?”

“I am sure the local gossips have informed him of our familial situation”, Mr. Bennet said wearily.

“But Mr. Bennet.....”

“I believe dinner should be ready shortly?”

Mrs. Bennet looked unhappy, but took the hint and left.

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Castiel held his brother's hand as they sat on Gabriel's bed. Ever since The Incident, Gabriel had refused to sleep in his old room, where it had all happened, and his parents had reluctantly agreed to move his and Castiel's beds into a large store room at the back of the house. It also prevented the rest of the family from being woken by the eldest Bennet's nightmares, though fortunately these had become rarer of late.

“I do not even know this man, Cassie”, Gabriel said, looking even more miserable than usual. “And you know how the rumour mill works. Someone is bound to tell him.”

Castiel looked across to where the flowers he had gathered during his walk earlier were placed in an old blue vase. Forget-me-nots, he thought wryly. How appropriate.

“Not necessarily”, he said, though privately he thought it more than likely. “But he may like you regardless of what people say. And if he is the sort of person to be swayed by idle gossip, you are probably better off without him. Wait until you see him at the ball; dance with him, and then decide.”

“But if I do not like him, you know full well mama will expect you to take my place!” Gabriel objected. “I could never do that to you!”

“The reports of him in the village are quite positive”, Castiel said, smiling. “Absurdly tall, maybe, but kindly and generous. The rest of the household.... is another matter.”

“Tell me about them”, Gabriel said, pulling himself up to sit cross-legged on his bed.

Well, he is in his mid-twenties, and quite rich; five thousand a year is quite accurate. He has two sisters, Margaret and Ruby. Ruby is married to a Mr. Gordon Walker, who is a bit of a bore, by all accounts. Eats far too much, and once accidentally shot one of his servants when out hunting, but the man lived. Both sisters play the piano a lot, and have fair-sized settlements of their own, about two thousand each, give or take. Oh, and Mr. Bingley is coming down with an even richer friend, one Mr. Winchester, the Earl of Hexhamshire's nephew, though with no chance of inheriting, as he is related through his late mother Mary, and the title cannot pass through female descent. He owns Pemberley, a large house in the Peak District in Derbyshire, and has over ten thousand a year. Margaret Bingley has been trying to get her claws into him for years, but without success. He is apparently an unpleasant person who does not socialize at all well. There is a tenuous connection between him and our own family, in that his mother's sister is Lady Naomi de Bourgh, the patroness of our cousin, Mr. Crowley Collins.”

Gabriel stared at him for a moment.

“What?” asked Castiel.
“But of course you never listen to gossip, Cassie!”

Castiel blushed.

“I just like to keep informed, future Monseigneur Bingley!”

Gabriel scowled at him.

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Mrs. Bennet flounced into the living room at Longbourn, pulling off her wet hat.

“The weather is so unseasonal for this time of year!” she grumbled. “And those two boys are so tiring.”

She had just taken all five sons into Meryton to buy some new clothes. Balthazar and Raphael had bolted upstairs immediately to try some of them on, whilst Michael had gone to the library for some peace and quiet. Gabriel and Castiel both went and stood by the fire.

“I had a visitor whilst you were out”, Mr. Bennet remarked casually.

Castiel looked sharply at his father. That tone was far too laid back.

“Not Lord Zachariah, I hope”, Mrs. Bennet said acidly. “Those cigars of his leave such an unpleasant odour, and it takes days to clear.”

“No, Mr. Samuel Bingley called.”

Mrs. Bennet froze for a moment, then uttered a cry.

“And we missed him! Heavens above!”

“This time, yes”, Mr. Bennet smiled.

His wife looked sharply at him.

“This time?”

“He is attending the forthcoming county ball at Lucas Lodge”, Mr. Bennet said. “I am sure we shall see him there.”

“‘But this is too wonderful!’” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “We must go shopping for some better clothes for Gabriel at once!”

“I believe dinner is nearly ready”, Mr. Bennet said pointedly.

“But Mr. Bennet...”

“It is only a ball, dearest”, Mr. Bennet said firmly. “Gabriel had plenty of clothes. I am sure he has something suitable, and judging from the number of bags you brought back from this trip, I cannot afford another one right now.”

Mrs. Bennet pouted.

“I am sure Inias Lucas will have a new suit”, she muttered, as she left the room to check on dinner.
Mr. Bennet waited until she had gone before turning to his sons.

“Do you want a new suit, Gabriel?” he asked softly.

“No thank you, sir”, Gabriel said.

“Then I suggest you and Castiel retire to your room, and look at what you have, before your mother decides for you!”

His sons both smiled, and left.
I Won't Dance!

Chapter Summary

Dean expects to be bored at the county ball, and he is.
He expects to find the local people tedious, and he does.
He expects the food and wine to be poor, and they are.
He expects anyone he asks for a dance to accept him. Er.....

October 1800

Dean’s fears as to their reception into local society were, as things turned out, quickly justified.
The moment the five of them entered the ball room, there was a sudden hush, before the general chatter started up again.

Fresh meat, he thought bitterly.

Sam, of course, put himself out to please, and soon had his dance card mostly filled for the evening. Dean had four duty dances, one each with Sam's sisters, plus obligatory ones with the hostess Lady Amelia (frightful and smelt of dogs) and her son Inias (tall, dowdy yet well-spoken), but that was all. He would not condescend to lower himself to step out with any more of this country riff-raff, as he told Ruby during a brief break for fresh air on the balcony. Of course Sam, the big girl, soon noticed this, and tried to persuade him otherwise.

“My next dance is with the eldest of the Bennets”, he said cheerfully. “And you were wrong about that picture doing him too much justice, Dean; I think he looks quite handsome.”

“What’s the future Laird of Netherfield’s name?” Dean asked, sipping some decidedly indifferent wine.

Sam swatted at him.

“Gabriel. That’s him over there.”

Dean followed Sam’s eye-line to where a young blond omega was dancing with a heavy-set young beta male. Gabriel Bennet was in his early to mid-twenties, quite short even for an omega, and had his blond hair done up in a ponytail. He was not bad looking, Dean supposed, and clearly a good dancer, as he was skilfully avoiding his partner’s less than graceful steps. Though something about him suggested that, like Dean, he really did not want to be here.

“He’ll make you look even taller!” he scoffed to his friend. At over six foot four, his former charge was well above average height.

“I do not care!” Sam said as the music indicated the current round was coming to a close. “I am going to talk to him now. At least one of us should be dancing!”

Dean sighed as his friend moved elegantly across the floor to introduce himself to Gabriel Bennet. The shorter man looked at him almost reverently, and Dean could just imagine he was thinking, ‘here comes five thousand!’ Not if he had anything to do with it! Sam might be well of age, but Dean was still his protector, whether he liked it or not.
Margaret Bingley sidled over to him again, and Dean braced himself. The woman was like a rash, and about as welcome. Fortunately it seemed that, for once, she was more interested in dissecting her new neighbours than pursuing him.

“The Bennets are one of the principal families in the area”, she sniffed. “Five sons, and all omegas! That’s so unlucky!”

“Why?” Dean asked, privately thinking that she was being rather old-fashioned, but not wanting to start an argument, as it would only prolong the conversation.

“Apparently the estate is entailed in default of an alpha heir”, she told him, sipping her wine and making a disgusted face before putting it down. “And since Rebecca Bennet can’t have any more children, that means when her husband dies, she and her children are out. It all goes to Charles Bennet’s nephew, a priest or something. No wonder she is so eager to get them all married off!”

Dean looked pensively across to where Gabriel and Sam were dancing. The eldest Bennet looked very happy, and dancing with someone worth over five thousand a year, well he might. Not going to happen, Dean thought.

“Are the rest of the family here?” he asked.

“All except Mr. Bennet senior; he ’doesn't do evenings out’, I was told. A good thing I got Lady Lucas to point them all out to me; I would not have thought they were related, they are so different to look at. Mrs. Bennet is that silly-looking woman on the chaise, with the pout. The woman she is talking to is Mrs. Turner, her sister, and the man standing behind them is Mr. Turner.”

“He is black”, Dean said, surprised.

“The son of a freed slave, I was told. They let anyone into society nowadays!”

Even the likes of you, Dean thought cattily.

“The two teenagers over there are Raphael, the dark-haired one, and Balthazar”, Margaret Bingley went on. “They’re the youngest, sixteen and fifteen, I think. Should not have even been presented yet. And flirting like that; they should know better!”

Dean bit back the obvious remark about motes and beams. It took an effort, though.

“The one reading a book in the corner is the middle child, Michael. Accomplished, but boring. And where’s the second eldest? Oh yes, that’s him, sitting on the outs bench. Castiel, I think his name is. Strange name, if you ask me. Supposed to be as attractive as his older brother, but I don’t see it myself.”

Dean looked across, and saw a tallish omega, with untidy hair and a thoughtful look on his face as he watched Sam and his brother dance. Probably jealous because he's not the one going for the big prize, Dean thought bitterly.

“Attractive?” Dean huffed. “If that is the best Hertfordshire can offer, then I pity its alphas!”

It was of course Dean's luck, or lack thereof, that every single person in the room managed to strike a pause in their conversation just as he spoke those words rather more loudly than he had intended. Several frowns were sent in his direction, and even though there was no reaction, he knew that the omega had heard him. Still, he was only a socially inferior omega, so what did that matter?
Three hours later, and Dean was both bored and uneasy. Bored by indifferent music, indifferent company, and beyond indifferent food and wine. And uneasy because his friend was now on his fourth dance with Gabriel Bennet, and the two seemed to be getting on far too well. Dean really wanted the whole evening to be over with as soon as possible, and had thus far shunned all attempts by the local people to talk to him. When the ball's host, Lord Zachariah Lucas, tried to engage him in conversation, he had to fight down the urge to snap at him. He was sure the man was going to suggest a second dance with his son Inias, but instead he looked behind the two of them to the outs bench.

“Surely you must dance again, Mr. Winchester!” he said teasingly. “I see there is someone unattached who would love to step out with you.”

Dean turned, and saw Castiel Bennet looking down at his dance card, frowning as if it held the mysteries of life. He winced.

“Really?” Dean said dryly. “I do not see anyone attractive enough to tempt me.”

And that was the moment when Charles Bennet's second son looked straight at him for the first time, and Dean was hit by the full force of a pair of startlingly blue eyes. They looked him up and down appraisingly, and judging from the look of disdain on the omega’s face, he was not that impressed with what he’d seen. Dean almost took a step back in surprise. This man’s elder brother might be set on ensnaring young Sammy, but this Castiel Bennet was looking at the master of Pemberley as if the man was of no real consequence! Dean actually felt slighted!

This was the only possible explanation as to what he said next.

“I suppose one dance could be acceptable”, he said dryly. He stepped round Lord Lucas. “May I have the pleasure, Mr. Bennet?”

Castiel Bennet stood up, and looked at him again. Dean had the distinct impression he was being judged, and found decidedly wanting. Surely this insignificant little omega wasn't about to....

“I am sorry, Mr. Winchester”, the omega said, and that voice was so low, it was incredible. “I do not wish to dance any more this evening.”

Dean bit back his surprise.

“Not even with the Earl of Hexhamshire’s nephew?” he said.

Castiel looked at him sharply.

“I do not believe I am really ‘attractive’ enough to tempt you, Mr. Winchester!” he said acidly, then rose and walked elegantly over to the window, where Dean lost sight of him.

In all of his twenty-seven years, it was the first time anyone had ever refused to dance with Dean Winchester. And for some reason, it bugged him.

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It was late when their carriage rolled back to the steps of Netherfield, and their party headed for their respective bed-chambers. Dean was unusually silent as his valet helped undress him, and decided to try to read his book whilst the warming-pan was doing its work. But he found himself unable to fully concentrate, his mind always wandering back to the way those blue eyes had stared at him as if he was.... well, nothing.
He had not wanted to go to the damn ball, and had known he would not enjoy himself there. It was bad enough that Sammy seemed far too taken with Gabriel Bennet, an omega not only of considerable social inferiority but also with a family that were without exception utterly appalling. The antics of his two youngest brothers as the evening had progressed had been bordering on lewd, and his mother and aunt were just plain harridans. The middle brother at least kept himself to himself, and Castiel Bennet..... had dared to refuse to dance with him! With Dean Winchester, master of Pemberley and the Earl of Hexhamshire's nephew! Dean would have to have a serious talk with his friend about making better choices in his romantic attachments.

He tried to ignore the small voice at the back of his mind that kept telling him he deserved Castiel Bennet's scorn for his remarks earlier in the evening.

A maid came and removed the warming-pan, then left. Dean sighed before getting into the warm bed. He would see if he could persuade Sammy to meet someone else in the neighbourhood in the next few days, someone eminently more suitable, or at worst less unsuitable. Someone whose brother would Know His Place In Society, and not look at Dean Alexander Winchester in such a judgemental way.
October 1800

It was the day after the Lucas Lodge ball, and Mrs. Bennet was highly (and loudly) satisfied with the events of the previous evening. Castiel fled to the peace of a walk in the fields to escape his mother's constant witterings. He did not share her confidence that her eldest son and Mr. Samuel Bingley were as good as married, not least because he had seen the way Mr. Winchester and Mr. Bingley's sisters had viewed the Bennets with open disdain for much of the evening. Not, he was ashamed to admit it, that such a regard was ill-merited; Raphael and Balthazar had been even more out of control than usual, and his mother and his aunt had pursued a frankly vulgar conversation with all the tact and diplomacy of a tidal wave.

Castiel wondered as he walked why Mr. Bingley, who seemed a nice enough alpha, had a friend like Mr. Winchester, who was very much his complete opposite. He knew from his gossip network that the latter had been the former's guardian for some years, but that such a relationship persisted to this day seemed bizarre. Castiel liked Mr. Bingley, but he feared that he was rather a weak character, and would be easily deflected if either his friend or relations told him that an alliance with the Bennets would be unfitting.

Then, of course, there was Gabriel himself to consider. Castiel knew his brother was not yet over The Incident, and although he had said in their room last night that he did like Mr. Bingley, he was clearly nervous – if not terrified - about the prospect of an actual relationship, let alone anything remotely approaching marriage. Castiel wondered if, bearing in mind how well his brother normally hid his feelings, if Mr. Bingley was even aware just how much the omega liked him. And Gabriel's lack of emotional display would surely but add to the belief amongst Mr. Bingley's associates that he was, as he had heard Miss Pettigrew vulgarly express last night, 'only in it for the five thousand.'

He returned to the house just before luncheon, to find that the objects of his thoughts had paid a morning call, and that Mr. Bingley had been particularly attentive towards his elder brother. Rather curiously, Mr. Winchester had joined his friend and the sisters, which seemed odd bearing in mind the events of the evening before. Gabriel told him the older alpha had been as brooding and unsociable as he had been at the ball, 'although at least you weren't here to be insulted by him this time, Cassie.'

Two days later, Gabriel and Castiel were invited over to Netherfield for the day, to spend time with the sisters (Mr. Bingley would be away on business in London, which made Castiel suspect this was the sisters' way of vetting a potential future brother). The younger Bennet would have preferred not to go, but felt he had to support his brother, so braced himself for the ordeal.

He had not been at Netherfield long before he decided that his initial impressions of the sisters, and in particular Margaret Bingley, had been regrettably correct. She was a frankly unpleasant
individual, and about the only good thing about her (in Castiel's opinion) was watching the look of barely-concealed irritation on Mr. Winchester's face every time she approached the alpha. There was a match made in Hell!

When it came to it, Castiel found himself wondering why Mr. Winchester was there at all. There were any number of things he could be away and doing out on the estate, but instead he sat in a chair in a corner of the room, pretending to read (it would have been more believable if he had remembered to turn a page occasionally). He might have continued to sit and brood, but apparently Margaret Bingley's discourse on the qualities she thought should be possessed of a responsible mate in this day and age provoked him even more than Castiel.

“By reading”, he said sharply, “I presume you mean more than just fashion magazines?”

Miss Bingley blushed fiercely.

“Most books are far too long anyway!” she declared roundly. “I for one have neither the time nor patience to sit for hours staring at page after page of drivel!”

“This is a discourse on Greek literature”, the alpha said reprovingly. “Hardly 'drivel', Meg.”

She turned to Castiel.

“Please tell me you and Gabriel are not into Greek literature!” she said.

Castiel smiled.

“I quite like Greek plays”, Castiel said, noting with some pleasure the shock on the woman's face. “Aeschylus is a particular favourite of mine, though I prefer the original to the modern translation.”

“You can read Greek?” Mr. Winchester said, clearly surprised.

“It is nearly the nineteenth century Mr. Winchester”, Castiel said acidly. “Even unattractive omegas are allowed to learn things in this day and age!”

The alpha blushed fiercely, and excused himself from the room. Castiel felt cross. Mr. Winchester was probably one of those old-fashioned alphas who thought omegas should be barefoot and collared, bred at their master's whim and discarded when no longer wanted. Times were changing, and even though omegas (as with women) effectively became the property of their husband when they married, society was beginning to think of them as rather more than just breeding machines.

Society. Not Mr. Dean Winchester, though.

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Only a few days later, Castiel was annoyed to find he was again looking across a room at Mr. Winchester, this time at a small reception at Morecambe House. Mr. Preston King had not attended the county ball because his niece was a nervous person, and he felt a small get-together might better suit her prior to any larger social gathering. Maria King was a frail-looking young lady, and barely looked her eighteen years. She reminded Castiel of a porcelain doll; very beautiful but very fragile. It was patently obvious by the way Mr. Winchester introduced Mr. Bingley to her that he cherished hopes that this might prove a better match than Gabriel, and equally patently obvious that those hopes were ill-founded when Mr. Bingley promptly decamped to talk with Gabriel after barely five minutes, much to Mr. Winchester's visible annoyance. Castiel felt sorry for Miss King, and suppressed his enjoyment at Mr. Winchester's discomfiture enough to go and talk to her himself.
“Mr. Bennet”, Miss King said shyly after a few minutes, “would you think it impertinent of me to ask you a personal question?”

“Of course not”, Castiel smiled.

“Is Mr. Winchester courting you?”

Castiel nearly dropped his wine-glass. He stared at her in shock.

“Absolutely not!” he said vehemently. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Only he has been eavesdropping on our conversation just like my dear uncle does every time I talk to an alpha or beta”, she explained. “And he keeps looking at you very oddly.”

Castiel turned, and sure enough, Mr. Winchester was indeed staring right at him. He frowned; it really was socially inexcusable to look at an unattached omega like that. Mr. Winchester blushed, and moved round behind some other guests.

“He really is a most unpleasant man”, he told Miss King. “He insulted me twice the first time we met in public, then expected me to dance with him! I suspect he is probably still getting over the shock of someone saying no to him for the first time in his life!”

Miss King laughed. Her uncle looked across in surprise, then smiled at Castiel.

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A week later, Castiel encountered Mr. Winchester yet again, this time at a reception at Verulamium Manor, the home of the Browne brothers. It was a small affair, and with Mr. Bingley still intent on talking to Gabriel at every opportunity, Mr. Winchester looked supremely bored.

Castiel wondered why the alpha’s face darkened just as Mr. Browne came across and sat down next to him.

“Good evening, Mr. Bennet.”

Castiel did not like Mr. Bartholomew Browne very much, although he knew the man cherished hopes of becoming a suitor of his. Their first encounter had been marred by the beta whipping a recalcitrant horse outside Castiel's house, and the omega had publicly reprimanded him for so doing, much to his and everyone else's astonishment. The Browne estate was sizeable, but probably not enough to support the Bennet family if the worst happened – so unless Mr. Bingley's pursuit of Gabriel ended in matrimony, Castiel might well have to marry Mr. Browne and hope one of his three younger brothers could also make a prestigious match.

“Good evening, Mr. Browne”, he said politely. “I do not believe I saw your brother here?”

“Gideon is away in London, doing 'good works'”, the man sighed. “I see Mr. Bingley is talking to your brother again.”

“Yes”, Castiel smiled. “They seem to be becoming good friends.”

“But his other friend does not approve”, Mr. Browne observed, looking across to where Mr. Winchester was now talking to Castiel's uncle, Mr. Turner. “I do not see Mr. Bingley's sisters here?”

“They have gone shopping in London, I am told”, Castiel said.

“For which I would wager Mr. Winchester is grateful!” the man said, spitefully if (Castiel
suspected) accurately. “I hope he has not insulted you again of late?”

“He has not had the opportunity”, Castiel said sharply, “for which I am grateful!”

“I am surprised someone of his age and position has not married yet”, Mr. Browne mused.

“‘With barely a billion people on the planet, I doubt he can find someone good enough!’ Castiel snapped.

Mr. Browne smiled. Castiel looked across, and saw Mr. Winchester looking at him yet again, a frown on his features. Insufferable man!
A Shock On The High Street

Chapter Summary

Dean gets a shock when a familiar and unwelcome face from his past surfaces in Meryton High Street, whilst his feelings for a certain blue-eyed omega become more and more confusing.

October 1800

Dean found himself continuing to observe Castiel Bennet several more times over the subsequent few weeks – solely to gather information about the family as regards his friend and Gabriel, of course - and it soon became clear that the omega much preferred the company of his teenage friend, Inias Lucas, to the Bingley sisters. This frankly surprised the alpha; he would have thought that the omega would seek the sisters' friendship if only to improve his brother's chances of a match with Sam. The fact he did not was oddly warming, for some reason. He was also curious as to why the younger Bennet did not approach him for the same reason.

Castiel Bennet had already caught him looking at him once, at Morecambe House, which had been embarrassing enough. Unfortunately it was not long before his eavesdropping was noticed a second time.

“Mr. Winchester”, Inias Lucas said, suddenly turning to him as he loitered behind their couch at Lucas Lodge one day, “do you think my friend is right when he says love is more important than marriage?”

Dean blushed at the question.

“I have not yet found someone to love”, he said flatly, trying to look anywhere but at Castiel Bennet, “so I am probably not best fitted to answer that question.”

“I was merely saying that a successful marriage cannot be without love”, Mr. Bennet said patiently. “There are many people who enter marriage for all sorts of reasons – usually of a financial persuasion - and then make the best of things, but true happiness needs love to allow it to flourish.”

His voice was far too deep, Dean thought. He could just imagine that gravelly voice growling out his name from beneath him...

“And how would you know someone capable of true love?” Dean said a little too quickly, in an effort to get his mind out of the gutter.

The omega looked sharply at him.

“Love is much more than just physical attraction”, the omega said thoughtfully. “It is sad that so few of my gender can marry who they want, and have to settle for someone on the grounds of their financial holdings, rather than whether there is anything of romantic substance between them and their future mate.”

Dean looked across to where Sam and Gabriel were talking. Again.
“So you would never marry for money, Mr. Bennet?” he said, a little more acidly that he had intended.

Castiel Bennet’s face darkened.

“I would not want to marry solely for money, Mr. Winchester”, he almost snapped. “But if there is genuine love, money should not be allowed to stand in the way, whether there is too much or not enough of it!”

Dean could not help himself from stepping back at the omega’s vehemence.

“And if your mother presented you with someone you did not love, you would still marry them?” he pressed, adding silently ‘even if that person had, say, ten thousand a year?’.

“I am a loyal son”, Castiel Bennet said, still frowning at him. “I would do my duty, both in and out of the bed-chamber. I would only hope to have as my mate someone who might find even me ‘attractive’, and who is prepared to accept me for rather more than my humble looks which, so I am told, are by no means enough to ‘tempt’ some people!”

Dean blushed fiercely. An all too obvious reference to the way he had slighted the omega at their first meeting. He quickly excused himself, and did not flee from the room. He just left it in a hurry.

He did not eavesdrop on any more of Castiel Bennet’s conversations.

 November 1800

The dinner at Lucas Lodge had taken place on All Hallow’s Eve, and Dean awoke the following morning from an even more intense dream than usual. Listening to Castiel Bennet defend himself in that gravelled growl of his – even when he was using it to put the Earl of Hexhamshire’s nephew in his place – was far more arousing than it had any right to be. The man was a social inferior who had ideas Far Above His Station, and once Dean had left, he need never see him again. Then he remembered Sam and Gabriel, and groaned. He would have to keep a tight eye on those two, or he and Castiel Bennet might end up as brothers. A disturbing thought indeed.

It was of course All Saints’ Day, and the local preacher decided his theme for the sermon should be ‘good things do happen’. Dean was surprised to see the church so well attended for a midweek service, even for a special day. He had always taken a rather jaundiced view of the Heavenly Father, and events less than half an hour after he left the church that day would only serve to reinforce that opinion.

Sam had suggested a walk to Meryton before returning home, to which Dean had agreed, though he knew this was only because his friend had overheard Gabriel Bennet tell his brother that he planned to meet a friend in town. Dean therefore accompanied his friend with the sole purpose of keeping a close watch on what was developing between him and the omega. And definitely not because he knew Castiel Bennet was going to be there as well.

Though it may just possibly have been a very small factor in his thinking. Just possibly.

They walked slowly down the High Street, Sam pretending to be fascinated by the shop windows whilst very obviously looking out for a certain set of golden eyes. Sure enough, they spotted the Bennet brothers standing outside the haberdashers, talking to two soldiers who had their backs to the approaching alphas. Dean recalled that a militia unit had recently been stationed just outside the town, presumably on leave from the endless war with Revolutionary France. There was
something vaguely familiar about one of the soldiers, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it....

Then the man turned round, and Dean gasped in shock. Metatron Wickham! The man who had so nearly seduced his own sister, now a soldier in King George III's army. Right here in Meryton, talking to Mr. Castiel Bennet! And judging from the equally shocked look on Wickham's face, he recognized Dean too, though he quickly stilled his features, and turned back to resume his conversation. Unfortunately Mr. Bennet had clearly spotted both reactions, judging from the puzzled look on his face.

So good things did happen, eh? When?

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Sam, being the good egg he was under that badly-styled hair, waited until they had left the town and were walking back towards Netherfield before he said anything.

“That soldier. You know him?”

Dean sighed.

“Remember that trouble I had with Anna a few years back, when the son of my father's late steward tried to seduce her to get at her inheritance?”

Sam paled.

“Him? Oh Dean! I am so sorry.” He thought for a moment, then went on. “I did issue a general invitation to the officers for the ball, but if you are unhappy....”

“Mr. Wickham will not attend. And if he does, I shall control myself.”

Sam looked at him uncertainly, but did not press the matter any further, for which Dean was grateful.

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Two days later, Dean decided to walk down to Meryton, so offered to accompany Sam as far as Longbourn and another call on the Bennets. He did not go into the house himself, but parted from his friend at the gate. He was about to continue when Mr. Castiel Bennet came down the road, clearly returning from a walk of his own. The autumn wind had whipped some colour into his cheeks, and made his unruly hair look even worse than normal. Dean was struck by a sudden urge to run his fingers through it, to see if it was as soft as it looked....

“Mr. Winchester.”

That gravelled voice again. Why did this annoying omega always have this effect on him?

“Mr. Bennet”, he said, bowing in return.

The omega looked at him coolly, and went up the path and into the house. Dean stood there for some little while before he realized anyone in the house could see him standing there like a fool, and hastened on his way.

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“Mr. Wickham has been telling everyone about how you 'cheated' him out of his rightful inheritance”, Sam said a few days later, when they were sitting quietly in the writing room.
“Perhaps it might be better if you were to put your side of the story into general circulation, Dean?”

“To whom?” Dean asked with a harsh laugh. “The whole area thinks me beyond salvation, just because I am not as sociable as you. No, Sammy. If these people are stupid enough to fall for a silver-tongued trickster like Metatron Wickham, they deserve to remain in ignorance!”

Sam looked dubious, but dropped the subject, and soon after started writing a letter. Dean found himself wondering if Mr. Castiel Bennet had been taken in by the rogue like everyone else, but consoled himself with the thought that that particular omega’s opinion of him could not be much lower than it already was. Not that it mattered to him, anyway. Let him and all these country bumpkins believe what they liked. He, Mr. Dean Winchester of Pemberley, frankly did not give a damn!

He could not know then just how badly that particular decision was going to come back and bite him in the not too distant future.
The Devil You Know?

Chapter Summary

Castiel is put in the unenviable position of distrusting either the overly smooth Mr. Wickham or the obnoxious Mr. Winchester.

November 1800

If there was one thing to be said for Castiel Bennet, it was that he could read people. And the meeting in Meryton with first Metatron Wickham and then Mr. Winchester had piqued his interest. There was something about the beta that was not quite right, and events in the following few days only hardened that suspicion. Up till that weekend Mr. Wickham had called daily at Longbourn, and seemed to take a particular interest in Castiel, then suddenly the visits had stopped. He did send a letter citing military reasons, but since Captain Denny continued to visit occasionally, Castiel did not believe this.

He cornered his cousin that weekend and asked if regimental matters were keeping him busy. The alpha clearly guessed where he was driving at, and blushed horribly.

“You are wondering about Mr. Wickham”, he said quietly. They had retired to the library after dinner, but there was always the chance one or other of Castiel's siblings could walk in on them.

“Yes”, Castiel said bluntly. “He seemed all over us last week – mother even suggested he might be about to propose to me, which was frankly terrifying - and now nothing. Did you tell him of our circumstances, Denny?”

Incredibly, the blush deepened.

“I really should not be saying this”, he said slowly, looking nervously around as he spoke, “but Mr. Wickham is something of a rake. He does not have a good reputation at all, cousin; he leaves debts everywhere he goes, and is always trying to seduce ladies and omegas of fortune. I should not have done so, but when I became aware he was coming here so often, I may have mentioned your family's financial circumstances in an attempt to warn him off.”

“You certainly succeeded!” Castiel smiled. “And if he is all you say, then perhaps we should be grateful.”

“Do you happen to know a Miss King?” Denny asked.

“Yes, the American. She seems a nice young lady, if a little shy.”

“Perhaps you might drop a warning to either her or her uncle then”, his cousin said. “Only after I warned him off you, I foolishly mentioned she was the only real person of any great fortune in the area. His eyes lit up, I am sorry to say.”

“I will call at Morecambe House at the first opportunity”, Castiel said firmly. “And Mr. Winchester? He and Mr. Wickham seemed to react very oddly to each other.”

“Wickham said something about the man cheating him out of an inheritance”, Denny said. “He's
been telling everyone who would listen, in the barracks and the town. Not that the master of Pemberley did himself any favours at that awful dance, especially with his remarks towards your good self. I fear he has set himself up so that people will all too easily believe whatever Wickham says about him.”

“He does not seem keen on winning friends in Hertfordshire”, Castiel smiled. “Quite unlike his friend, Mr. Bingley. He was much the better person at the dance.”

“Mr. Bingley seemed quite taken with Gabriel”, Denny said carefully. “How is your brother these days, if you don't mind me asking?”

“Considering all you did for us after that awful day, I don't mind at all”, Castiel smiled. “He is much better, although there is still the occasional nightmare. I would be amazed if someone does not tell Mr. Bingley about it.”

“They did. Or at least try to.”

Castiel's smile faltered.

“What?” he ground out.

“I caught Lord Zachariah trying to tell him at the ball”, Denny explained. “Mr. Bingley cut him off quite sharply for such an affable young man. He said he was looking to the future, and everyone had things in their past they would probably not rather be discussed in public!”

“Ouch!” Castiel grinned. “An unintentional but deadly blow. Inias' father has several skeletons in the closet, and that is just the ones I know about.”

His cousin looked at him coolly.

“Castiel Bennet, I am sure you know them all, each and every one. Indeed, I am surprised with your intelligence network the government has not recruited you to spy on the French for us!”

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Castiel made a point of calling in at Morecambe House the very next day, and was more than a little alarmed to find Mr. Wickham had been there the day prior. He managed a short interview with Mr. Preston King, a large alpha of a man who remembered him from the reception and the way he had made his niece laugh. He was deeply thankful when he understood the reason for Castiel's visit, and assured him that the soldier would not be left unsupervised with his niece in future.

Captain Denny had assured him that the regiment would be moving on during the winter, but even so, Castiel was a little perturbed that both Raphael and Balthazar seemed to be spending so much time visiting the camp. They always returned with tales of how wonderful Mr. Wickham was and how hard he was working – that was something Castiel could have well done without. But knowing the date of the regiment's departure made him bite his tongue when his mother kept repeating how handsome and brave Mr. Wickham was, usually accompanied with what were presumably meant to be meaningful looks in his direction. Either that, or she was being troubled by the wind again.

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He might have been holding his tongue at home, but less than a week after his meeting with his cousin, a visit to the village led to Castiel speaking his mind very publicly indeed. And with deeply embarrassing consequences.
The omega had gone into the grocery store to pick up a few extra items his mother had forgotten to order, and found his aunt and uncle there. Mrs. Turner was busy chatting with the owner, Miss Ryder, so Castiel talked amiably with his uncle whilst waiting. At least until he heard his aunt remark:

“So it seems that Mr. Winchester's father promised to reserve a living worth a full five thousand for dear Mr. Wickham, because the latter's father had been such a loyal and faithful steward. And then once both men are dead, our Mr. Winchester cheats Mr. Wickham out of the living and keeps it for himself. Disgraceful, I call it!”

Castiel felt his temper rising.

“Who told you that, aunt?” he said pointedly.

“Your dear mama, when Mr. Wickham visited her house last week”, she said, clearly surprised that her nephew, let alone an omega, should speak to her in such a tone.

“An increasingly rare visit on his part, then”, Castiel said acidly. “So you only have Mr. Wickham's version of events?”

The three other adults stared at him.

“Are you implying that Mr. Wickham is lying?” his uncle asked.

Castiel huffed a laugh.

“I have heard a lot about Mr. Wickham who, I might add has hardly been near our house since he found out there were no rich heiresses therein”, he said, a little angrily. “I doubt much he has said has been an open lie, but I am certain we have not heard both sides of this particular story.”

Someone entered the shop behind them, but everyone continued to stare at Castiel.

“You would believe that obnoxious Mr. Winchester over our own dear Mr. Wickham!” his aunt said incredulously. “After the way he treated you at the dance?”

Castiel silently cursed the village gossip network that made his slighting such public news.

“All I am saying is that we should not believe everything Mr. Wickham says”, he said firmly. He fixed his aunt with a hard look. “Everyone deserves the chance to be accepted into society, aunt.”

It was a direct reference to his uncle, and his initial cool reception by the people of the village before their eventually coming to accept him. His aunt reddened, and was clearly about to say something when then newcomer coughed politely. Castiel turned round to see who it was.

Mr. Winchester himself. And he had very obviously overheard everything Castiel had just said about him.

Damnation!

Gabriel laughed when he told him what had happened. Though he was still mortified by the events in the shop, Castiel felt it was worth the humiliation to hear that far too rare laughter.

“So he publicly insults you, then you come along and defend him!” Gabriel chuckled. “You had better not try that over dinner, or poor mama will have one of her turns!”
“I do not like Mr. Wickham”, Castiel said flatly. “Admittedly he and Mr. Winchester are the devil and the deep blue sea, but if pushed, I should very reluctantly have to side with the latter. Though it pains me to say it.”

“Cheer up”, Gabriel said, still smiling. “If it hurts you, it probably shocked that insufferable alpha to the core. He must have been so sure he'd driven away everybody, then you ride to his rescue like a knight saving a damsel in distress!”

“I do not think Mr. Winchester could in any way be called a damsel!” Castiel huffed.

“Indeed!” Gabriel said. “Ah, I hear the dinner bell. And I know mama did not get to the kitchen today, so we can all eat in safety!”

Castiel laughed, and followed his brother downstairs.
Gabriel Bennet catches pneumonia after being caught out in a downpour, and Dean watches as his friend and the omega grow ever closer. His own feelings for the omega's brother aren't helping much, either.

November 1800

Dean had been shocked by his discovery in Meryton. That Castiel Bennet of all people would defend him – especially after the way he had treated him – was frankly unbelievable. He knew from experience how credible Wickham could be, and yet there was at least one person who could apparently see right through him. And the way the omega had blushed when he had realized who had overheard his spirited defence, well, it was....


He focussed his attentions on his friend, if only to distract himself from his own problems. Sam was in love with the eldest Bennet omega, that much was plain. But the latter’s own feelings were much harder to gauge; indeed, sometimes Dean suspected he didn’t really care for his friend at all. Possibly he was being forced into the relationship by his mother, as he seemed strangely nervous at times. Still, to Dean it all boiled down to the fact that the Bennets wanted to get at Sam’s money. And he was damned if he was going to stand back and allow that to happen.

Except, this particular day Margaret and Ruby had invited Gabriel Bennet over, and he had ridden through a sudden downpour, arriving looking like a drowned rat and coughing badly. Dean would have laughed, but his friend gave him such a stern look that he refrained. Sam had hustled Gabriel upstairs to one of the empty bedrooms, and had insisted on calling a doctor. When he came down some time later, he looked unusually grave.

“Possibly pneumonia, perhaps something worse”, he said, looking sadder than Dean had ever seen him. “He keeps asking for Cas.”

“Who?” Dean asked, puzzled.

“His brother. Castiel Bennet.”

“Oh. Him.”

“I’ll go and get him”, Sam said. “I know you and he do not exactly get on, Dean.”

Dean was relieved, as the thought of a long drive with only those blue eyes for company worried him more than he would have cared to admit. But he was anxious for his friend. Sammy was getting in too deep.

Sam had insisted that Castiel Bennet stay at Netherfield until his brother got better, which Dean thought would mean having the blue-eyed omega around all the time. The prospect unnerved him
for some reason. As it turned out however, Gabriel's brother spent the next few days almost constantly in his room, and Dean didn't see him downstairs even once. For some reason this also unnerved him.

“I’m worried about Gabe”, Sam said the following morning.

They were in the library. The doctor had just finished examining Gabriel upstairs, and his brother had presumably gone out for some fresh air.

Gabe, Dean thought. Not Gabriel. Hmm….

“Why?” he asked, sipping his water.

“I think he’s hiding something from me”, Sam said. “He was really open that first time we met, and everything seemed to be going so well. But ever since, he’s been…. I don’t know, almost retreating back into his shell.”

Dean thought about suggesting that possibly the eldest Bennet didn’t feel for Sam what his young friend obviously felt for him, but guessed it might not go down too well, particularly with the omega so ill.

“Maybe he’s not that easy to get to know”, he suggested instead. “The Bennets might be more complicated than we think.”

“Lord Zachariah tried to tell me something about his past that one time”, Sam said. “He got as far as ‘something you should know about that family’ before I shot him down.”

“Why didn’t you just let him tell you?”

“Because he was only doing it to forward the interests of his own son”, Sam said sharply, “and I disapprove of both malicious rumour-mongering and petty spite!”

There was a pointed cough from one of the high-backed chairs by the fire. Castiel Bennet’s unmistakable ruffled head was leaning round one of the high-backed chairs by the fireplace. Both alphas went red.

“I am sorry to intrude, Mr. Bingley....” he began.

“It’s Sam”, Sam smiled, “and it is quite all right. I said you could use the library any time you liked. Did the doctor report to you before leaving, like I asked?”

“Yes thank you”, Mr. Bennet said. “I stayed with Gabriel throughout the examination; he.... doesn’t like being alone with doctors. He said he wanted a rest, so I decided to come and choose a book.”

“Of course”, Sam said. “You can read it here or take it back to your room; whatever is best for you.”

“Thank you.... Sam.”

Dean noticed that the omega did not really smile at his friend, but his eyes crinkled at the edges, as if his face had some idea of what was supposed to happen but could not quite figure it out. He wondered what he would have to do to earn a look like that.

Probably stop insulting him at public events, a small voice at the back of his mind unhelpfully supplied.
One of the servants came with a message for Sam, and he left the room. Dean saw that Margaret Bingley had finished her magazine, and was heading towards him. He decided quickly that Castiel Bennet might be the better, or perhaps lease worse, option, and moved towards his chair.

“Pilgrim’s Progress”, he observed, tilting his head to catch the title of the omega’s book.

“Indeed”, Mr. Bennet said, in his gravelled tone. “The story of a man who finds in his faith the one thing he truly values above all else.”

“Are you religious, Mr. Bennet?” Dean asked, leaning against a sideboard. “Your father named you all after angels, I see.”

“I presume Gabriel’s name gave you that clue”, Mr. Bennet said dryly.

“What about your name?”

“All seven of us had angel names, Mr. Winchester. I am named for the angel of Thursday, as I was born on that day.”

“Seven?”

“Our mother had two children after me and before Michael, but sadly neither Diniel nor Rachel survived.”

“That is sad. Gabriel, Michael, Raphael.... the only archangel missing is Lucifer.”

He had meant it as a quip, but the look of sheer fury on the omega's face was such that Dean almost stepped back in surprise. It was quickly masked, however, and Mr. Bennet stood up sharply.

“I think I shall go and see if my brother has awoken”, he said, still looking furious at Dean's remark. “Good afternoon, Mr. Winchester.”

He left hurriedly. Dean stared after him, perplexed. What was all that about?

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For the remaining six days of Gabriel Bennet’s illness, which turned out to be a rare form of pneumonia, his younger brother again spent virtually all his time in their rooms. Sam had given him the room next door, and often personally took up food and books for both of them. Dean couldn’t shake the feeling that the omega was deliberately ignoring him.

Though he was intent on his friend’s relationship, it would have taken more denial than even he possessed to ignore the feelings he was developing towards Castiel Bennet. The omega was plain, and, to Dean, verging on outright uncivil, but there was something about him that piqued the older man’s interest. It wasn’t just the impossibly blue eyes or the permanently untidy hair, there was something about him that – heavens above, Dean was going to be forced to use that awful word, even if it was inside the safety of his own head – cute. Ugh!

When Mr. Castiel Bennet and his brother finally left Netherfield, Dean only had one eye on Sammy. They would be away for just three days until the forthcoming ball, but the way his friend talked to Gabriel, Dean would have thought they were parting for three years. He had the other eye very firmly on Castiel Bennet, who looked almost apprehensive as he watched the two say their farewells. That was odd; surely the younger omega would he happy for his brother? He could not still be jealous, could he?
Sam sighed after the carriage had finally passed from view, and went slowly back inside. Dean watched him thoughtfully, increasingly concerned that his friend was falling in love with an omega from a totally unsuitable family. Thank the Lord that would never befall the likes of him!

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His dreams that night were nobody's business but his own, thank you very much.
Love And Loss

Chapter Summary

Castiel plays matchmaker for his friend Inias, but his fears that Mr Winchester would intervene in his brother's relationship with Mr Bingley are proven all too justified by the latter's sudden departure from Netherfield.

November 1800

When the brothers finally reached home, Castiel could tell at once that something was definitely up. The house had been thoroughly cleaned from top to bottom, obviously not just for the return of himself and Gabriel. His mother fussed her eldest son off to his bedroom, then pulled Castiel away to the front room.

“My son, we are to have an important visitor tomorrow!”

Another rich man coming to the neighbourhood, so we can all be paraded in front of him like cattle, Castiel thought gloomily.

“Your cousin, Mr. Crowley Collins, will be staying with us for nearly a whole week!”

He winced. It was an open ambition of his mother that one or other of her children should marry her nephew, so she and her other sons could stay at Longbourn if, as seemed likely, her husband – ten years her senior - died before her. And because of Gabriel's relationship with Mr. Bingley and the age gap between Castiel and his three younger siblings, that son most likely had to be him. He had met Mr. Collins only once before; the man was a priest in Kent, a quiet, almost nervous beta, rather too eager to please. He only hoped the man did not entertain the same thoughts as his mother, otherwise letting him down would be difficult.

“I shall be delighted to meet my cousin again”, he said politely. “But since I have spent the last week at Netherfield, I shall not be able to discuss local news with him very much. Perhaps, mother, you might tell me what has happened in the village of late.”

He knew her well; he had just given her an open invitation to gossip. It was worth an hour pretending to listen just so he could avoid any further discussions about marriage.

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As things turned out Mr. Collins was delayed in Kent for some reason, and did not arrive until Monday, the day of the ball, much to Mrs. Bennet's annoyance. The day before, Castiel managed to flee his mother's preparations for the relative sanctuary of Lucas Lodge and his friend, Inias.

“Mother is determined to get me married to Mr. Collins”, he groused. “If he proposes, refusing him will be very difficult.”

“Why would you refuse him?” Inias asked. “He is an interesting man, not unattractive and very well-read.”

Castiel stared at him curiously.
“What is it?” Inias asked.

“He only came here once since you were presented, and that was when you had chickenpox”, Castiel said slowly. “How is it that you have met him?”

Inias blushed horribly.

“You and your library memory!” he sighed. “Promise you will not tell your mother?”

“Go on.”

“He wanted to see Longbourn without having to see your family”, Inias said quickly. “Father arranged it for him. I thought him very nice.”

Castiel stared at him in amazement.

“You and Mr. Crowley Collins?” he said slowly.

“He would never look at someone as plain as me!” Inias said at once. “I know people think he talks too much and tries too hard, but it's just nerves. Underneath that gruff exterior he really is a lovely person.”

Castiel decided to change to subject to spare his friend's blushes, but he filed the information he had learnt away for future use. Perhaps he might, as the old saying went, kill two birds with one stone….

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At the ball, Castiel was obliged to accept two duty dances with his cousin, and after the first, they went outside on the balcony for some much-needed air. Castiel did not miss his mother's knowing look as they did so.

“Mr. Bennet”, the beta began nervously, “may... may I speak frankly?”

"Of course, Mr. Collins.”

The priest swallowed nervously.

“I really do not know how to put this.”

Castiel smiled.

“You would like to ask Mr. Inias Lucas for a dance?”

A small – well, perhaps not so small part of Castiel always enjoyed the shocked looks he got when people realized he could read them. He had seen Mr. Collins eyeing his friend across the room, and the man had missed five steps as a result, much the irritation of his fellow dancers. And he knew how his friend felt about the beta.

“Your mother thinks I should declare myself to you”, he said, blushing horribly.

“You do not love me, Mr. Collins”, Castiel said gently. “And I think you do feel something for my friend. I believe his dance-card still has several spaces on it. If you asked, I am sure he would say yes.”

At that moment, he spotted Mr. Winchester coming out onto the balcony behind them. Castiel could not help himself; he raised his cousin's hand to his lips and kissed it lightly.
“To the next dance!” he said with a knowing smile, and left to see his friend, though not without noticing the look of absolute fury on Mr. Winchester’s face. He did not know why the alpha was so angry, but the knowledge gave him a warm feeling.

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Unsurprisingly, Inias was delighted to accept Mr. Collins as a partner, and the two danced well together. Though Castiel's happiness was short-lived, as the insufferable Mr. Winchester then approached him.

“Mr. Bennet, you are very elusive”, he said.

“Not really”, Castiel said dryly. “I am not one for social occasions such as these, Mr. Winchester.”

“I saw you talking with Mr. Collins earlier. And you danced with him.”

“My cousin has come all the way from Kent to see us. I believe dancing with him was the least I could do.”

Mr. Winchester clearly wanted to make some comment about the kiss, but could not seem to find away to work it into their conversation.

“Would you accept me as your partner for the next dance?” he asked instead.

“I do not enjoy dancing, Mr. Winchester”, Castiel smiled. “It is, as I believe someone once said, ‘merely a lot of country riff-raff falling over each other’."

He felt a twinge of enjoyment as that shot went home.

“But you do dance”, Mr. Winchester objected.

“Mr. Bennet?”

Castiel turned. Standing behind him was Mr. Bartholomew Browne, in an unfortunate grey suit and yellow shirt. Still, any port in a storm.

“I am afraid I have already pledged my next dance to Mr. Browne”, he lied, allowing the beta (who, mercifully, did not give him away) to take his hand and lead him away.

Mr. Winchester was becoming really tiresome.

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December 1800

Thursdays were usually Castiel’s favourite day of the week, what with his being named for the angel of that day. But this particular one at the start of December would be remembered for all the wrong reasons, as his aunt bustled into Longbourn clearly brimming with news.

“Such happenings, sister!” she panted, trying to remove her bonnet which had become tangled in the wind. “They say nothing happens in the country, but two great events in one day...”

“Events, dear sister?” Mrs. Bennet said, ringing the bell for tea. “My leg has been bad this morning, so I have not been to the village. Pray tell.”

Castiel looked up from the book he was reading. He suddenly had a very bad feeling.
“Well!” Mrs. Turner said. “First, Mr. Bingley and his party have left.”

“For a day in London, no doubt.”

“No, sister. Left, left. The house is being closed up, and there is no sign of it being reopened again any time in the near future.”

Castiel bit back a gasp. That could mean only one thing. Mr. Winchester had succeeded in persuading his friend away from Gabriel, removing him from Hertfordshire and an undesired alliance. His mother looked crushed by the news, but her sister prattled on.”

“And the other news is even greater! I know, sister, it will come as a shock to you, as it did to me, but your nephew Mr. Crowley Collins is engaged! To Mr. Inias Lucas!”

This, at least, did not come as a surprise to Castiel. He and Mr. Collins had walked over to Lucas Lodge on Tuesday, Castiel reading in the library whilst his cousin and his friend talked. He was glad for Inias, who was really a lovely person, but he knew the news would be crushing for his mother. His aunt was just here to gloat really, which they could well have done without.

And Gabriel – well, poor Gabriel would be devastated. To have loved and lost twice would be too much to bear. He would never find anyone now; local gossip would ensure that. And it was all the fault of that dastardly Mr. Winchester. If Castiel ever met him again, he would definitely have one or two things to say to him, alpha or not!

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The nightmares returned.

On the surface, Gabriel seemed to take the news of Mr. Bingley's departure with stoic reality. It was only in the semi-privacy of his room with his brother, however, that the façade cracked, and he wept openly at having been unlucky in love a second time. Castiel comforted him as best he could, but in the two weeks after the Bingleys had left, Gabriel woke screaming every night, as memories of terrible things from the past returned again to haunt him. His brother was always there for him, holding him gently and comforting him as best he could, and silently hating both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Winchester (though mainly the latter) for putting his brother through all this again.

The only good thing to happen in December was the arrival of his aunt and uncle from London, Mr. and Mrs. Singer. Castiel took the first opportunity to plead with them to take himself and Gabriel with them back to the city for a while – he had no hopes of meeting the Bingleys there; he just wanted to get his brother away from the scene of the disaster. Checking with them, he found their house was in another part of the city to Winchester House, although not that far from it. As ever, Bobby and Ellen did not let him down, and they departed after the Christmas break, arriving in the capital on New Year's Eve.
London In Winter

Chapter Summary

Dean looks forward to a quiet time in London, in which he and his friend can collect themselves after their Hertfordshire 'problems'. Things do not go quite according to plan....

December 1800

London was what it always was and probably always would be, a busy mess of a city that he tolerated rather than liked. Margaret and Ruby were off to shows or events almost every day, but Dean, apart from the management of his financial interests, found himself unusually bored. What really worried him was Sam, who seemed to be getting more and more miserable with each passing day. He never wanted to go out anywhere, and just sat reading in the library most of the time, or looking out of the window with a wistful look on his face. No matter how many times Dean told himself it was all for his own good, it hurt him to see his friend like this.

Fortuitously, a letter arrived from the Bingleys' uncle barely a week after their arrival in the capital. Ezekiel Holder had married James Bingley's sister Patricia, and despite not being a blood relative had stayed in touch after her death two years ago. He invited all four of them to spend the winter with him at Hunstanton on the Norfolk coast, and Dean encouraged his friend to go. He hoped that time would, as the old saying went, prove a good healer. It was important for Sam to put the events of Hertfordshire far behind him.

Physician, heal thyself, a quiet little voice whispered from the back of Dean's mind. He ignored it.

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January 1801

Dean considered himself a good Christian, but there were days when he really felt God had it in for him. And the day after his twenty-seventh birthday was one of those days.

He had spent most of the day at one of his clubs, discussing the latest developments in the war – the Austrians proving as useless as ever, but the Anglo-Turkish forces driving back the French in Egypt - and had decided to go to nearby St. Paul's Cathedral for some quiet reflection before heading home. He sat quietly in one of the pews in the gathering gloom, thinking over recent events until he realized that the rain had stopped beating against the stained-glass windows. He edged himself out and turned to walk down the aisle – and froze.

A horribly familiar omega was sat praying in a pew just a few rows down, his hair as messy as ever, and his figure lit by a dusty beam of light that, oddly, shone though just one of the many windows to their right, making him look almost ethereal. Dean could not help but let out a gasp, and Castiel Bennet immediately looked up and around for the source of the noise. When he saw who it was, his face darkened. He slowly stood up and made his way out into the aisle.

“Mr. Winchester.” That gravelled growl was now openly hostile. Apparently God really did have it in for Dean.
“Mr. Bennet”, he said, bowing slightly. “I did not expect to see you in London.”

The omega glared at him.

“Gabriel and I are visiting our aunt and uncle for a month”, Mr. Bennet said coldly. “After recent events at home, they kindly offered to let us stay with them.”

Dean knew full well what he was alluding to. He managed to suppress a blush.

“Your brother is well?” he asked politely.

“As well as can be expected”, Mr. Bennet said acidly. The anger in his words was palpable, and Dean flinched.

“The Bingleys have gone to visit an uncle of theirs in Norfolk”, he said, trying desperately to make conversation.

It was the wrong thing to say. The omega's frown deepened even further.

“Gabriel had no intention of calling at your house, Mr. Winchester”, the omega said, glaring at him. “Besides, he received a particularly cruel letter from Miss Bingley, forwarded to him from home, which made her and her brother’s feelings – or apparent lack thereof – perfectly clear. Now if you will excuse me, I am due to meet with my brother. He has been through a terrible experience recently which has left him completely drained” (he stared particularly hard at Dean as he said that) “and he needs my support.”

“I am sorry if I am keeping you from him”, Dean said. “Good day, Mr. Bennet.”

“Good day, Mr. Winchester.”

The omega strode down the aisle, his long coat flapping behind him like a pair of wings. Dean watched him go, knowing for sure now that Castiel Bennet hated him.

He didn't know why that bothered him so much.

+++~+++

There was, Dean felt, no real reason for him to feel unhappy at his actions. He had saved a friend from an ill-judged union with a grasping family who were only after his money. Sammy would almost certainly thank him if he knew the full facts.

Then why didn’t you tell him all your reasons for leaving Hertfordshire, that irritating small voice asked from the back of his mind. It now sounded horribly like the gravelled growl of a certain omega.

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This was getting ridiculous.

Dean had acted like any true friend would, and there was really no reason for him to keep telling himself this half a dozen times a day. Just as there was no reason he was now spending almost every day thinking about a pair of hostile blue eyes and that impossible hair.

Except it now wasn't just the days. Castiel Bennet had somehow managed to inveigle himself into Dean's dreams as well, sometimes angry with him, sometimes..... well, Dean was an alpha, after all, and he had needs. The irritating omega was always on his mind, and even at a ball one
evening he found himself disliking an over-eager female because her eyes weren't the right shade of blue, and her hair was far too neat.

He was thankful that any relationship with Castiel Bennet was quite impossible. He really was.

Wasn’t he?

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February 1801

During the three years between his father’s death and his taking on responsibility for the Bingleys, Dean had fallen in with some bad people. That had been one of the darkest times in his life, but it had also brought him an acquaintance with Victor Henriksen, a young Dutchman who worked in what he euphemistically called the ‘grey areas’ of the law, along the docks and harbours of the great metropolis. Dean had been able to repay the other alpha’s kindness back in part some years later, when Victor had been falsely accused of murder, and Dean had arranged his defence, even testifying as to his character. The case collapsed when Dean’s investigators found the real murderer, and he always sent his old friend a note every time he was planning on being in the capital. Victor was usually out on his 'business', so when the blond monocled alpha turned up in person at Winchester House one day, Dean knew it had to be serious.

He just hadn't been counting on it being that serious. He stared at his friend in shock.

“Please tell me you're joking, Vic!” he managed at last.

His friend shook his head.

“You spent three of the formative years of your youth sleeping with anyone and everyone, Dean”, he pointed out gently. “There were bound to be consequences. I've seen the boy, and he's the spitting image of you. It's amazing they kept it secret this long.”

“Not that amazing”, Dean said with a sigh. “It is the Braedens, after all.”

Victor had just informed him that he almost certainly had a son, a ten-year-old boy called Benjamin who was the result of a three-week affair Dean had had with his mother, Lisa, not long after his father's death. That he hadn't known was not that surprising; the Braedens were amongst the most powerful of the London families, an ancestor having cannily got in with the future George II on his arrival from Hanover nearly a century before, and their descendants having milked the connection for all it was worth. And Dean could hardly approach the boy himself without risking a first-magnitude scandal.

“And the family back her up in this?” he said angrily, running his hand through his hair.

“Not willingly, I would judge, but family is important to the Braedens”, Victor said. “I'm sorry, Dean, but you had to know.”

“Would they accept money for the boy?”

“No. Your best bet is to wait and hope. She recently married, which is how I found out, and her new husband isn't overly fond of the boy. Perhaps in the future, things may change. I'll keep you informed.”

“Thanks, Vic.”

++~+++
Though he knew he could not approach the boy – his son – Dean knew from Victor that Lisa owned a small restaurant close to the House of Commons. He went there one day, unsure as to exactly what he was going to say or do to his one-time lover.

Lisa was apparently busy in the kitchens when he arrived, so he ordered a coffee and a cake, and sat down to eat it. There were pictures all round the wall, and he only slowly realized that the one by his table was of his son. He was still staring at it when he realized someone had approached his table.

“Lord Winchester”, came a familiar female voice. “Long time no see!”

He turned and smiled as she sat down opposite him.

“Hullo, Lise.”

“Are you here about Ben?” she demanded at once.

“No”, Dean said, a little more sharply than he had intended. “He's my son, and I'll do anything you ask of me for him, but he shouldn't have to cope with an absentee father suddenly turning up after all these years.”

She seemed to calm down a little.

“He's out the back, talking with a friend of mine”, she said, sitting down opposite him. “I'm expanding this place, and Mr. Singer is providing me with the money.”

“Not using your own?” Dean was surprised.

“The Singers are old friends of the family. They've gone off to look at the House with one of their nephews; the other one is helping Ben with his homework.”

“Hullo, Mr. Winchester.”

That was the moment when Dean became absolutely certain God did have it in for him. In spades.

“Hullo, Mr. Bennet”, he ground out, standing up.

Castiel Bennet looked between the two of them, his head tilted to one side in an expression that was absolutely not endearingly cute. Dean was just telling himself that when the horrible truth struck him; the omega had come fresh from talking to his son, and judging from the sudden look of understanding on those impossibly blue eyes, he had just put two and two together.

“I shall get back to Ben”, Lisa said, standing. “Thanks for helping him, Castiel. I'll talk to you later, Dean.”

“Oh. Right.”

She left. Castiel Bennet continued to stare at him.

“You know, don't you?” Dean said sourly. “So what are you going to do about it? Try to blackmail me?”

The stare suddenly became a full-on glare, and Mr. Bennet leant forward sharply. Dean flinched.

“We are not all down on your level, Mr. Winchester”, the gravelled voice ground out. “A person's past is their own business. I prefer to deal with the present and the future. For young Mr.
Braeden's sake rather than yours, I shall not speak of this to anyone. You have my word on that. Good day."

He strode from the restaurant, leaving a speechless alpha in his wake. Castiel Bennet had been given the perfect weapon to extract revenge on the man who had wrecked his brother's life, and he had passed it up to protect a boy he barely knew.

What a man!
Two of the Bennets leave Longbourn on trips to the southern counties.

February 1801

Three days after Castiel's encounter at the restaurant, he and Gabriel arrived back in Longbourn, both feeling refreshed from their capital excursion, and both feeling a little guilty that they knew one reason for this was that they had spent a month away from their family. Castiel was also a little depressed that he no longer had his friend Inias within walking distance; the omega had returned to Kent to be married there to Mr. Collins, something his mother reminded him of far too frequently.

One week later he received a letter from his friend. He went at once to find Gabriel.

“Inias has invited me to Kent for Easter, along with Uriel”, he said cautiously. “Do you think I should go?”

“More time away from this place”, Gabriel said dryly. “Why would you not?”

“I am worried about you, Gabe.”

His elder brother sighed heavily.

“Perhaps you could see if Mr. Collins has a marriageable cousin”, he smiled. “Someone who doesn't mind someone else's offcuts....”

“Gabe! Don't say that!”

The elder Bennet smiled weakly.

“Go, Cassie”, he said firmly. “Fresh air and the Garden of England. Even if you have to put up with the aunt of Mr. Winchester!”

“From what Inias says – or doesn't say – she sounds a complete harridan”, Castiel laughed. “Probably one of those old-timers who think us omegas should be collared and barefoot, wheeled out only whenever our alpha wants. I expect she is as used to getting her own way as her detestable nephew. Thank the Good Lord that I shall not be meeting him again!”

March 1801

Castiel stared at his father in horror.

“You cannot be serious!” he blurted out. “It would be madness!”

The militia had departed for Brighton during his time in London, much to Castiel's intense relief. Raphael and Balthazar had of course been inconsolable; so many handsome men taken from them.
at once, and both Castiel and Gabriel had quickly tired of their complaints, which had started almost before the soldiers had left the town. But misery had turned to joy for Balthazar at least, when he had been invited by an omega called Theobald Forster, the mate of Mr. Wickham's regimental colonel, to stay with them for a time in Brighton. Balthazar had been ecstatic (and, of course, Raphael miserable and peevish), whilst Castiel had despaired.

“Your brother is a fool, Castiel”, his father said bluntly, “and he will never be happy until he has disgraced himself in public in some manner. At least this way he can do it at minimal expense to ourselves.”

“Father, you know what he is like”, Castiel persisted. “If he starts going into heat whilst he is down there – it would be disastrous!”

“I am sure Msr. Forster and his husband will keep an eye on him”, Mr. Bennet said airily. “And of course, there is always Mr. Wickham.”

Yes, Castiel thought, 'dear Mr. Wickham'. At least the beta knew that Balthazar had no fortune to speak of, so he was safe from that particular danger.

“I just think it ill-advised for someone of his.... character”, Castiel said. “But of course I shall respect your decision, father.”

He left the room, still feeling uneasy.

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Castiel and Uriel Lucas had to travel to London in order to catch the post to Kent. Fortunately the coach went right through the village of Medlington on its way down to Dover, and Mr. Collins' carriage would pick them up there. When they arrived in the village, both Mr. and Msr. Colins were there to accompany them back to the vicarage.

“You may find Lady Naomi a little... overpowering”, Inias said.

Mr. Collins tutted at his mate but smiled at him, and Inias returned the look. Castiel was pleased to see them so happy together.

“I only know of her as the aunt of the infamous Mr. Dean Winchester”, he said.

“The man who thought he was too good for you at the ball!” Inias laughed. “I remember that. Funny you should mention him. He will be here as well, this Easter.”

Castiel froze.

“What?” he said angrily.

His fellow passengers looked surprised at his sudden vehemence.

“He is coming to Medlington – never call it Rosings by the way; Lady Naomi hates the 'official' name – to spend the holiday with his aunt”, Mr. Collins said. “I believe his cousin, Captain Adam Fitzwilliam, is accompanying him.”

Oh joy, Castiel thought bitterly. Another judgmental member of that infernal family.

“I wonder what Captain Fitzwilliam did to merit such a punishment”, Inias mused. “I only hope it was nothing too bad.”
“Inias!” Mr. Collins said reprovingly. “That is verging on gossip!”

“From the man who told me about the bigamy case in the village?” his mate retorted.

Mr. Collins blushed.

“Point”, he said gruffly, before exchanging a smile with his mate.

Castiel looked at them fondly. With everything else in his life right now and his holiday about to be marred by another encounter with that unpleasant interfering alpha, at least it was good to see his friend so happy.

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Lady Naomi stared at him in horror. Across the table, Castiel could see his friend covertly praying. Mr. Collins had gone a deathly shade of white.

At last the owner of Medlington found her voice.

“You actually have an opinion about the war?” she said, still clearly stunned.

“Yes”, Castiel said firmly. “Now that Mr. Pitt has been forced out, I am fearful the government will seek peace with France at any price.”

Her Ladyship continued to stare at him.

“But you are an omega!” she said at last.

There was a distinct snicker from Lady Lilith at the far end of the table which, fortunately, went unnoticed by her mother.

“I am”, Castiel said. “And?”

Another long and painful silence.

“Omegas do not have opinions about such matters!” Lady Naomi managed eventually.

“Why not?” Castiel asked at once.

She looked at him as if he had asked why the exterior of the manor should not be painted bright purple.

“It is just Not Done!” she said, the capitals clearly audible.

“Well, we are in the nineteenth century”, Castiel said dryly, ignoring the frantic warning signals he was getting from Mr. Collins out of the corner of his eye. “Who knows? Maybe one day omegas will even have the right to vote?”

The butler, clearly a man of some sense, made a large glass of whisky appear next to Lady Naomi at this point. She downed most of it in one shot.

“Propriety!” she rapped out. “Society would never allow such goings-on! It would be revolutionary! We might as well be French and have done with it!”

Castiel was sorely tempted to tell her at this point that her beloved nephew had sired at least one bastard child - propriety indeed! - and smiled inwardly at the reaction that would certainly evoke, but he held his tongue.
“Society is always changing, my lady”, he said with a smile. “The days of omegas being barefoot and collared belong in the history books with the cavemen. And with people who think like that.”

She downed the refilled glass in one go this time, which gave Mr. Collins a chance to ask her about her nephew. Fortunately for all involved, the change of subject worked.
He Married Him?

Chapter Summary

News from his aunt seems to confirm Dean's worst fears.

March 1801

Normally Dean would have been back at Pemberley for the start of spring, but unfortunately the house was undergoing major work, and after his last experience of this a few years back, the alpha had decided he was better off waiting it out in the capital. In truth, he was almost looking forward his visit to the Kentish home of his aunt, Lady Naomi de Bourgh, despite the fact she was about the only woman he knew who unnerved him. It was not just her supreme certainty as to her own consequence, but her determination – make that obsession – with getting Dean to marry her daughter and sole child, Lilith. Not that the latter was unattractive (although her mother's choice of her dresses usually ran the gamut from dire to appalling!), but she was dull in comparison to someone with blue eyes, impossible hair and cheekbones that you could....

He glanced round to make sure no-one was watching him, then slapped himself for thinking that. Again.

Lady Naomi had been on good terms with her sister, his mother Mary, until the latter’s death, and had somehow developed a belief that he and Lilith were actually betrothed, one she held despite all efforts to persuade her to the contrary. When he did eventually marry someone other than her daughter, Dean knew that there would be hell to pay. And now he had the unbearable Mr. Collins to add to the mix as well, with his pompous verbosity. But at least Dean would be away from any further chance meetings with the omega of his dreams.

He was thinking that particular thought in the carriage with his cousin as they bowled along towards Medlington. Adam was reading through some regimental documentation, and Dean was perusing a letter his aunt had sent which had arrived only hours before their departure from the capital. As usual it detailed the way she was doing good for all the people of the village and how terribly ungrateful they were (six long pages!). Dean nearly gave up, but kept on until the end of the letter in case his aunt had any real news to tell him.

For once, it seemed that she had:

'You will of course approve of my choice as to our new parish priest, whom I believe you have already been fortunate enough to meet during your time in the county of Hertfordshire. Mr. Crowley Collins is most respectful, though I was a little surprised that he returned from this trip with a young omega, whom he had asked to be his mate. Someone from one of the principal families of the area, he informed me at the time, although of course it is Hertfordshire, so I am not sure that counts for much. Fortunately they decided to be married here in Medlington village, so I was able to attend and grant my belated blessing. A marriage is a wonderful thing, nephew.'

Dean knew there was more than a passing hint there. That, and the fact that she had underlined the word 'wonderful'. Three times.

'I believe you may have met the man during your stay in that county, so you will be able to renew
any acquaintance with him whilst you are here with my daughter and myself. Mr. Collins is having his new mate's brother and a friend from Hertfordshire to stay with him at the vicarage; one of them is called Uriel, I think, though I do not recall the other one's name. Something biblical, perhaps. They arrived by post two days prior, and I shall be inviting them to dinner in the evening. I must say that despite the irregularity of his marriage, I do find the new Msr. Collins a charming creature. Although I should remark that his hair always seems to be somewhat untidy.....'

Dean’s heart stopped for a moment. That obnoxious Mr. Crowley Collins had actually married Castiel Bennet? His Castiel? What had the omega been thinking? His heart sank.

Of course. Castiel Bennet had thought of his family, and the connection, albeit indirect, with Lady Naomi de Bourgh. She might be flint-hearted for most things but never blood, and she would not tolerate anyone even remotely connected with her falling into penury. Dean remembered Castiel Bennet kissing Mr. Collins’ hand at the ball, and shuddered. That the young omega had sacrificed himself for his horrible family. It was truly awful!

Then he suddenly realized. Castiel Bennet – no, Monseigneur Collins - would be there. Right next door to Medlington Manor, and likely round most evenings. During his whole stay in Kent, he would have to see him almost every day.

His stay in Kent was ruined!

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Dean was not at all surprised when their carriage rolled past the gates of his aunt's house to find Mr. Collins there, waiting to bow to them as they arrived. His cousin laughed at the face Dean pulled once they were out of sight.

“The man cannot be that bad!” he smiled.

“You have not had to be talked at by him!” Dean groused.

“Tell me who else is going to be there”, Adam said. “We are only moments away from the Lady Naomi Experience, after all!”

Dean glared at him.

“Apart from the obnoxious Mr. Collins, the only ones I know for sure are Mr. Castiel Bennet” (he could not bring himself to use the omega's married name) “and Mr. Uriel Lucas, both omegas. Mr. Lucas is about fifteen, I recall, and rather withdrawn. Mr. Bennet is in his early twenties, a little too open in his manner, but is passably presentable. Or would be if he took better care of himself.”

“Is that all you learnt in Hertfordshire?” his cousin scoffed. “For shame, cousin! Were there no pretty ladies or omegas to tempt the master of Pemberley?”

“Not I!” Dean said, “although my friend Samuel Bingley had a narrow escape with a local omega whose family were after his money. Fortunately there was no love involved, so I was able to extract him with only minor collateral damage.”

Even as he said that, he wondered. His friend’s letters from Norfolk had been lacking his usual spirit, and he had not mentioned anyone else worthy of his attention, unusual for someone who fell in love as easily as he did. It was over three months now, a long time for him to not be romantically attached.

“He should be grateful that he has a friend such as you, then”, Adam observed.
“Yes”, Dean said. “If only I could get that awful sister of his married off to someone, everything would be wonderful. But she has only a relatively small inheritance, although of course there is the family name.”

“Names are important”, Adam agreed. “We are here, cousin. Let us gird our loins for the battle ahead!”

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It had been said that Dean Winchester could detect a pie at a range of over a mile, and the delicious scent pervading the house led him down into the kitchens, where the fearsome cook Mrs. Bridges held sway. Though the pie was for dinner, he was able to charm her into allowing him to take one of the smaller ones she had baked for the staff back to his room. He knew her from his previous visits to Medlington, so (even though his aunt would have horrified had she found out), the two were soon chatting away like old friends.

“You missed a treat last night sir”, she smiled, kneading some pastry on a board. “Mr. Collins came over, and Mr. Castiel actually dared to disagree with Her Ladyship over a question of politics! Brooks said he had to supply two extra-large scotches to help her get over the shock!”

Dean wondered at that. Lady Naomi had said that Mr. Bennet – Msr. Collins - always deferred to her advice. Then again, perhaps this was a first disagreement, or the omega felt particularly strongly about the subject under discussion. He wondered if there would be any future chances for him to see the rare (if not unknown) sight of his aunt not getting her own way for once.

“And Mr. Collins is so much better now he is married”, Mrs. Bridges went on, unknowing of the hurt her words was causing the alpha. “He used to be all nervous and excited whenever he was out in society, but having a mate seems to have calmed him down a lot.”

“I am very happy for him”, Dean said insincerely. “I believe they were expecting his mate's brother for Easter as well?”

“He had a headache last night, so did not come over”, Mrs. Bridges said ruefully. “I only hope he does not share Mr. Castiel's frankness, or Her Ladyship may not survive the shock! Good heavens, is that the time? I must get on with dinner, sir, if you'll excuse me.”

Dean thanked her again for the pie and left, wondering why she did not call Castiel Bennet by his title of 'Monseigneur Collins', and also as to which of his four brothers was the one at the vicarage. Knowing his luck, it would be Gabriel Bennet, whose presence would make Dean feel even more guilty. He went back to his room, where he found a note from his aunt that the Collinses were now coming over that very evening, to meet the new guests.

He just could not catch a break!
March 1801

Castiel found himself quite liking Medlington Manor, even if its owner clearly thought him far too outspoken for a mere omega. Ever since that evening when he had openly disagreed with her about the political situation, she had avoided addressing him directly, clearly fearing another bout of omega assertiveness. Though Inias did admit later (in the safety of the vicarage) that both he and his husband had found the whole thing highly amusing in retrospect, and Castiel was certainly not going to keep his opinions to himself, even if she was the aunt of the most obnoxious man it had ever been his bad luck to meet.

Especially if she was the aunt of the most obnoxious man it had ever been his bad luck to meet.

It was not long before Mr. Winchester turned up with his cousin, the promised Captain Fitzwilliam. Adam was a tall, dark-blond alpha, and Castiel thought him quite attractive at first sight, although he suspected there might be some weakness of character in that chin. He followed Mr. Collins over to be formally introduced and smiled at the soldier, enjoying the brief look of displeasure on the older alpha's face before it was hastily hidden.

“Mr. Winchester, what an unexpected pleasure to meet you again!” the vicar gushed. “And so soon!”

Mr. Winchester's face suggested he did not consider it that much of a pleasure.

“Indeed, Mr. Collins”, he said, radiating false bonhomie. “And I understand I should offer belated congratulations on your, ahem, recent marriage.”

“Oh yes, indeed. Allow me to present my mate, Monseigneur Collins.”

Inias duly stepped forward, and the alpha visibly started. There was a marked and decidedly overlong silence.

“Oh”, Mr. Winchester said eventually in a strangely high voice, before lowering his tone back to normal. “You. You married him.”

Castiel stared at the scene in some confusion, before suddenly realizing. Mr. Winchester must have been told a marriage had taken place between Mr. Collins and 'someone in Hertfordshire', and he must have assumed he, Castiel, was Mr. Collins' mate! Oh, this was just too good! He was unable to prevent a slight smirk from crossing his face, particularly when he saw how discomfited Mr. Winchester looked.

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Not one to pass up a chance to annoy a man he so intensely disliked, Castiel was pleased when
Captain Fitzwilliam kissed his hand for a little longer than necessary, enjoying the scowl on his cousin's face. That scowl only deepened when he smiled again at the younger alpha in response. He soon found the young soldier pleasant company, and the man persuaded him to play the piano for them all, whilst he talked about various matters. Again, the omega was surprised that someone like him was friendlier with Mr. Winchester than their loose family ties would have warranted, particularly as their characters seemed so different. Was there something about the alpha he was missing?

He stopped his musings and switched his attention back to Captain Fitzwilliam, who was talking about his cousin's time in Hertfordshire.

“I have never met Samuel Bingley”, he told the omega”, but I have heard he is a good man.”

Too good for my brother, according to your cousin, Castiel thought ruefully.

“I am sure he is blessed in having a friend such as Mr. Winchester”, he said, perhaps a little archly.

“Yes, I think Dean really is a good friend. Particularly saving him from the clutches of some money-grubbing omega and his family down there.”

Castiel almost stopped playing.

“He did what?” he asked.

“He persuaded Mr. Bingley to leave the area. All in his best interests, from what he said. I do not believe there was any real love involved.”

That's what you think, Castiel thought bitterly.

He finished his piece, and switched to one about a storm at sea. It suited his mood better.

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He had all but been certain of Mr. Winchester's involvement in destroying his brother's happiness, but knowing he had been boasting about breaking Gabriel's heart made the omega feel angry deep down inside. And the looks he was getting from the man in question, who clearly resented him being friends with his cousin, did not help. Castiel knew nothing would come of any friendship with Captain Fitzwilliam— as a fifth son even of a family as well-off as the Fitzwilliams, he would have to marry for money— but he felt a vicarious thrill that their friendship annoyed the alpha, and did his best to encourage it.

The man seemed determined to annoy Castiel right back, however. The following day, they met whilst out walking. Not wanting to talk to him any more than was necessary, Castiel made it patently clear that this was his favourite walk, assuming that the man would take the hint and go elsewhere. Much to his annoyance, he did not, and they continued to meet each day thereafter, even when Castiel took a different walk. Even stranger, Mr. Winchester seemed to be trying to make conversation between them, though the one time he strayed towards talking about Castiel's family, the omega gave him such a look that he stopped dead.

What was that irritating alpha playing at?

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April 1800

Another dinner over at the house, and once again Captain Fitzwilliam persuaded Castiel to play
some music for them (Miss Lilith had strained her hand, an injury Castiel suspected she was playing up to avoid spending all evening at the piano). The soldier made light conversation, whilst his cousin sent dark glances towards the two of them from across the room. Finally he left his aunt talking to Mr. Collins, and came over. Castiel smiled politely at him whilst silently wishing him a million miles away, and carried on with his piece.

“Your cousin wishes to disconcert me”, he said playfully to Mr. Fitzwilliam. “He assumes his magnificent presence will cause me to ruin this beautiful piece.”

“I was actually enjoying it”, Mr. Winchester said, seeming strangely uneasy. “You play well.”

“But not as well as Miss Lilith”, Castiel observed quietly.

Mr. Winchester glanced across at the lady in question, who tonight was wearing a dark red dress that was only mildly awful. Castiel allowed himself a small smile. The chances of any marriage between those two was about as remote as some undiscovered Pacific island. Mercifully for Miss de Bourgh.

“You play as you feel!”, Mr. Winchester said. “People should never try to be what they are not.”

“That certainly applies to you, Mr. Winchester”, Castiel said dryly. “I am sure you are exactly what you appear!”

“The Winchester is not a social animal”, Captain Fitzwilliam said. “I believe he will not even put himself out to dance, unless he considers his partner worthy enough to be considered as the next Lady or Laird of Pemberley.”

“And certainly not with 'country riff-raff'”, Castiel said pointedly.

Mr. Winchester blushed.

“I am not fickle enough to make friends lightly”, he said, sounding almost sulky.

“Or at all”, muttered his cousin, smiling as he said it. “I suspect poor Samuel Bingley is your only true friend beyond family.”

Mr. Winchester seemed to think about that for a moment.

“Perhaps Mr. Bennet might consider himself my second friend, then?” he said.

Castiel abruptly stopped playing, and looked hard at him. Was the man making fun of him?

“That would be unwise”, he said darkly.

Mr. Winchester seemed about to ask why this was, when his aunt, presumably tired of being ignored, interrupted their conversation by demanding to know what they were discussing. Castiel at once resumed playing, and Mr. Winchester soon resumed watching him, much to the omega's annoyance. He really just wished the annoying man would go away.

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The more he thought about it, the less sense it all made. Unless Mr. Winchester thought that by being nice to him, he might somehow divert his attentions away from Captain Fitzwilliam (and he must understand how impossible any alliance was in that direction), what exactly was he playing at? Castiel was sure he had made it clear that he had no time for the man, and tolerating even his presence was a social nicety he endured only in the certainty he would be leaving for London after
Easter.

It had been a very confusing, and mostly depressing last few months. As he fell asleep that night, Castiel's last thought was that at least his remaining time in Kent would hold no more unpleasant surprises. He had had more than his fair share of those lately.

He did not know just how wrong he was.
Love And Marriage

Chapter Summary

Dean comes to grips with the horrible realization that he is actually in love with that accursed omega. Fearing there is some prospect of his cousin getting in before him, he decides he will propose that thing starting with the thirteenth letter of the alphabet that rhyme with 'carriage'.

April 1801

Damn and blast, his cousin was talking to that accursed omega again! Dean brooded (no, he was not sulking) behind the piano, and watched the two of them in conversation. Then his cousin leaned in far too close, and Mr. Bennet laughed softly.

Dean's scowl deepened. Fortunately for his peace of mind (and his face muscles), Castiel Bennet was then claimed by his friend Inias to look at a magazine he had found, and Adam came across to take a book from a nearby shelf.

“Passably presentable!” he chuckled. “If I did not know you so well, cousin, I would have thought you were trying to keep him for yourself!”

Dean looked across at the omega, now outlined against the setting sun through the main dining room window. He looked beautiful, yet so definitely male, like one of those Greek statues Dean had seen in London. He continued observing him, wondering why this attractive omega seemed not to like him. After all, Dean loved him.

He blinked. Inside his head, maybe, but for the first time in his life he had used that word. The L-word.

He loved Castiel Bennet?

He walked over to the side-table to pour himself some more wine (or if he was being honest, to hide his face from the others), his emotions in turmoil. This was so not good.

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Somehow he got through the two hours until the visitors left, and made it to the safety of his room. His valet looked at him strangely as he helped him undress, but eventually Dean was in bed, and able to think of the events of the past evening uninterrupted.

It was true. He did indeed love Castiel Bennet. Those impossibly blue eyes, that ruffled hair, and the way that even as an omega, he stood no nonsense from anyone, especially Mr. Dean Winchester.

For possibly the first time in his life, Dean actually looked at a fellow member of the human race and thought of the M-word. Marriage (and for once, he didn't even wince when thinking about it). Castiel as the next Laird of Pemberley, Castiel welcoming guests to their palatial home, Castiel writhing beneath him in their giant four-poster bed, Castiel’s belly round with their first-born child….
He burrowed his head into his pillow and groaned. This was so unfair! Why did he have to want someone like that?

There were all sorts of reasons why the whole thing was impossible, the two main ones being Castiel’s obnoxious family and the fact that the omega didn’t much like him. But this was the nineteenth century and people didn’t marry for love; they married for money and made the best of it. Pemberley was a good one hundred and fifty miles from Longbourn (Dean had checked), so family visits would be few and far between, and he could always arrange to be ‘out’ when they did come. Although he might deign to stay if only his father or uncle called, as they seemed tolerable enough. The London relatives, the ones in trade, would definitely not be welcome.

Right. He would ask Castiel Bennet to marry him the next day; they could be married at Longbourn, but would immediately adjourn to the safety of distant Derbyshire. Dean would allow the omega to visit his family as he wished or whilst he went on to London on business, and thus he would he spared their baleful presence. Castiel seemed healthy enough, and once he had produced five or six children to secure the Winchester line, he would have done his duty. Although Dean looked forward to lots of time in bed with the omega before, during and after those pregnancies.

That was all sorted, then.

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Dean Winchester was not a coward. But he did want to make his proposal without anyone else being present, so he was a little annoyed the following day when Mr. Bennet did not emerge from the vicarage at the usual time or indeed any time thereafter. He spent the best part of an hour sat in the library window before deciding enough was enough, and he would pay a call on the Collinses. His proposal would have to wait for the following day, as he did not want to run the risk of it being interrupted by anyone.

The maid at the vicarage showed him in, and he was surprised (and more than a little disconcerted) to find only Mr. Bennet at home.

“Uriel is upstairs with a headache”, the omega explained, “and Crowley and Inias have gone into town to do some shopping. I decided to stay home, in case Uriel needed anything. Did you wish to leave a message, Mr. Winchester?”

Dean had spent much of the morning running through various ways of proposing in his head, and had finally settled on one. Yet the mere presence of this irritating omega seemed to scramble his brain to mush.

“No, I just decided to call in whilst passing”, he said airily. “I rarely walk this way.”

Mr. Bennet frowned.

“But you must come this way often, Mr. Winchester”, he observed. “Judging from the number of times we keep meeting each other, that is.”

Damn over-smart omega!

“Well, I cannot call in every day”, Dean said defensively.

“Your cousin calls here often enough”, Mr. Bennet observed. “He is a very pleasant young man.”

“A little too fond of the gaming tables”, Dean said, “but yes. Adam is all right, I suppose.”
“A most charming young man. I believe that, like me, he has four brothers?”

“Three in the army like him, and the viscount holding court at Standwell, not far from my house. All older.”

The omega smiled at the all too obvious hint that Adam would have to marry for money. Dean loved that smile.

“It must be nice to live in a great house”, Mr. Bennet said, a little dreamily. “Though the person you live with is far more important than the number of rooms they have.”

“You could see yourself as a Laird?” Dean asked curiously.

Mr. Bennet laughed.

“More like a soldier's mate!” he said, his eyes doing that strange crinkling at the edges thing that looked like an almost-smile.

“You and Adam?” Dean said incredulously. “That's impossible!”

The omega's face darkened at once. He stood up sharply, and Dean had to make an effort not to back away.

“You may have ruined by brother's life, Mr. Winchester, but you have no right to interfere in mine. What is between your cousin and myself is frankly none of your business. You may now leave.”

“But....”

“You will see yourself out.”

The omega swept from the room, leaving Dean feeling decidedly awkward. Still, there was always tomorrow, and the chance to be a Laird must surely trump being with a gangly twenty-one year-old who couldn't keep his mouth shut. And next time, he would write down exactly what he was going to say, in case his brain again opted for a sudden non-pre-advised vacation.

Everything was still fine.
No!

Chapter Summary

Castiel's stay in Kent brings a surprise proposal – from the most unlikely source.

April 1801

Four days until Mr Winchester left Medlington (not that Castiel was counting, of course). He would miss Captain Fitzwilliam, who had become a good friend, but the sandy-haired alpha was beginning to unnerve him. The sooner he was one hundred and fifty miles away - Castiel had checked - from the Bennets in distant Derbyshire, the better.

He was therefore not best pleased when, whilst sheltering in Carter’s Copse from a shower during his walk that day, the self same alpha came across him again. Like the day before, he seemed strangely uneasy, which worried Castiel slightly. The omega was also going through heat which, although the suppressants he was taking worked, made him edgy, as he knew alphas could scent even a suppressed heat when close enough.

“There is something I wish to say to you, Mr. Bennet”, the alpha said. His voice was strained, Castiel noted.

“Indeed”, the omega smiled politely. “Then please speak, Mr. Winchester.”

So we can talk and part, he added silently. The alpha swallowed hard.

“I have been thinking about marriage”, he said stiffly. “My marriage.”

Not Adam, then, Castiel thought.

“For someone in your position, that would be important”, he said, having to make an effort to stop himself from adding ‘so why are you bothering me with all of this?’

“Yes, um, my marriage. To you.”

Castiel blinked. What on earth...?

“Your marriage. To me.” He could think of several things he wanted to say (and few of them were repeatable even in the presence of this awful man), but his brain seemed to have temporarily lost its connection to his mouth.

“Um, yes”, Mr. Winchester said, looking decidedly awkward. “I mean, I know your family’s a long way down the social scale from mine, but I am sure people could eventually be persuaded to overlook that.”

“Overlook.” Castiel seemed only to be able only to repeat what the alpha was saying.

“Indeed, yes”, Mr. Winchester went on. “My aunt I suppose, will be horrified, but I really think it would all be for the best, do not you?”

“Best.” Castiel could feel his temper rising. The look on the man’s face made it clear he was not
even considering rejection as a possibility, though Castiel's lack of response was clearly registering something approaching unease.

“Yes.” The alpha shuffled his feet. “And your background.... well, it's hardly what most people would expect for a future Laird of Pemberley, you know.”

“Expect.” Castiel was going to blow any minute.

“Of course I would do what I could for your family, and you could still see them by yourself from time to time....”

And Castiel's temper went off like a rocket. Heat be damned, he stepped up close to him and focussed his full glare on the alpha, who flinched in surprise.

“Thank you very much for your consideration, Mr. Winchester”, he growled. “Given the circumstances, I understand that the recipient of such affections is expected to express gratitude for them, regardless of the extent to which they are returned. If I could feel any such gratitude, I would do so. But I happen to know you’ve done more than enough for – or should I say to – my family already. I must decline your ‘gracious’ offer. Good day.”

He started to walk off. Mr. Winchester made a strangled noise behind him, then caught his arm. Though the alpha was far the stronger of the two, Castiel spun round and shot a fierce glare at him. The hold was loosed at once.

“But why?” Mr. Winchester demanded. “To be thrown over like this – you must have a reason?”

“I have two”, Castiel said, and now his tone was icy. “I know exactly what role you played in forcing Gabriel and Sam apart. You cruelly and quite deliberately ruined what was almost certainly my brother's last chance of happiness. I would never so much as consider forming as much as an acquaintance with someone who would hurt a beloved brother, far less marriage.”

“You are over-reacting!” Mr. Winchester protested. “He will get over it. And he was only after Sammy for his money, anyway!”

Somehow Castiel managed to get even angrier. He might only be an omega, but he would not be spoken to like that. He took another step towards Mr. Winchester, and the alpha stepped back in surprise.

“Do not pretend to understand my brother, Mr. Winchester!” he growled. “He has been through things you cannot even begin to understand. I hate you for what you did to him! And that you boasted of your 'great achievement' to your cousin – that was despicable, even by your 'standards'!”

He glared at the alpha, then turned to walk away.

“But I love you!” the man called out.

Castiel froze, feeling even angrier if that were possible.

“You do not know what love is, Mr. Winchester!” he almost snarled. “You ruined your friend's happiness for seeking to ally himself with one Bennet omega, then you go and propose to another? You have no shame!”

The alpha winced at that

“Your other reason?” Mr. Winchester persisted. “I suppose you believed Mr. Wickham after all?”
Castiel stared at him pityingly.

“Do you honestly think so little of me that I cannot see through someone as shallow as Metatron Wickham?” he sneered. “I know his sort all too well, and the fact he ceased his attentions the minute he knew we had no money only served to prove what a rat he is. You wish to know my other reason? I just do not like you! And I would not marry you if you were the last alpha left alive on the planet!”

He left before he could say any more. He had just been proposed to by one of the richest alphas in the country, and had rejected him as brutally as he could. His mother would throw a fit if she ever found out.

What had that impossible man been thinking?

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Castiel decided to walk back through the village, in order to give his head time to clear, as he felt he could not yet face any of his friends or acquaintances. Mr. Dean Winchester, the man who had used his influence to ruin poor Gabriel's prospects, had proposed to him, Gabriel's brother! He, insignificant little Castiel Bennet, had been proposed to by the Earl of Hexhamshire's nephew! And the insufferable man had clearly been sure he would be accepted.

At least Castiel had corrected that impression, in no uncertain terms. He allowed himself a small smile at that thought.

There seemed to be some sort of celebration going on in the village, and Castiel recognized Betty, one of the women who sometimes helped out at the manor, coming out of the tavern.

“What's going on?” he asked, curiously.

“We've won another great victory, over those sneaky Danes!” she beamed. “Brest, Camperdown, the Nile – our sailors are unbeatable!” One of the locals wrapped an arm round her waist, and she slapped him half-heartedly. Castiel smiled at her and walked on, deep in thought.

Nice to see someone enjoying a triumph, he thought wryly.

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It was late afternoon when he got back to the vicarage, and only as he reached it did he remember. Damnation! They were supposed to be going up to the Manor tonight, and that meant facing Mr. Winchester. Not that Castiel was afraid of the alpha, but the embarrassment for both of them was just too much. He hurriedly sought out his friend, and pleaded a headache from too much sun. Inias looked suspicious, but Castiel insisted he just needed a quiet evening in a dark room to recover. He was relieved when his friend and his husband left for the Manor, leaving him alone to review the day's tumultuous events.

Castiel Winchester, Laird of Pemberley? He smiled at the sheer ridiculousness of the idea!
Chapter Summary

In the twenty-four hours after the impossible happened, Dean Winchester is forced to take a long hard look at himself. He does not like what he sees.

April 1801

Dean had been prepared to avoid Castiel Bennet at dinner that evening, and was relieved when Mr. Collins informed Lady Catherine that the omega had a bad headache. Though Inias Collins gave him a knowing look he could well have done without.

He knew he had to do something in the wake of his disastrous proposal, and he eventually decided on a letter. It was one of the hardest he had ever written; on one hand he wanted to defend himself and his actions as regards Gabriel Bennet and Sam, but on the other he wanted to avoid angering the omega any further. Although when he came to think about it, his bridges were probably all burned in that direction anyway. In the end he openly admitted his role in splitting the two up, and pleaded only that he had done it because he wanted to protect his friend, and thought Gabriel's lack of emotional display meant he was not serious about the relationship. He also put in the whole sorry story about Wickham and his sister, hoping at least this might make Mr. Bennet see him in a better light, and prove the omega had been right about the scoundrel. He suggested that Mr. Bennet could seek confirmation of this from Captain Fitzwilliam if he was so inclined, guessing the omega might well disbelieve him. He ended with a promise that he would never again bother him with any further offers. He did not really hope the letter would do him any good, but at least he had made the attempt.

He took the letter to the vicarage the day after his rejection, only to run into Inias Collins. One look from the omega told him the man knew at least something of what had transpired the day before.

“You had better sit down”, he said, to Dean's surprise.

Dean did so. Inias looked at him thoughtfully.

“I worked out that you were the one behind Mr. Bingley's sudden departure last autumn”, he said carefully. “And judging from my friend's anger yesterday, I presume he knows as well. I do not think I have ever seen him so upset.”

Dean noticed he did not say anything about his ill-starred proposal. Thankfully at least Mr. Bennet was sparing him the indignity of making that public. That would have made him feel even worse than he did now.

“You friend has a low opinion of me”, Dean said, thinking as he spoke that it was the ultimate in understatements. “I merely wish to clarify certain issues for him. I know he would not welcome speaking with me, so I thought a letter was the best way.”

“It is probably not my place to tell you this”, Inias began, looking unusually angry for him, “and I am surprised no-one in Hertfordshire told you anyway, but in view of the way things turned out, I think it is best you know just what a foul thing it was that you did.”
“Pardon?” Dean said, surprised.

“You believed that because Gabriel was not open in his affections towards your friend, he did not truly love him”, Inias said. “You could not have been more wrong, Mr. Winchester. My friend's brother finds it difficult to express affections of any sort because of what happened seven years ago. My own foster brother raped him, then tried to kill him.”

“What?” Dean almost shouted.

Inias sighed.

“You have met Mr. Turner, Castiel's uncle, a good man. He had a distant cousin; I do not remember the man's original name as it was foreign, but my father adopted him and called him Lucifer. It seemed a good fit at the time; he was bright, cheerful and far too full of himself.”

Dean could see where this story was going, and he did not like it.

“Lucifer was a couple of years older than Gabriel. My father paid to put him through college, but he fell in with the wrong crowd, as they say. He became sullen, withdrawn and sometimes violent. When he started dating Gabriel, I was anxious, but it seemed to calm him down a little. Then one day he raped him whilst he was in heat, and tried to kill him to hide the evidence of what he had done.”

“What happened?” Dean asked, horrified.

“Castiel arrived just in time, and managed to force him off, although Lucifer stabbed him too. He nearly killed him. My brother fled, but he was caught after six months and rightly hung. I don't think anyone shed any tears. Poor Gabriel miscarried three months into the pregnancy, and ever since then the local people viewed him as, and I know it is a horrible phrase, 'damaged goods'. That was why he was so cautious in his affections, Mr. Winchester. In the circumstances, it is really quite understandable.”

Dean stared at him, aghast. What had he done?

“Now you know why Castiel is so close to his elder brother”, Inias said sadly. “I do not think Gabriel had a relationship of any sort until he met Mr. Bingley. Those autumn months last year were about the only time I ever saw him genuinely happy, until you stepped in. I know Castiel did not want to come here partly because he did not want to leave his brother in Hertfordshire, but Gabriel apparently insisted. Those are two wonderful men, who deserve much better than their lot in life.” He looked at the clock and sighed. “Castiel will be getting back from his walk soon. I shall give him your letter.”

Dean took the hint and left, his mind in a whirl. He had terribly misjudged both the Bennets in the space of little more than a season. What was wrong with him?

He swore to himself that he would put this right. He would tell Sammy what he had done, even if, as was likely, it cost him the friendship of the younger man. He would not divulge the whole truth about Lucifer – that was Gabriel Bennet’s prerogative if things got that far – but he would admit his role in breaking up their relationship. He would also have to admit that, having persuaded Sammy that the eldest Bennet omega wasn’t interested in him and would anyway have been totally unsuitable, Dean had then gone and proposed to said omega’s brother.

That bit might just take some explaining.

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It was finally Dean's last evening in Kent, and of course the Collinses had come round. Lady Lilith, wearing a patterned green dress that was truly hideous, was playing something that in Dean's opinion was far too long and too depressing on the piano, whilst Castiel Bennet and Adam chatted, which was also depressing. Dean pretended to read a book whilst eavesdropping.

“My regimental colonel writes that we are to be joined at Brighton by the Chiltern Militia”, Adam said with a smile. “The regiment of a certain Mr. Metatron Wickham.”

Dean frowned. A reminder of his arch-enemy was not what he needed right now.

“Then I am sorry for the ladies and omegas of Brighton”, Mr. Bennet said acidly. “Or at least those with sufficient fortune and unwary guardians!”

“You do not like Mr. Wickham?” Adam asked, surprised.

“I think he is a most unpleasant person, without whom society could do very well”, Mr. Bennet said firmly. “Gabriel wrote last week that he was thrown out of Morecambe House after trying to see Miss Maria King without her uncle's knowledge. He is a dangerous man.”

“From what my cousin says, most people in Hertfordshire think quite highly of him”, Adam noted.

“Most people in Hertfordshire are far too credulous”, Mr. Bennet said, sounding almost angry about it. He shot a look towards Dean before adding, “of course, the actions of some people do not serve to do them any favours!”

They were interrupted by the dinner gong, and Dean's only consolation as he followed his cousin in was that Mr. Bennet seemed to dislike Mr. Wickham as much as himself.

It was not that much consolation.

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“It is a great pity you cannot stay another week”, Lady Naomi said over dinner an hour or so later. “Mr. Bennet and Mr. Lucas are returning to Hertfordshire next Friday, and they will have to travel post, which is most unseemly. If you delayed for a week, you could take them with you part of the way.”

Dean swallowed and glanced across the table at Castiel Bennet, who was directly opposite him. The omega looked about as enthralled as Dean felt at the prospect of a long journey together.

“I'm sorry, aunt, but my business in London cannot be postponed any further”, he said. “I have already delayed several important matters to remain here this long.”

“For which I am sure we are all grateful”, his aunt said starchily, looking pointedly at her daughter. “But I dare say we will see you here again soon, nephew. And who knows? Next time you may have something to say regarding wedding bells?”

Mr. Bennet coughed. Dean risked a quick glare at him.

“I am sure that day will come soon, aunt”, he said smoothly. “I just have to find the right person, and the right moment.”

“Indeed”, his aunt said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. “And when you do propose, I am sure a positive response is guaranteed!”
Dean’s plans were to ride back to London with his cousin, who would then travel down to Brighton to rejoin his regiment (a long way from Hertfordshire, Dean thought thankfully). He was due in the capital the day after the Bingleys returned from Norfolk, and a week later they would all head north to attend the christening of the newest Fitzwilliam, George, the son of the current Earl’s eldest son. After a few days at Standford, they would all move on to Pemberley together. Being in the capital would also enable Dean to confess to his friend just what he had done as regards Gabriel Bennet, a conversation which hung over him like a cloud as they drew nearer the capital.

However, on his arrival at his house, he found his plans were overthrown. In a badly-written letter, Dean just managed to make out that Sam and his sisters had stayed on in Norfolk due to their uncle being unwell, and would proceed from there to meet up him at Standford on the agreed date. It irked Dean no end that he was unable to start to put right his mistake, but he would just have to grin and bear it. Or at least bear it.

Dean tossed and turned in his bed that night, unable to get to sleep. The omega's words kept replaying themselves in his mind, and the way those blue eyes had glowed with hate made him ache inside.

'I would never consider maintaining as much as an acquaintance with someone who would hurt a beloved brother, far less marriage.'

It was so unfair. He had done what he had done with the best of intentions, and no-one in the county had told him why Gabriel Bennet didn't display emotions easily (the fact he had similarly not told anyone in the same county of Mr. Wickham's true nature was an inconvenient truth he would rather ignore at this point). Mrs. Bennet had clearly been angling for the marriage, and Dean had simply been protecting his best friend.

'You do not know what love is, Mr. Winchester!'

Fair enough, he had never been in love until now, but he knew how the game was played. Or did he? He had judged Gabriel Bennet solely on appearances, and had been both covertly and openly rude to his brother when they had first met at that ball. And his proposal of marriage had been bordering on the offensive, yet he had been certain he would be accepted. He had been painfully wrong on both counts.

'Someone as cold and heartless as you.'

It hurt, but the omega was right. He had not even considered Castiel Bennet's feelings before proposing. Worse, he had persuaded his friend that a marriage with a Bennet omega who did not apparently care for him was most unfitting, only for he himself to propose marriage to.... a Bennet omega who did not apparently care for him. And he had not felt a scintilla of remorse at the time.

'I hate you for what you did to him!'

That hurt. The man whom Dean loved actually hated him, and nothing was going to change that. He had not been foolish enough to suppose Castiel Bennet held any romantic feelings for him, but he had assumed – so, so wrongly – that his ten thousand and a promise of supporting the Bennets if needed would be enough to make the omega overlook his actions over Sam and Gabriel. He could not have been more mistaken.
‘That you boasted of your ‘great achievement’ to your cousin – that was despicable, even by your standards!’

Why, oh why had he told his blabbermouth of a cousin? And he had then basically stalked a man who loathed the very ground he walked on! He really was a terrible alpha!

You wish to know my other reason? I just do not like you!

It was not just the rejection that was so bad, but the manner of it. A polite declining of his proposal would have been bad enough, but the open fury towards him, the look of sheer, undiluted rage when the omega had advanced on him – it was horrible! The brutal way he had crushed those flickering hopes Dean had entertained, nurtured by the man's defence of him against the lies of Mr. Wickham and his relative civility during their all too brief conversations – he might as well have struck Dean and have done with it.

‘I would not marry you if you were the last alpha left alive on the planet!’

He groaned at that painful parting shot. Castiel Bennet would soon be on his way back to Hertfordshire, no doubt looking forward to consoling his elder brother whose life Dean had so spectacularly wrecked. He would probably be quietly laughing to himself every time he recalled Dean’s ill-starred proposal, as he strolled amongst the fields around Longbourn, the wind making his impossible hair even untidier. The only person Dean had ever wanted in his whole life, and the man hated him.

He rolled over and buried his face in his pillow, trying to blot out the memories. And for the first time since he was a child, Dean Winchester cried.
Reconsideration

Chapter Summary

Castiel recovers from his unexpected marriage proposal, and returns home before starting out on his tour of the North, assured that he will not see the irritating alpha there....

April 1801

The gentlemen had left for London, and Medlington seemed a quieter place without them. The rest of Castiel's stay – five more days – passed almost uneventfully, except shortly before his own departure with Uriel Lucas, a letter had arrived from his aunt and uncle in London. They did want to take him with them on holiday to the North as they had promised, but business reasons meant his uncle had to curtail their trip somewhat, and they would instead visit Derbyshire and the Peaks. Entering the county of the obnoxious Mr. Winchester made Castiel feel slightly uneasy for some reason, particularly as he knew his aunt would want to visit her home town of Lambton, which Castiel knew was not far from Pemberley. But even if his aunt and uncle insisted on a visit to the great house, they were unlikely to meet the man himself. He would probably be elsewhere, interfering in and wrecking somebody else's life.

Though probably not proposing marriage to them, Castiel thought with a smile. What had the man been thinking?

Just before their departure, Lady Naomi inquired as to whether he might deliver a letter to her nephew. Castiel was annoyed at this, because he knew it would involve his having to visit that tiresome man's London house, but he felt he could hardly refuse, given the hospitality (in the loosest sense of the word) he had received. He promised so to do, as he knew they would be spending the night at his aunt and uncle's house before continuing to Hertfordshire. He just had to hope the alpha would be out when he called.

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Winchester House was not really what Castiel had expected. He had imagined somewhere much larger if not palatial, but the grey building was compact and rather attractive, facing out onto one of the beautiful tree-lined squares in the west of the city. Surprisingly good taste for such an annoying man, Castiel thought.

“Mr. Winchester is at one of his clubs for the day”, the elderly butler informed him. “I will ensure he receives his relation's missive.”

“Thank you”, Castiel said. “I had been concerned lest he have already started back for Derbyshire.”

“Not until the twenty-fifth, sir, and then only to his uncle the Earl's house, for the christening of the Earl's grandson”, the butler informed him. “He will be At Home on May the second.”

Castiel could hear the capitals in that statement, and smiled. He left quickly, lest Mr. Winchester return early, and decided to walk back to his aunt and uncle's house rather than taking a cab, as the day was warm for the time of year. Londonders were still out celebrating the great victory at
Copenhagen, so the city was for once in a good mood.

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When he finally reached Longbourn, Castiel was relieved that his elder brother did not seem as depressed as he had feared. He did not of course mention events in Kent to any of them, even to Gabriel, as he feared it would re-awaken memories best left buried. He shuddered to think what his mother would say about him turning down marrying ten thousand a year! It was springtime in the county, and the better weather made Castiel feel more hopeful than he had for some little while. His only concern was Balthazar who, predictably, had not bothered to write much from Brighton, which left their mother in even more of a state than usual.

“You will never guess who I saw in town today, Cassie”, Michael said one day over dinner.

“You are right, I would never guess”, Castiel said, helping himself to some potatoes. “So tell me.”

“That unpleasant Mr. Winchester!”

Castiel froze.

“What?” he spat out.

Everyone looked surprised at his sudden outburst.

“I thought you found the man more tolerable than most people round here”, Mr. Bennet said amiably. “Did he give a reason for his presence, Michael?”

“He said he was dropping off some legal documents to the steward, from Mr. Bingley's London lawyer”, Michael explained. “Perhaps his friend is finally going to abandon his lease and let someone else move in.”

“If he does so, it will be the work of Mr. Winchester, not Mr. Bingley”, Castiel ground out. The idea of the man whose proposal he had so recently rejected being in his village was oddly unsettling.

“I take it he did not improve your opinion of him during your time in Kent together?” Mr. Bennet asked.

“He is the most arrogant, prideful, obnoxious, self-centred and insufferable alpha it had ever been my grave displeasure to have to meet”, Castiel declared roundly.

“Yet did you not defend him at one time?” Michael pointed out unhelpfully.

“I was not defending that man, merely stating that I did not think Mr. Wickham should be believed in everything he said”, Castiel snapped. When his family continued to stare at him, he added, “I met Mr. Winchester's cousin, Captain Fitzwilliam, in Kent, whose regiment is joining Mr. Wickham's at Brighton. He informed me of several things about the man which suggested my initial opinion of his may have been low, but it was certainly accurate.”

“Such as?” his mother immediately demanded.

“I am not at liberty to divulge that information”, Castiel said at once, “as it was related to me in confidence.” He knew there was no way he could reveal the truth about Mr. Wickham and Anna Winchester. He had never met her and almost certainly never would, but that lady did not deserve to have her reputation unfairly tarnished, even in a neighbourhood she was unlikely ever to enter.
“And is Captain Fitzwilliam handsome?” Raphael teased.

“A fifth son, and he will have to marry money”, Castiel said, glaring at his brother. “I suppose Bal is enjoying Brighton too much to write?”

Raphael glared back at him, and the talk moved on to other matters.

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The arrival of his aunt and uncle at Longbourn brought not only joy for Castiel that his holiday was here at last, but also for his elder brother, who would be entrusted with caring for his cousins, Asher and Josephine. Asher (he preferred just Ash) was a serious-faced young boy of twelve, who was always reading and loved talking about about the latest technological innovations. He also had a strange fascination with his hair, continually trying out new styles. Jo was two years younger, and was already set on a career in the Church, something Castiel had no doubt she would achieve. His aunt and uncle stayed one night at Longbourn, and the three of them departed early the next day.

The trip to Derbyshire could have been done in a single day, but this was a holiday, so they took things slowly, driving west to see Oxford and Blenheim Palace on the first day, and spending the second viewing the great castles at Kenilworth and Warwick. On the third day, Thursday April the thirtieth, they rolled into Lambton in the early evening, and settled at the inn there. Remembering from his London trip that Mr. Winchester would be home on the second, Castiel could therefore wholeheartedly endorse his aunt's plan to see the house the following day, with no risk of meeting its obnoxious owner.

His not-to-be husband.

He had re-read Mr. Winchester's letter several times of late, and the more he did, the more he found his opinion shifting. The alpha had, at the end of the day, acted in what he thought were his friend's interests, showing the same protectionism he had shown towards his sister, years earlier. He must just be exceptionally bad at reading people, what with thinking Gabriel had not been in love with his friend (a little understandable; Castiel knew his brother did not express emotion very well) and that Castiel might accept him (not understandable in a month of Sundays!). Things were not black and white any more as regards the irritating man, but they were still a very dark shade of grey.

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May 1801

Pemberley was a magnificent house, and Castiel would not have been human if his had not allowed himself a few pleasant fantasies about being its laird. The housekeeper, Mrs. Barnes, was pleased to show them round, and lavished a surprising amount of praise on her master, which clearly confused Castiel's aunt and uncle as it contrasted sharply with their nephew's words about him. Castiel too was somewhat surprised, as he knew the servants' view of a master was normally an accurate one.

There was the sound of a sharp spring shower beating against the glass windows as the tour began, and they were all thankful to have narrowly missed it. They eventually stopped before a large picture of the house owner, the largest one in the room, Castiel noted.

“It was painted last year”, Mrs. Barnes informed them. “The master drove the poor painter quite mad; he never could sit in one place for any length of time!”
“Is it a good likeness, Castiel?” his aunt asked.

Mrs. Barnes looked at him in surprise.

“You have met the master?” she asked.

“On a few occasions”, Castiel admitted. “Yes, the image is quite accurate.”

“You are indeed fortunate”, the housekeeper said with a smile. “I know some people think him prideful and stand-offish, but opinion on the estate is that we could not have a kinder master.”

All three stared at her in surprise.

“He certainly did not socialize at all well in Hertfordshire”, Castiel said slowly. “In fact, he seemed to get on the wrong side of just about everyone, and not to care about it.”

“The master only cares about certain things”, the housekeeper admitted, “but when he does, he cares deeply. Through this door there is a special room he has set up for his sister who arrives tomorrow, along with a wonderful new piano all the way from London, especially for her.”

Castiel's aunt and uncle exchanged wondering glances, as the housekeeper led them into the room.

“It is a wonder he has not yet married”, Mrs. Singer observed. “A house this size deserves a Lady or a Laird.”

To Castiel's surprise, the housekeeper blushed.

“I did hope from his letters that he had found someone in your county, sir”, she said, addressing Castiel. “He sounded happier than he had done for many a year. But sadly it all came to naught.”

Castiel wondered at that. Mr. Winchester had never expressed an opinion that he found anyone in his home county the least bit attractive......

The realization made him turn bright red, and it was fortunate that his aunt and uncle were busy examining Miss Winchester's new piano. The housekeeper, on the other hand, looked at him knowingly, much to his discomfiture.

Mrs. Barnes recommended that they step outside for a magnificent view of the west side of the estate, after which they could take the Long Walk round the garden. Glad his face had returned to its normal colour, Castiel led the way through the great glass doors – and stopped dead, staring in horror at the scene before him.

Oh no! Now that was just unfair!
Homecoming

Chapter Summary

A thrown horseshoe and a spring shower make Dean's next meeting with Castiel.... memorable. And horrifically embarrassing. For them both.

May 1801

Friday May the first dawned a bright, sunny day, and Dean groaned as he sat up in bed. It had been an exhausting week, spent between dodging the continuing attentions of Margaret Bingley and feeling guilty at the equally continuing sight of his best friend being an emotional wreck. And he still had not told Sam about his actions in breaking him away from Gabriel Bennet, something he was not looking forward to at all. It was not cowardice, he told himself as his valet dressed him. He was just waiting for the right time.

Like never, a familiar gravelled voice whispered from the back of his mind.

He eventually came down and found Sam in the library, reading something that looked far too learned for his usual taste. Much more like the sort of literature Castiel Bennet would read...

“You into Ancient Greece now, Sammy?” he asked, trying to distract himself from his own unwelcome thoughts.

His friend looked at him, or rather it seemed, through him.

“Gabe read this whilst he was recovering”, he said, looking strangely guilty as if he feared Dean might reprimand him for mentioning anything to do with Hertfordshire. “I.... just wondered what he found in it.”

He stood up and wandered out of the room with his book, sniffing slightly. Dean looked after him, feeling even more guilty.

Seeing Margaret Bingley looking set to approach him, he went over to the morning mail, and was relieved to find he had a letter waiting for him. It was from his steward, detailing several minor matters of business that would need attending to when he got back to Pemberley. Nothing of great import, but suddenly being home had a great deal more attraction than a further twenty-four hours spent seeing his friend being miserable and avoiding that awful woman. He hurried away to make his departure known to his host and his friend.

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Dean decided to ride back rather than take his carriage, and sent his valet and carriage on ahead of him. It would have scandalized many in society, but he insisted that his staff ride inside the coach, provided it was kept clean. He saw no reason why they should perch behind or on top in the rain whilst an empty carriage rumbled along just feet away.

The weather was still fine when he left in mid-morning, though some leaden clouds in the west held the threat of heavy rain later. The ride north would take just over an hour, following the river nearly all the way home.
"I would not marry you if you were the last alpha left alive on the planet!"

He winced, as Castiel Bennet's final broadside flashed through his memory again. He knew he had to tell Sam what he had done, but his friend was such a wreck right now that he feared the admission would only make things worse. His friend could quite easily respond by heading straight down to Hertfordshire and begging Gabriel Bennet to forgive him. It would probably cost Dean his friendship, but he knew he deserved any suffering on his side. His actions from the moment they had entered Hertfordshire had been cold and unfeeling, and he had been just as bad in Kent.

He was just passing the point where the Derwent was joined by the River Wye when he realized Ajax was limping slightly, and dismounting, found he had cast a shoe. Sighing, he led the horse the mile or so to the nearby town of Lambton, and handed him over to the blacksmith. He was about to cross the road when he noticed a fine carriage heading out the way he had just come. The covers were up, but he caught a brief glimpse of one of the people inside. He stared in amazement. It couldn't be....

The carriage quickly rounded a corner, and was lost from view. Dean shook his head hard. He was getting delusional; Castiel Bennet was on a tour of the North, and was most definitely not in that coach, no matter how much Dean wanted him to be. Smiling at his own foibles, he went over to the tavern and ordered a pie and a pint, noticing all the time how those grey clouds were gathering overhead. Thank the stars he was only a few miles from Pemberley.

Finally riding up Scarrick Fell, he had his first view of his home. It looked beautiful in the afternoon sunlight, though the shadow of the clouds hung over part of it. To his surprise, an open carriage was parked in front of the house, looking suspiciously like the one he had seen leaving Lambton; he knew Pemberley was open to the public, but in this remote corner of the county the house received few visitors, particularly with so much beautiful countryside around.

Castiel Bennet finally comes to Pemberley, he thought to himself with a sigh. I really am getting delusional in my old age!

He was still lost in thought when there was the rumble of distant thunder, followed seconds later by the first heavy splash of a late spring storm. Though he spurred Ajax into a gallop, he was totally drenched by the time he reached the stable yard, and could hand his horse over to the groom. Just to rub it in, the rain stopped the instant he dismounted. Sighing at his sodden clothes, he trudged sadly towards the house, realizing too late that the carriage owners were just emerging through the glass doors in front of him. Great! There could be few things worse than looking like a drowned rat in front of total strangers...

Except at least one of the party was no stranger, for a pair of stunning blue eyes were staring straight at him, the expression in them one of total shock. Mr Castiel Bennet, the omega he had dreamt of installing as Laird of Pemberley, was standing right outside said house, and Dean Winchester – looked awful!
Chapter Summary

Castiel finds that Mr Winchester in Derbyshire is a somewhat different creature from Mr Winchester in Hertfordshire.

May 1801

Castiel stared at the dripping alpha before him in horror. Had he got his dates wrong? He had been sure the master of Pemberley was not due back for another twenty-four hours, otherwise he would never have risked coming here. It was so embarrassing!

It also struck him at this untimely moment that he had never considered Mr. Winchester attractive until now. Right here, standing on the steps of the house to which he, insignificant little Castiel Bennet, might have been laird of, facing an alpha whose muscles rippled through a soaked shirt and who looked so much more human than ever before, he suddenly did, and was even more embarrassed as a result.

Not that the house owner seemed to be faring any better. The alpha seemed as shocked as he himself was, asking about his relations several times over before excusing himself and all but fleeing into the house, still dripping and looking mortified.

“So that is the infamous Mr. Winchester!” his aunt said, coming forward. “He seems a little perturbed, nephew.”

I know exactly how he feels, Castiel thought bitterly. Of all the luck, when he had been sure they would miss him!

“We should continue the tour”, he said instead, leading them off to the Long Walk. At least there was no prospect of any further meetings with the alpha. He was probably in his study now, wondering why an omega who had so brutally rejected his hand in marriage had then come to his house. Castiel cringed at the thought.

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Apparently God had decided his embarrassment quota for the day was not yet full, for as they were admiring the ornamental lake, the alpha in question, somewhat dryer, approached them from the direction of the house.

“Mr. Bennet”, he said, looking distinctly uneasy.

Castiel looked at him warily.

“Mr. Winchester”, he replied.

They both bowed.

“Will you do me the courtesy of introducing me to your friends?” the alpha asked.

Castiel was surprised. Someone as proudful as Dean Winchester deigning even to notice lower life
forms. But once he knew to whom Castiel was related, he would surely excuse himself and flee back to the safety of his big house.

“This is my aunt, Mrs. Ellen Singer, and my uncle, Mr. Robert Singer”, Castiel said. He paused very slightly before adding pointedly, “they are in trade.”

To his great surprise, Mr. Winchester did not turn tail and sprint away, but instead bowed to both his relatives, and immediately fell into conversation with his uncle. On his discovering him to be was a keen angler, he invited him to come and fish on the estate, promising to provide whatever equipment he needed. His aunt stared at her nephew in wonder, clearly confused as to why this alpha they had heard such bad things about – from their nephew, at least - was being so gracious. Then to Castiel's horror, he saw a knowing look cross her face, and just knew he was in trouble.

He was right. On reaching the next turning, his aunt declared that she needed her husband’s arm to support her for the rest of the way, which meant Castiel had to walk with Mr. Winchester. Who, it seemed, appeared to have suddenly forgotten the art of conversation. They walked for some little time before Castiel steeled himself to speak.

“We did not expect to find you at home, Mr. Winchester”, he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “We were led to believe that you were not due back until tomorrow.”

“I came back a day early”, the alpha explained, sounding strangely nervous. “Business, you know. My sister and the Bingleys.... they will join me tomorrow.”

He looked almost apologetic at this news. Castiel looked at him coolly. They had drawn quite a distance ahead of his aunt and uncle (he was sure his aunt had contrived this), so there was little chance of their being overheard.

“I have been thinking about your letter, Mr. Winchester”, he said slowly. “Whilst I cannot condone your actions, I find upon reflection that I can perhaps begin to understand them. To act, however rashly, in defence of someone who means a lot to you. I can relate to that.”

Mr. Winchester looked at him in amazement. Castiel hurried on.

“Your actions were foolish, however, and they caused Gabriel much pain. He has been through far too much in his life already. He did not deserve to have Mr. Bingley taken away from him. You thought that, because my brother does not show emotion easily, he was not serious in his affections.”

To Castiel's surprise, the alpha hung his head.

“I did”, he said quietly. “I am sorry for that.”

“What was done is done”, Castiel said sadly. “I wish things could have been different, though. Gabriel really did love your friend; he just hasn’t been able to show it since....”

He stopped, and reddened, realizing how close he had come to giving away Gabriel’s secret. They walked on in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, until they were almost at the steps again.

“I wonder, Mr. Bennet, if I might prevail upon you for a small favour”, Mr Winchester said.

Castiel looked at him in horror. He had promised.....

“No, that!” the alpha blurted out. “Only… I mentioned my stay at Longbourn to my sister in my last letter, and I know she would like to be introduced to you now you are here.”
Castiel looked at him uncertainly, wondering why Mr. Winchester would want him anywhere near the family he had so brutally rejected. He forced himself to manage a small smile.

“You were very gracious to my aunt and uncle”, he said, adding a silent ‘amazingly so, considering they are in trade’. “Yes. I would be delighted to be introduced to Miss Winchester.”

The discussion moved on to the sights and pleasures of Derbyshire, on which Mr. Winchester proved quite knowledgeable. Castiel's aunt and uncle eventually caught them up by the steps, and declining Mr. Winchester’s invitation to stop for refreshments, alighted to their carriage, though not before his uncle had promised to return in two days’ time for some fishing. As they drove away, Castiel mused on the strangeness of the unexpected encounter. It was almost like he was meeting a totally different person from the obnoxious, prideful alpha who had been so sure Castiel would accept him as a husband.

And looking back at the magnificence that was Pemberley, Castiel thought of powerful muscles rippling through a wet cotton shirt, and knew all too well that what he was feeling was dangerously close to regret.

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Castiel had naturally assumed that, when his uncle visited Pemberley for the fishing trip, he and his aunt would call on Miss Winchester and be formally introduced then. It therefore came as something of a surprise, it not a shock, when a servant interrupted him in his room the next day to report that two visitors from Pemberley were waiting on his aunt and uncle downstairs. After trying (and inevitably failing) to do something with his unruly hair, he reluctantly went to meet them.

Miss Anna Winchester turned out to be very different from her brother. Not just the shiny red hair and petite features, but the fact that she was clearly terrified at meeting strange people. Castiel warmed to her at once, and did his best to put her at ease, sharing anecdotes about his brothers with her, as well as discussing their common interest in piano-playing. It seemed to work, and she soon seemed much more relaxed.

What was strange, however, was the way in which her brother kept looking at them. Castiel could understand if he was anxious for his sister, but as Miss Winchester relaxed more, her brother looked almost relieved, as if he and not she were undergoing an ordeal. If he did not know differently, he would have thought the owner of Pemberley harboured feelings for him, despite his brutal rejection of his suit.

At the end of their meeting, Miss Winchester politely invited himself and his aunt to luncheon the next day, whilst his uncle would be fishing on the estate. By this time Castiel had become all too aware of the knowing looks his aunt and uncle were sending his way, but he evaded any further questions by personally escorting the visitors back to their carriage. He said his formal goodbyes to both of them, and had turned to leave when Mr. Winchester called out to him.

“Mr. Bennet?”

Castiel turned and raised a quizzical eyebrow at him.

“Mr. Winchester?”

“Um.... thank you!”

Castiel nodded, smiled slightly, and returned to the inn. Mr. Winchester must have been thanking him for being so kind to his sister. Of course. That was it.
He slipped back to his room and his book, but did not get much reading done.

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Castiel knew that the trip to Pemberley would be awkward, as it would involve meeting Mr. Bingley's sisters. The more he had thought about it, the more he believed they must have been as instrumental as Mr. Winchester in breaking up the relationship between his brother and theirs. Presumably Margaret Bingley had considered him a rival, which was in itself somewhat amusing, given his feelings for Mr. Winchester.

He did not really want to analyse those feelings right now.

Mrs. Walker was in her room with a headache, but Miss Bingley was cold enough for both of them, welcoming the visitors with something bordering on incivility. Castiel set himself to draw Miss Winchester out of her shell again, and they went over to examine the lovely new piano her brother had had bought for her. All went well until Miss Bingley turned to Castiel and remarked that the removal of the militia from Meryton to Brighton must be a great loss to the Bennets in particular. Castiel was roused to anger, particularly as he felt Miss Winchester flinch beside him. He knew she was remembering her own unfortunate dalliance with Wickham, something Miss Bingley knew nothing about, and his protective instincts flared up.

“We bear the loss with admirable fortitude, Miss Bingley”, he retorted. “But we struggle on. We cannot all live an empty life of luxury at someone else's expense, you know!”

She reddened considerably, and excused herself from the room. Mrs. Annesley, Miss Winchester's companion, tried unsuccessfully to turn a laugh into a cough. Even Miss Winchester smiled slightly, and whispered a small word of thanks to him later on when she thought no-one was looking. Castiel felt a little bad for the slight, but told himself the woman had deserved it.

All in all, it was a successful second visit to the house, and Castiel found himself actually looking forward to the rest of his holiday. Especially if it contained a third visit to the house. And of seeing Mr. Winchester.
Runaway Bride

Chapter Summary

Just when things are looking up, Dean's own pride proves his downfall, and he has to make a deal with the devil.

May 1801

The visit of Mr. and Mrs. Singer and their nephew to Pemberley gave Dean one particularly bad moment, just as the four men were packing up their fishing equipment. Sam had asked if Mr. Singer was enjoying his holiday, and to Dean's surprise, the man had hesitated.

“To tell the truth, we shall both be glad to return”, he had sighed. “I love being here, of course, and this is my wife’s home county, but we both miss our children, much more than we had expected. This is the first time we have been away from them for so long.”

“How many children do you have?” Dean had asked politely.

“Two, a boy and a girl”, Mr. Singer had beamed, the pride evident in his voice. “Asher and Josephine.”

“It must be difficult to find someone to care for them for so long”, Sam had said.

“We are fortunate in that aspect. They are staying at Longbourn with their cousin, Gabriel Bennet. Castiel’s older brother.”

Mr. Singer had then focussed his attention on his equipment box, giving Dean a clear view of his friend’s face. For a moment Sam had seemed to have translated himself to another world, and Dean could have well imagined the thoughts of Gabriel Bennet surrounded by happy children, playing riotously in the fields of Hertfordshire. Then Sam’s face had suddenly darkened, and he had turned away with what had been a barely stifled sob. Dean had coughed loudly to try to cover it up, but he would never forget the look of pain on his friend’s face. He, Dean Winchester, had done that. And it was high time he set about undoing it.

As he lay in bed that evening, his mind turned to the problem of Gabriel Bennet. However much he might be ‘damaged goods’ in the eyes of the locals, Dean needed to discover first if he still felt anything for Sammy, before trying to repair the hurt he had caused. That meant he had no other choice than to apply to Castiel for information about his brother. Something highly improper, for which he should expect a whole load of opprobrium. But it had to be done. He would visit the inn the following day, and talk with him.

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Dean had known the conversation with Castiel Bennet would be difficult. But when he was ushered into the room where the Singers were staying, he found the young omega in tears. The sight was heart-breaking; he desperately wanted to go over and comfort him, but that would have been wrong on so many levels.

“What has happened?” he asked anxiously.
The omega continued to sob, much to Dean's own distress, but eventually managed to speak.

"I have to return home at once. The most dreadful news…. there is not a moment to lose! I must find my aunt and uncle!"

"Then send a servant after them", Dean said firmly. "You are clearly in no fit state to go yourself."

The omega sobbed again, but managed to pull himself together enough to ring for a servant, and gave the man directions as to where he thought his aunt and uncle had gone. Then he sank back into his chair by the window. To Dean, he seemed even smaller than usual, hunched up into himself.

"It is my brother Balthazar", he ground out eventually. "He was visiting with a friend in Brighton, and he…. he has eloped. With, of all people, Metatron Wickham!"

Dean was shocked. It hit him at once that this was at least partly his own fault. Sam had urged him to make it clear to the people of Hertfordshire just what sort of character they had in their midst, but he had thought them unworthy of being so warned. And this was the consequence; the man he loved crying in front of him. Certain social exile awaited the omega's family; there was no way that someone as mercenary as Wickham would ever marry Balthazar Bennet, for under a thousand a year. Once again, Dean had hurt the family of the man he loved.

He started dolefully at Castiel Bennet, still hunched up and shaking. He so wanted to go over there and take him into his arms, but he knew he could not. Instead he seemed to be standing there helplessly forever, until he heard the welcome sound of Mr. and Mrs. Singer returning. Excusing himself, he went out and met them on the stairs, briefly summarizing the situation for them, and wishing them Godspeed for their journey home.

He had hurt the man he loved yet again. Now he had to put it right.

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He left Pemberley at once, striking across country to take the Great North Road, and thus avoid the risk of passing the Singers and Castiel Bennet on the way. He arrived in London shortly after sunset, and went straight to his house, immediately dispatching Victor a letter begging him to help find the two runaways as a matter of urgency.

Mercifully, the Dutchman came through for him even more quickly than he could have dared hope. The very next morning he sent Dean a message that Mr. Wickham and Balthazar Bennet were staying at a small inn on the southern edge of the capital, and that the former had left Brighton (predictably) due to his gambling and other debts, taking the omega with him. Dean could have used his lawyer to force the man into a debtors’ prison, but he had other, much crueler plans for the rapscallion. And for the heedless and selfish Balthazar Bennet, for threatening the happiness of the man he loved.

It was lucky that Edward Fitzwilliam, one of Adam's brothers, was in the capital, and even luckier that he was in a position to do what Dean needed. Though he was shocked at the request.

"How much you must dislike this man!" he smiled, pulling out a form. "Of course there are commissions available, even for a general like Old Thunderguts. You do know he won't allow your man to breathe unless he does it 'the army way'?

Dean smiled unpleasantly.

"That is my intention", he said grimly. "And it has the added bonus of his being based as far away
in England as he can be without leaving the country. I only hope the regiment goes on active service soon.”

“Unlikely, I’m afraid”, his cousin said. “I expect a preliminary peace with the French by the end of the year; I only hope the government does not give away too much. Now that Pitt has gone, the current lot are a weak bunch. But saying that, I wouldn’t expect the peace to hold for long, either. That Napoleon chappie can’t be trusted.”

He named a price, and Dean handed over a cheque and signed the relevant forms. The whole thing took less than ten minutes.

“Metatron Wickham is now a captain in one of the most notable regiments in His Majesty’s army!” Mr. Fitzwilliam smiled. “Will you be there when he learns who his new master is?”

“Oh yes!” Dean smiled unpleasantly. “And I will be making sure he gets there, and takes his wonderful new mate with him. There is more than one way to give a man a life sentence!”

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Wickham stared at him in astonishment.

“A whole decade!” he stammered. “And Old Thunderguts – even the Grand Old Duke of York is said to be afraid of him!”

“Ten years”, Dean said firmly. “It’s a simple choice, and one I should have forced on you long ago. Either you accept a full commission in the army and stay with both it and Balthazar Bennet for not less than a decade. Or I take the matter before the courts, and have you thrown in the debtors’ prison. From which, as I am sure you are very much aware, you will never escape.”

“This is revenge for Anna, isn’t it?” Wickham sneered.

Dean looked at him in contempt.

“Do you really have a choice?” he said acidly. “I will clear all your debts, including the ones you ran up in Longbourn and Brighton. I will settle a modest amount on Mr. Bennet – not you – which along with his settlement will enable you both to live at an acceptable level. It will be quite interesting, I must confess, to see which of you breaks the other first!”

“I hate you!”

“Your choice, Wickham. Young Mr. Bennet, or prison.”

Wickham glared at him.

“Fine!” he snapped. “I’ll take him!”

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Persuading Wickham into the arrangement had been relatively easy, compared to the problems Dean encountered when he told Mr. Singer what he had done. The older man stared at the alpha in horror.

“My brother and I will never be able to repay you!” he said at last.

“I take the expense totally upon myself”, Dean said firmly. “It was mostly my own fault this happened. Sam advised me to lay bare Mr. Wickham’s character to the people of Hertfordshire,
but I refused, because I did not deem them worthy of being warned. Your nephew was quite right about me; I was arrogant and prideful, and this is the consequence.”

“It would have taken a great effort for them to believe you anyway”, Mr. Singer pointed out, “given their opinion of you at the time. My poor brother is distraught at the whole business, especially as he was advised against allowing his son to go to Brighton in the first place.”

“Was he?” Dean asked curiously. “By whom?”

“Castiel”, Mr. Singer explained. “Even when he told us of how the two of you met in Hertfordshire, he counselled against believing everything Mr. Wickham said. He has always been very good at reading people.”

“It is a pity his father declined such good advice”, Dean said grimly. “I must beg that you do not inform anyone at Longbourn of my involvement in this matter.”

“Mr. Winchester!”

“I am serious, Mr. Singer. That family has suffered enough for my pride as it is. I would not have them bear the knowledge that a man they all so dislike sorted out a problem of his own making.”

The older man looked at him speculatively.

“I do not think quite everyone there dislikes you, Mr. Winchester”, he said with a smile. “But I must thank you again for acting on behalf of…. my dear nephew.”

He looked pointedly at Dean. The alpha knew for certain that the man could see right through him, and that it was not Balthazar Bennet to whom he was referring. And best of all, he was kind enough not to say any more.

“Mr. Castiel Bennet is back in Hertfordshire, I presume?” Dean asked. “I hope he has recovered from the shock of all this.”

“Yes”, Mr. Singer said, seeming rather thoughtful all of a sudden. “Perhaps you may meet him there one day.”

“I have no reason to return to that county, sir.”

“That is a pity”, Mr. Singer said. “Talking of Hertfordshire, we had not been there half an hour before Mr. Bartholomew Browne came to call, asking to see my nephew.”

Dean shuddered at the thought of the cadaverous beta.

“A neighbourly visit, no doubt”, he observed.

“I think that quite soon, he will propose to my nephew”, Mr. Singer said, clearly watching Dean’s face for any reaction. “And although there is not even a friendship there, Castiel may have to accept him.”

“Have to?” Dean asked, a little too loudly. “Why?”

“Well, with Gabriel unlikely to wed, it falls on Castiel to make a match that can at least partially support the family if the worst happens”, Mr. Singer said gently. “And with Mr. Bingley's lease on Netherfield still having three months to run, it is unlikely there will be any other rich alphas descending on the area. Castiel could do so much better, but at the end of the day he is a dutiful son, and if his mother asked, I think he would feel he has to accept Mr. Browne.”
He looked hard at Dean.

“I think I had better be returning to my friends in Derbyshire”, Dean said. “I... will bear you words in mind, sir.”

He bowed to the older man, and left. It shamed him to think he had not so long ago looked down on people like this.

He had to get Sam back to Hertfordshire, for both their sakes. Which would mean coming clean about what he had done over Gabriel Bennet. That would not be a good conversation.
May 1801

When the tall alpha had left the room at the inn in Lambton, Castiel had not thought he could feel any more depressed. There could of course never be any relationship between them – his own brutal (and perhaps, in retrospect, a little foolhardy) rejection of the man had seen to that – but he had hoped that there might eventually be respect between them, if not a distant friendship. Now the one person in the world the man hated had eloped with Castiel's younger brother, and Mr. Dean Winchester of Pemberley would quite rightly never want to speak to him again.

The three of them left Lambton as soon as they could, heading south for Hertfordshire. Whilst his aunt had been busy packing, his uncle had written several letters to friends and acquaintances in London, in an effort to see what could be done to locate the runaways. They would have to spend a night in Leicester and then reach Hertfordshire late the next day; hopefully the letters would be received in the capital somewhat sooner, and some news might be forthcoming. Though it would probably not be good.

Castiel's mother was a mess, and Mr. Bennet was not much better. Both wanted to go to the capital, but Mr. Singer dissuaded them, saying he needed them there in case the runaways decided to make for Longbourn (unlikely, Castiel thought, suspecting it was a ruse for his uncle to avoid being encumbered with one or both of his parents in the capital). The Singers and their children left early the following day, promising to write daily regardless of any developments.

About the only good thing in Castiel's early return was that his elder brother looked a little better, happily exhausted at having to cope with his cousins for so long. Raphael in particular was unbearably smug, saying more than once that this would never have happened had he been allowed to accompany Balthazar to Brighton. Castiel was able to persuade his mother to retire to her room for much of his first full day back, promising to inform her immediately of any developments.

The omega pointedly did not mention to his older brother that he had met Mr. Bingley and Mr. Winchester in Derbyshire, merely saying they had visited Pemberley and found it very nice. He did not want to make his brother feel any worse, though he himself did feel a pang of regret at the way things had turned out. He had even started to entertain hopes that Mr. Bingley might be persuaded to return to Hertfordshire one day, with all that would entail. All those hopes were lost now, thanks to the feckless Balthazar, towards whom Castiel felt very bitter.

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The next day passed painfully slowly, and Mr. Singer's letter from London brought no fresh news. But the day after, Mr. Bennet summoned the family to the front room. There was an ominous frown on his head.

“They have been found”, he announced gravely.
“They have been found,” he announced gravely.

“The family stared at him, waiting anxiously.

“And?” Castiel asked, fearing the worst.

“They are not married. Worse; Balthazar was on a suppressed heat, and that was one factor in the abduction. But Mr. Wickham has agreed to marry our son, provided I settle his inheritance on him now.”

“That is wonderful news!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “A marriage! I shall talk to Father Joshua at once....”

“No!”

They all looked at him in surprise. Mr. Bennet almost never raised his voice.

“They are to be married in London. Next week, the thirty-first. My brother and sister, and some friend of his, will be their witnesses. They will then remove to the North, where Mr. Wickham will take up his new commission. His new regiment is based in the city of Newcastle, and he and Balthazar will live there.”

“But they will come here first, surely?” his wife objected.

Charles Bennet rose slowly to his feet. For all his short stature, he could be intimidating when the need arose. His wife visibly shrank back.

“Understand this, my dear”, he said firmly. “As long as I draw breath, that man and his mate shall never set foot in this house! Never! Even with this sham of a marriage, Balthazar has disgraced us! As far as I am concerned, I now have precisely four sons!”

He strode from the room, whilst Castiel reached quickly for his mother's smelling salts.

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Castiel was summoned to his father's study later that same evening. Mr. Bennet locked the door before beginning.

“First, son, I owe you an apology”, he said firmly. “You were right about Mr. Wickham and we – the entire village, it seems – were wrong. Had I but listened to your advice, this whole farrago could have been avoided.”

“But at least they are to be married now”, Castiel pointed out.

To his surprise, his father laughed.

“It is your uncle we have to thank for that!” he said bitterly. “Me must have laid out at least two thousand to save our family's good name. I can never repay him!”

“Two thousand?” Castiel gasped. “But why?”

“Because someone as mercenary as Wickham would never take Balthazar for barely a thousand, unless he was either forced to or was being paid by someone else”, his father explained. “He is a scoundrel, not a fool. This is all your uncle's doing, Castiel, and I can never repay him.”

Castiel could only nod in agreement. Longbourn's finances were stable enough, but they could never lay their hands on that type of money. Why had his uncle done such a thing?
He was still puzzling over this some days later, when letters from the newly-married couple arrived at Longbourn for each of them. Castiel's contained the inevitable plea for money – he did not even try to feign surprise - but it was the last paragraph which shook him to the core.

'I wore white, by the way, and you can keep your comments about that to your good self! There were just the five of us at the do, me and Wickie, my aunt and uncle, and that weird friend of his who arranged it all. You remember, the rude one who refused to dance with you that time. He's as stuffy as ever, worse luck. He and Wickie obviously hate each other, but he got me the man of my dreams, so I do not really care how much money it cost him (I am telling just you this, Cassie, because our mother would rocket to the moon if she found out).'

Castiel gaped. Mr. Winchester had arranged his brother's wedding? But why? What possible motive could he have had? He had to write to his uncle at once.

The reply to Castiel's letter came two days later. His uncle told him that Mr. Winchester had sworn both him and his aunt to secrecy over his involvement in the dreadful business, and he was sorry that Castiel had found out in this way. He begged him to keep the information to himself, as it would only embarrass the man who had saved the family's reputation. The last few lines of his letter were particularly interesting:

'Mr. Winchester 'claims' he did this noble deed solely because it was his failure to inform the people of Hertfordshire as to Mr. Wickham's true character that contributed to this horrible business. But because I know you will keep this to yourself, nephew, I think you know as well as I do that this particular alpha had another reason for acting the way he did. I might add that when I finished the meeting by thanking him for acting on behalf of 'my dear nephew', he obviously knew quite well I was not referring to poor Balthazar. I swear his blush could be seen from across the street!'

Castiel blushed himself, and locked the letter away in his draw.

Mr. Bartholomew Browne had been over for another visit, his third since Castiel's return. Castiel still did not particularly like the beta, but if as seemed likely he was the one who would have to marry money, perhaps he could do worse. His mother had not helped, telling him four times to be sure to invite the man to the reception that would shortly be held at Longbourn.

He decided to go for a walk to help clear his head. At the gate he met his older brother, coming back from the village. Gabriel looked stunned.

"Is something the matter?" Castiel asked, concerned.

His brother looked at him strangely.

"I just spoke to Mrs. Wilkinson. Apparently she's received a big order for immediate delivery. Sa.... Mr. Bingley is returning to Netherfield!"

Castiel stared at him, not wanting to encourage false hopes, but wishing fervently that what he was thinking was right.

"Let us see what happens”, he said gently. “Take care, brother. I do not want to see you get hurt again.”
His brother smiled weakly.

“I expect I shall see him around”, he said, trying and failing to sound casual. “I shall know how to deal.”

But will you? Castiel thought anxiously. Will you really?

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“Well, see if I care!” Mrs. Bennet said for the seventh time that afternoon, as Castiel sat by the hearth. “It is his house, and he can come and go as he pleases.”

“That is good of you”, her husband said dryly. “I presume you will not want me to be visiting the man the minute he arrives this time?”

Castiel had to suppress a laugh as he saw the emotions warring on his mother’s face. Finally she spoke.

“No!” she said stoutly. “Gabriel was not good enough for him last time. If he wants to see him... us, he knows where we live!”

“Indeed he does”, Mr. Bennet intoned, getting up and heading off to his study and some peace and quiet.

Castiel tried to continue reading his book, but his mind was elsewhere. He knew full well that Mr. Samuel Bingley would never have dared to set foot in Hertfordshire again without the express permission, if not the direct encouragement, of his friend.

What on earth was Mr. Winchester playing at?
Love Hurts

Chapter Summary

Love hurts, they say. For Dean, it really, really hurts.

June 1801

After a brief stop off in Hertfordshire to hand some letters over to Sam's steward – for once the Fates were kind, and no-one from Longbourn saw him – Dean had returned to his friends at Pemberley. Sam's sisters were off to visit a friend of Mr. Walker on the Yorkshire coast, and fortunately Margaret Bingley was too excited by the news that the Prince of Wales himself would be in the area at the time to pay Dean more than the customary annoying attentions. Once they were safely seen off, Dean cornered his friend in the library.

“Sammy, have you heard any more about Netherfield?” he asked casually.

The taller man visibly tensed before replying.

“Um, I haven’t actually asked Wilkes to put out any feelers as yet. Thought I might just let the lease run out, you know.”

So far so good, thought Dean.

“Only, I know how much we all enjoyed our time there”, he went on. “I was wondering…. would you like to go back and see the old place?”

Sam looked curiously at him.

“I suppose…. I mean, it seems a shame to have a house and not use it.” He hesitated before adding tentatively, “you…. would come with me?”

“I would be delighted to, my friend.”

Sam got up to take his book back to the library, clearly still thinking hard. Dean waited until he was gone for some little time before pumping his fist into the air. Then he remembered that he still had to have that conversation about his actions in breaking up Sam's relationship and his proposal to Castiel Bennett, and he sobered up.

He was not out of the woods yet, not by a long chalk.

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Within three days of their return, no less than eight local families called to pay their respects to the lord of Netherfield. Much to Dean’s annoyance, however, Mr. Bennet was conspicuous by his absence. This depressed him, almost as much as a chance sighting of Castiel Bennet in Longbourn; fortunately the omega did not spot him, and Dean was able to slink guiltily away. Finally he buckled, and suggested to his friend that it would be discourteous for them not to call on the principal family in the area (even if said principal family was very pointedly ignoring them). Sam agreed – again, very quickly, Dean noted - and they set out to Longbourn at once.
Mrs. Bennet was even worse than Dean remembered. She gushed over Sam, was barely civil towards him, and seemed determined to tell them several times over about her youngest son’s recent marriage. It did amuse Dean somewhat that she would never know what a critical part he himself had played in securing that union, but he held his tongue. He was torn between monitoring the interaction between Sam and Gabriel, and watching Castiel Bennet. Sam was clearly desperate to talk to the eldest Bennet omega, who not unnaturally seemed a little flustered by all the renewed attention, whilst Castiel watched his brother almost nervously. Dean also caught him looking straight at him once, doing that curious head-tilt thing of his which meant he was finding something hard to understand.

Before they left, Mrs. Bennet invited them both to a dinner she was hosting late the following week, and Sam accepted with alacrity. He was smiling broadly as they resumed their carriage, and that made Dean feel happier than he had done in weeks. Until he came to the unpleasant realization that this was the moment he had to come clean to his friend as to how he had destroyed his first chance of happiness all those months ago. It was not going to be pretty.

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For a brief moment he had thought his friend might have been prepared to accept what he had done. Then Sam had turned to look his full in the face, and there was the briefest of warning glints in his brown eyes before he lashed out. Dean could have dodged, but he knew he had to let his friend get this out of his system. He had every right to be angry. Nearly a whole year of happiness, and his friend – his former guardian, the man he trusted above all others – had betrayed him.

“Why?” Sam yelled, tears in his eyes. “In the name of God, why? What did I do to deserve that? From you of all people!”

“I was trying to protect you, Sammy”, Dean muttered, feeling his jaw to check it was still attached. “I thought he might just be after you for your money; you know their family’s situation as well as I do. And he never showed any real interest in you. Even today, he was little more than friendly towards you.”

Sam ran a hand through his overly long hair. “Yes, well. Gabe – he doesn’t show emotion very well.”

“Hardly to be expected”, Dean muttered before he could stop himself.

Sam’s frown somehow got even deeper.

“You know something about him, don’t you?” he said accusingly. “You’ve been digging into his past!”

“I know a bit”, Dean hedged. “What do you know?”

“Very little, except he got badly hurt in his last relationship. Is it very bad?”

“Very. But it is Gabriel Bennet’s prerogative to give you the details. I am sorry I snooped, Sammy. I was only trying to protect you.”

Sam glared at him.

“Hmm. And another thing. Did my sisters help you in this? They suddenly turned against the Bennets for no reason, as I recall. Meg even started saying bad things about Castiel Bennet.”

Dean blushed.
“A little”, he admitted.

“But why?” Sam said, looking confused. “I mean, I can understand why they might not want me to be connected with the Bennets, but Meg only ever does things like that if she sees some sort of benefit for herself. I mean, it is not like you…..”

He stopped. Dean could almost see the gears churning in his friend’s head. This was so not good.

“She didn’t think….. you and Castiel Bennet? Really?”

Much to Dean’s indignation, Sam laughed out loud.

“It’s not that funny!” he groused, though he was relieved to see his friend's anger had abated for the moment.

“Oh dear!” Sam said, wiping his eyes. “Honestly, talk about getting the wrong end of the stick. You hardly talked to him, and he was barely civil towards you. How did she get that idea? I mean…..”

“I proposed to him.”

Sam’s laughter died in his throat. He stared at Dean incredulously, and seemed to be trying and failing to form a reply. He grasped the fireplace, his knuckles whitening under his grip.

“You did what?” he said at last, his tone ice-cold.

“I proposed to him. He refused me.”

Sam shook his head several times, as if that would enable him to make sense of a world suddenly turned very peculiar.

“So let me get this straight”, he said, and his voice was so cold it made Dean flinch. “You did your best to split me from Gabriel Bennet, because any alliance with that family would be oh so unsuitable, then you promptly went and proposed to his brother?”

Dean hung his head.

“It sounds bad when you put it like that”, he said defensively.

“Is there any way it could ever sound good?”

There was a prolonged silence between the two men. When Sam finally broke it, his voice was surprisingly gentle.

“You wanted me to come back here, didn’t you?” he said softly. “You thought the two of us might get back together.”

“I did. I guess I find it hard to stop interfering. I am sorry, Sammy.”

He looked pleadingly at his friend, and was relieved to see he looked a little calmer.

“I… I am rather glad you did, this time.” He hesitated before going on, “and you and Castiel Bennet?”

“Not a chance”, Dean said glumly. “He may have forgiven me a little, but I am sure he still dislikes me for what I did. That is a fact.”
The following day Sam prepared to go to Longbourn, having first reassured him that he had forgiven him for everything, and that they were still friends. Dean had never felt so relieved in his life before. His romantic prospects might be deader than a doornail, but at least he still had Sam’s friendship, which he had greatly feared he might forfeit by his actions. He swore that if Sam and Gabriel Bennet did get together, he would do everything in his power to make their lives as comfortable as possible.

He decided to take himself off to London for a week or so, to enable Sam to have a clear field, although his friend first extracted a promise he would be back in time for the dinner at Longbourn. Even on the carriage ride down to the city, he found himself wishing desperately to be back in Hertfordshire, and with a certain blue-eyed omega. Who could never know the depths to which Dean had gone to salvage his family’s honour and who, even if he had forgiven him his insane actions last autumn, could never truly love him.

Two days after his departure from Netherfield, Dean received the expected letter from his friend. Sam proclaimed himself the happiest and luckiest man alive, and Dean was truly glad for him. If only his own prospects were not so poor.

He was just days away from a visit by someone who would, however inadvertently, blow his beliefs clean out of the water.
Chapter Summary

Whilst happy that his elder brother's happiness is finally secured, Castiel is forced to resort to threats of physical violence to get his point across to a most unwelcome visitor.

June 1801

It was the morning after Mr. Bingley's visit, and the brothers had gone for a walk in the fields so they could speak in private. Castiel stopped and looked at his elder brother. The wind in the corn seemed strangely silent for once, and even the birdsong seemed muted.

“Did he say why he left?” he asked tentatively.

“I only had a few words with him alone, just as they were leaving”, Gabriel said, kicking his heels. “He said he was so sorry for the way he had behaved, and would do anything to make it up to me.”

“And do you still love him?”

Gabriel stopped in the middle of the field, looking down the gentle slope back towards the house.

“That is the trouble, Cassie. I do. I don't think I could..... oh no!”

Castiel looked at his brother in surprise, then followed his gaze down the field, to where Mr. Bingley was manoeuvring his long legs over the stile.

“He's coming over here!” Gabriel almost yelled, looking frantically at his brother. “Now! Help!”

Castiel took him gently by the arm, and smiled.

“Mr. Samuel Bingley is one of the gentlest creatures that ever walked the earth, and you will be perfectly safe with him.”

“I cannot....”

“You can and you will.” He kissed his brother gently on the forehead, then walked towards the approaching figure.

“Mr. Bennet.”

“Mr. Bingley.”

They bowed to each other, and whilst he was still down, Castiel quietly whispered “good luck!” to him, before walking past him and heading for home.

He hoped and prayed that things would work out this time.

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Yes And No
Two hours later Gabriel finally came home and went straight to his and Castiel's room, despite their mother's efforts to get him to talk. His brother needed just one look to know the truth.

“I.... I am going to be Monseigneur Bingley!” Gabriel managed, before bursting into tears. Castiel hugged him hard, not caring that he too was crying. His brother so deserved this after all he had been through.

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Mr. Bingley called the next day for the formality of asking Mr. Bennet for Gabriel's hand in marriage. Mrs. Bennet, predictably, had nearly gone through the roof when she was told. Her own and her family's prospects were now assured, and two of her sons were married off. Mr. Bingley announced he would shortly be holding a ball at Netherfield, at which he and Gabriel would step out as an engaged couple for the first time, and all was right with the world.

Except Castiel felt sad, although he hid it from his family. His brother had the perfect match, whilst his own prospects were bleak, although at least now he did not have to marry for money himself. That thought led him to the curious matter of Mr. Winchester, who had gone off to London before the proposal (with a bruised face, according to one rather puzzling report). There was at least the consolation that he would be back for the reception, though that was small beer. Castiel had begun to realize that Gabriel might not be the only one in love with a rich alpha. But he was the only one to get a happy ending out of it.

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It is said that the messengers of Eros and Anteros sometimes take strange forms. Though there must have been few stranger than the one who visited Longbourn unannounced two days later.

Castiel stared out of the window in astonishment. He had seen that carriage several times before. But that it should be here, sixty miles from its usual location – surely it couldn't be....

The rest of his family was all out on various errands, even his father. He briefly considered telling a servant that he too was out, but considered that Lady Naomi de Bourgh must be here for a reason, and would certainly not go away until she had achieved her purpose. Though quite what she wanted with any of the residents of Longbourn was beyond him.

She swept in with some speed, then gave poor Wilton such a glare that Castiel half expected the poor man to crumble to dust. The servant moved faster than he had ever seen him go in his hurry to leave the room.

“I am sure you know why I am here, Mr. Bennet!” she began, her voice ice-cold and angry.

Castiel felt his hackles start to rise. She might be his social superior, but her tone was unwarranted, whatever the reason for her call.

“Indeed, your ladyship”, he said politely, “I am at a loss to understand the reason for your gracing us with your presence.”

“Do not trifle with me, omega!” she almost barked. “I have received definitive information that you and my nephew, Mr. Dean Winchester, have entered into....” she paused her before almost spitting out the last words, “an understanding!”

Castiel's immediate reaction was to tell his visitor how wrong she was, but Lady Naomi had embarked on a long and vitriolic speech about the Bennets' low connections, her nephew's high ones, the social chasm that separated them, and how Mr. Winchester was already betrothed to her
own daughter. By the time she had ended by demanding that the omega admit there was no such understanding, Castiel's patience had not just run out, but had hired a coach and was halfway to London.

“I understand that your nephew is more than of age”, he said dryly. “I believe he is quite capable of making decisions for himself. As am I, and I see no reason why I should be expected to offer you any such assurance.”

She recoiled as if he had struck her.

“You impudent person!” she snapped at last. “Do you presume to tell me whatever feelings you may or may not have for my nephew stand in any way against his prior betrothal to my own daughter?”

“I know from Captain Fitzwilliam that any such betrothal is totally within your own imagination, Lady Naomi”, he said firmly. “Mr. Winchester is not engaged to your daughter. Though I have not known him long, I find him admirable in what he does for his friends. Indeed, he is a far better person that the world in general gives him credit for. He may make errors of judgement from time to time, but he strives to correct them, as my elder brother's recent happiness is witness. Whatever exists between the two of us, it is of no concern of yours.”

“I shall not be spoken to in such a manner”, she almost shrieked. “I am the widow of a knight of the realm, whilst you, Mr. Bennet, are nothing! Do you hear me? Nothing! You will never have my nephew to marriage!”

“That is for him to decide, not you.”

“Then I shall talk to him! I shall expect a lot more sense from an earl's cousin than from someone whose brother eloped with a common soldier!”

Castiel stood up sharply.

“You will now leave, Lady Naomi!” he growled.

“I have a lot more to say to you, Mr. Bennet. First, I think....”

“You will leave, or I will have the servants throw you out!”

She paled.

“You would not dare!”

He stepped towards her, his eyes glinting dangerously.

“Try me!” he hissed.

For a moment he thought she actually might start off again, but she drew herself together and swept from the room, her face as black as thunder. Castiel spared a thought for the luckless Mr. Winchester, who would certainly have an uncomfortable interview of his own very soon.

Then he remembered that he had praised the alpha to his aunt, and that the dratted woman would quite likely relay that information to her nephew when she met him. He groaned, and decided to lock himself in his room before his family came back.

++~+++
“Shut up, Gabe!”

His brother continued to roll around on the bed, wheezing with laughter.

“The prideful Mr. Winchester, and you!” he guffawed. “That is priceless!”

“He did propose to me.”

Gabriel’s laughter died in his throat, and he promptly fell off the bed.

“What?” he demanded from the floor. “When? Why did you not tell me?”

“That the man who broke your heart wanted to marry me? Or that I could have solved our financial problems at a stroke by just opening my legs, lying back and thinking of England?”

“Cassie!”

“How could I tell you, Gabe?” Castiel pressed on. “You were still reeling from Mr. Bingley’s departure, and as for mother..... she would never have let me hear the last of it. I told him what he could do with his proposal, and he has not approached me on the matter since.”

Gabriel looked at him in amazement.

“You have too big a heart, Cassie”, he said at last, suddenly serious. “You've been carrying all this round by yourself all this time, on top of all our other problems. And now the man is back in town, or will be soon. Is there any hope....?”

“After our brother eloped with his worst enemy, and I threw his proposal in his face?” Castiel said wryly. “The Lord alone knows how Lady Naomi thought we had ’an understanding’. She should be hitting Winchester House in London any time soon.”

“Poor Mr. Winchester!” Gabriel said. “At least you did not lose your temper with her, or say anything too embarrassing.”

Castiel reddened.

“Ah....”
Lady Naomi descends on Winchester House, determined to stop her nephew's 'understanding' with Castiel Bennet. But as at Longbourn, things do not go quite according to plan (apologies to Tina Turner, by the way).

June 1801

Dean was walking back from an afternoon appointment with a friend when he recognized a horribly familiar carriage outside his house. Incredibly, his aunt had come to call. He briefly considered turning tail, but reckoned that she was persistent enough to keep following him, even back to Hertfordshire. Better to deal with the problem here than there.

His aunt was waiting for him in the Yellow Room, and lost no time in setting about her business.

“I am sure you will be aware of the reason for my visit, nephew”, she began frostily.

Dean felt like the proverbial naughty schoolboy, and he did not like it.

“Indeed, aunt, I am not”, he said politely.

“Do not trifle with me, sir!” she snapped. “Two days ago I received news of devastating import in the general post, of all places! Mr. Uriel Lucas wrote me a most gracious thank-you letter for his recent stay at my house, and mentioned that he fully expected to read of your impending engagement to Mr. Castiel Bennet, of all people! You, who are engaged to my own daughter!”

Dean wondered briefly how Uriel Lucas might have thought such a thing, before remembering the young beta had been visiting the Bennets' house whilst he and Sam had called there. Obviously some look had betrayed his true feelings, and the meddlesome beta had seen fit to tattle on him. Dean was torn, unsure whether to laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of the idea of him and Castiel Bennet ever being engaged, or to again remind his aunt that there was no such engagement between himself and Lilith. He started to do the latter, but she did not let him finish.

“I am outraged, nephew! Outraged that you would behave in such a manner. And with such a family. Could you in all honesty have chosen any worse? Do not think I am unaware of how low their connections are, and as for Mr. Castiel Bennet – a rude, insufferable, manipulative slip of an omega who, it seems, is determined to have you! He even had the audacity to tell me – me, of all people! – that I had no business in this matter!”

Dean gasped as realization of what she had said struck home.

“You have been to Longbourn?” he said, feeling anger start to rise within him. “You have actually approached Mr. Castiel Bennet on this matter? How dare you!”

“I am your nearest relative, nephew. Your concerns are my concerns, especially since you are engaged….”

“I am not engaged to Lilith, nor will I ever be”, Dean said, trying to remain calm. “You must tell
her to look elsewhere for a husband. I love Mr. Castiel Bennet, and no other!"

He baulked inwardly as he spoke those words, but in view of his aunt's attack he felt them completely justified. Besides, they were all too true.

“What has love got to do with it?” his aunt demanded, her voice rising. “This is marriage! And to someone so eminently unsuitable, who is determined to ensnare you. Do you know what he had the audacity to say to me? Me, of all people? That he actually admires you, and thinks you are a far better person than the world gives you credit for! That he praises you for your role in arranging matters between your friend and his brother! He even threatened to have me thrown out of his house!”

Dean turned away for a moment, speechless. Castiel Bennet thought him admirable? A good person? Praise? And he knew, or had guessed, about Sammy. He gathered what was left of his wits and turned back to face his aunt.

“I fully intend to propose to Mr. Castiel Bennet”, he said firmly, narrowly managing to avoid adding the word ‘again’, “and I tell you now, aunt, there is nothing in this world you can say or do that would dissuade me!”

“I am sure the whole family will shun this disastrous alliance!”, his aunt said angrily. “And he shall never be admitted to Medlington whilst I am alive!”

Dean drew himself up to his full height.

“The family have more sense than you give them credit for, aunt”, he said angrily. “And until the day Monseigneur Castiel Winchester crosses the thresh-hold of Medlington Manor, you shall no longer be welcome at Pemberley!”

His aunt gaped at him, finally seeing to realize just how determined he was. There was a stunned silence.

“Goodbye, nephew”, she said coldly. “I shall return to Kent, and wait until you have come to your senses.”

Dean smiled.

“I am quite sensible enough, aunt, so you do not need to wait. And soon I shall return to Longbourn – and to Mr. Castiel Bennet! And since he alone holds my future happiness in his hands, I shall propose to him, and him alone.”

She swept out of the room, and was gone. Dean waited until he was sure he heard the front door close behind her, then sank into a chair.

Admirable? A good person? Praiseworthy? Did that mean….. was there actually….. hope?

+---+

Sam was waiting on the steps of Netherfield as Dean’s carriage drew up. He looked – well, radiant. Dean felt another twinge of guilt for delaying that happiness as he had, but Sam welcomed him effusively, spilling out the details of his (renewed) courtship even as they were climbing the steps.

“I am so happy, Dean! He’s told me everything that happened in the past, and he actually thought I might reject him because of it! The golden-eyed idiot! I told him the past was where it was staying, and we should plan for our future. I am going over to see him this afternoon.” He looked
at his friend hesitantly before adding almost shyly, “would you like to come?”

Dean smiled warmly at him.

“I will. And do not worry about me. I am sure Mrs. Bennet will contrive something so that you two love-birds can be alone.”

“We are not love-birds!”

Dean gave him a look.

“Shut up!”

“I didn’t say anything, Sammy.”

“You have very loud thoughts!”

Dean smiled, and went to get ready. Today, before he completely lost his nerve, he would tell Castiel Bennet that he still felt the same about him as he had at Medlington, and that he hoped fervently the omega would forgive him everything that had happened in the past. He might well get rejected a second time – the odds were heavily against any sort of positive answer, he knew – but he had to do it. And even if Mr. Bennet said they would have to wait a while until he could start to return Dean’s feelings, he would wait.

He would wait for that omega forever.
Two Proposals

Chapter Summary

Castiel is proposed to. Twice. On the same day.

June 1801

Castiel stared at the other man in shock.

“You… are proposing to me?” he asked eventually.

Mr. Bartholomew Browne smiled.

“I know you do not think much of me, from when I was hitting poor Alaric when we first met”, he admitted. “But I intend training to be a doctor, and my estate is of sufficient size that it could support us both very comfortably. I don’t ask for an answer straightaway, Castiel. You will need some time to consider this.”

Castiel crossed to the window deep in thought, then baulked when he saw who was approaching up the path.

“Oh no!”

“What is it?” Mr. Browne asked, concerned.

“Mr. Bingley and his friend are calling.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know!” He looked pleadingly at the beta. “Thank you for the offer, Mr. Browne. I shall let you know within seven days, I promise.”

“That is all I ask, Castiel.”

The beta bowed, and they left the room, meeting the new arrivals in the hall. Castiel noticed immediately how Mr. Winchester’s face darkened when he saw the two of them emerge together, and wondered why. Fortunately Mr. Browne left quickly, and Mrs. Bennet then suggested that they all go up to take in the view from Barton Rise. Castiel did not want to spend any more time with the confusing alpha than was necessary, but at least it would enable him to thank him for all his efforts on behalf of the wayward Balthazar, and to do so away from the house.

Sam and Gabriel predictably soon fell a long way behind. Castiel spent some little time gathering his courage, but Mr. Winchester spoke first.

“I see Mr. Browne was visiting”, he said, still frowning for some reason.

“Yes, he has been around a lot lately”, Castiel said distractedly.

Dean made a strange noise that seemed to indicate annoyance.
“A friend of yours, is he?”

“He wishes to be more. He proposed to me earlier.”

“He did what?”

Castiel was taken aback at the sudden increase in volume. He moved away from the alpha, who blushed noticeably.

“I have told him I shall consider his offer”, Castiel said. “He holds a considerable estate over St Albans way, and it would be a good match.”

Mr. Winchester looked like he was about to make a pithy comment, but bit it back.

“But I am glad we have this chance to talk”, Castiel continued, stopping and leaning against a tree. “There is something I feel I must say to you.”

The alpha looked surprised. Castiel ploughed on, before his courage failed him.

“I… have become aware of the part you played in facilitating my brother Balthazar’s marriage to Mr. Wickham”, he said, blushing for some reason. “I know you must have expended a great deal of time and effort to secure this. For that, I am deeply grateful.”

“Did Mr. Singer tell you?” the alpha asked, looking vexed.

“He did not. My brother let slip your involvement in the whole business in a letter he wrote to me. You have spared our family deep pain, and for that, I must thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I know also that Mr. Bingley would not have returned to Netherfield without your blessing, if not your guidance. Our family owes you a great deal….”

“I did it all for you!”

Castiel stared at him in shock. He had wondered at the alpha's motives for his actions, and whether his uncle was right as to his real motives. Still, all that time, effort and money for him, Castiel Bennet? Did that mean...?

“I do still love you!” Mr. Winchester blurted out, stunning Castiel even further. “I am sorry. I know that I promised I would never bother you again in this matter, but…. when I met you at Pemberley, even though we only had a few days together, I knew that I would always love you. But say the word, and I promise, I will never speak of this matter again. Ever. You have my word on that.”

He turned away, looking incredibly sad. Castiel stared down at his feet and scuffed them on the ground, trying to make sense of what he had just heard. The man still loved him! The man whom he had so brutally rejected was, by some miracle, still in love with him! Him, insignificant little Castiel Bennet! He forced himself to somehow put one foot in front of another, and managed the few steps he needed to draw nearer to the alpha, who was actually shaking.

“I think…. I may have been a little bit prejudiced in my first opinion of you, Mr. Winchester”, he said slowly, desperate not to say the wrong thing. “I have seen the way you behave around others, the many things you do for them, the way you protect those you love – even if you do perhaps venture a little too far at times…”

The alpha blushed. Castiel hurried on.

“But you are a good alpha, and perhaps our first meeting was not exactly the best way to be
introduced.”

Mr. Winchester looked at him sorrowfully.

“I am sorry for that”, he said, clearly ashamed at the reminder. “The way I treated you at that first ball – it was unforgivable.”

“For everything you have done since, I have forgiven you”, Castiel said, managing a small smile.

The alpha shuddered again.

“You… would be prepared to be my friend?” he said, forest green eyes flashing a quick glance at the omega.

Castiel sighed.

“I... could be your friend”, he said shyly, not missing the flare of hope in the alpha's eyes before he turned away again. “I suspect your aunt called on you in London not long after she came to see me?”

“She did”, Mr. Winchester admitted, blushing even more. “She said you had told her you thought me... admirable. A good person. And that you praised me.”

“She provoked me intensely”, Castiel admitted. “I told her what I truly felt, and she did not take it well. I even threatened to have her forcibly removed at one point!”

The alpha chuckled.

“I know! She was still fuming when she reached London! I do not think I exactly improved her mood, either!”

“Captain Fitzwilliam told me about her fixation as to you and her daughter”, Castiel said, smiling slightly. “She was sure I was out to entrap you into matrimony.”

The alpha said nothing, but stared fixedly at Castiel's mouth, as if the answers to all his problems were somehow therein.

“I... I do rather like you, Mr. Winchester”, Castiel said slowly. “I am sorry I was so.... frank when you proposed to me. It was unbecoming. You deserved better....”

Whatever he had been about to say was stifled by the fact that Mr. Dean Winchester suddenly turned and shoved him against the nearest tree, kissing him like his life depended on it. For a brief moment Castiel's body seemed to have lost its connection with his brain, then he simply melted into the alpha's grasp, feeling as if he had always belonged there. The man finally had to let him go in order to draw breath, but still held him firmly by the shoulders. He looked shocked by what he had just done.

“I... er... I....”

He stopped, looking pleadingly at the omega. Castiel smiled at him.

“Well, Mr. Browne's proposal was decidedly more... conventional”, he managed, trying to return his breathing to normal. “Am I to count that as a, er, ‘statement’ of renewed affections on your part, Mr. Winchester? Because if you intend to actually put it into words, I should warn you now that any verbal offer from your good self would stand a strong chance of being accepted.”
The alpha immediately got down on one knee.

“Mr. Bennet, will you do me the honour of accepting my hand in marriage?”

Only a very badly-behaved or truly mischievous omega would have toyed with the affections of their alpha at this stage in the proceedings. Unfortunately for Mr. Winchester, Castiel was just one such omega. He looked thoughtful for a few moments, silently enjoying the look of sheer terror that was evident on the alpha’s face as he thought he might be rejected a second time.

“I did say just ‘a strong chance’”, he said, his eyes gleaming with mischief. Well, I suppose I might consider you.”

“Why, you little...!”

Before he could react, Castiel had dropped to his knees and was kissing him hard. And Mr. Dean Winchester, master of Pemberley and nephew to the Earl of Hexhamshire, may have been a true alpha, but he did not seem to mind one little bit.

+~+~+

They walked slowly back to Longbourn, and arrived to find Sam and Gabriel had beaten them back, presumably having returned via a different route. Fortunately Mrs. Bennet was so intent on her eldest son that she did not remark on the unusually long time her second one had been absent. Castiel had wanted to share his happiness with Gabriel, but he and Mr. Winchester had agreed that they would not divulge anything to anyone until they had received Mr. Bennet's sanction for the match.

+~+~+

Castiel knew that Mr. Winchester’s interview with his father would be a tricky one, not least because as far as the latter knew, his second son still hated the man who was now asking for his hand in marriage. He was surprised, however, when one of the servants came to summon him to the meeting, and for his father to openly ask him if he was sure of what he was doing, in a tone which clearly suggested he thought his son was only doing this for the money.

“Absolutely sure, father!” he said firmly.

His father opened his desk and took out a small notebook. Castiel's heart sank.

“Only I seem to recall that you once described your prospective future husband as, and I quote, 'the most arrogant, prideful, obnoxious, self-centred and insufferable alpha it had ever been my grave displeasure to have to meet'”, he said dryly.

Castiel's face turned bright red. There was a decidedly awkward pause.

“Your son's description of me was, at the time, doubtless quite correct, sir”, Mr. Winchester said, coming to his rescue. “But I have striven to improve myself considerably since, and he has been magnanimous enough to acknowledge my efforts. I would deem it a great honour if you would grant your sanction for our marriage.”

“My good man, I would be delighted! I am sure that Castiel of all my sons knows his own mind. I doubt the two of you will ever agree on much, but I am sure you will be very happy together. I do however ask one thing.”

“Of course, sir”, Mr. Winchester said.
“Give me five minutes' start before Castiel tells his mother.”

“What?”

“Because I intend to be halfway to the village, so I do not have to deal with all the shrieking!”

Halfway to the village, as it turned out, was not far enough.

+++

Castiel's happiness was complete when he was able to break the news to Gabriel, who was overjoyed. He immediately suggested a double wedding, which threw their mother into a further ecstasy, as she could not decide whether one grand wedding or two regular ones would bring her greater happiness. Of his other brothers, Raphael was obviously jealous, whilst Michael barely looked up from his latest book. Predictably, there was soon a letter from Balthazar asking when he and his husband might wait on the happy couple at Pemberley.

“The twelfth of never!” the alpha growled, much to the omega's amusement.

Castiel was particularly delighted to receive no less than eight pages of congratulations from Miss Winchester, in which she looked forward to welcoming the new Laird of Pemberley. His friend Inias sent him a congratulatory letter from himself and his husband, the two of them having decided to decamp to London in order to escape the wrath of Lady Naomi. She wrote her nephew an angry letter of such pure vitriol that he swore he would get his solicitor to draft a reply, cutting off all communication with her for good. But Castiel begged him not to, and eventually the alpha wrote back something considerably gentler than her original missive had deserved. They did not hear from her for a whole year, after which a short note arrived stating that Lady Naomi might condescend to call in at Winchester House someday, if she could find the time. And if her nephew happened to be in the house at that time, so be it.

As soon as they could, the two couples had their double wedding at Longbourn, with Father Joshua presiding. Mr. Bingley had decided to quit Netherfield, and to both Castiel's and his new husband's joy he was able to purchase Lynton Grange, less than four miles down the road from Pemberley, so the four of them became neighbours as well. Less than half a year after one of the darkest periods in his life, Castiel could truly say that things had never been better.

Except that they very soon were.
A new chapter looms in the life of Mr Dean Winchester of Pemberley.

August 1801

It was the morning after Castiel's first heat since Dean had claimed him, the day after he had asked for his hand in marriage as was traditional with omegas. That Castiel had gone into heat at the same time had been an added bonus; it did not always happen with omegas, though Gabriel too had been fortunate.

Dean lay back in his bed, wincing as certain muscles protested at their over-use during the past five days, but happier than he felt he had any right to be.

“Dean, my love?” came a familiar rumble.

“Mphm?”

“You really need to get up. You are meeting your estate manager at ten.”

Dean rolled his body up against that of his omega, silently marvelling how well they fitted together.

“I am up!” he smiled. “Can you not feel how up I am?”

“You are insatiable!” Castiel laughed.

“Then try sating me some more, my love”, Dean growled.

“Up! Now! The staff already think we spend far too much time in bed as it is!”

“Not enough for me, my beautiful omega!”

Castiel slipped away from him and pulled on a dressing-gown before walking across to the window.

“You said I might choose how to redecorate one of the rooms”, he said, looking shyly at his husband.

“Come back here and I’ll make it two. Three if you're really good. And four if you're really bad!”

“Dean! I just thought…. would you mind if I picked the third bedroom? I think it would be ideal.”

“Ideal for what?” Dean asked drowsily.

His mate looked at him meaningfully, then casually ran a hand over his stomach. Dean stared at him in confusion for a moment before reality dawned.

“No!”
“I should be by this time!” Castiel chuckled. “I had the doctor call by yesterday afternoon. I am
due in six to seven months.”

“My son!”

“Or daughter. Though the odds are very much on a son, given our families’ records.

Dean leapt out of the bed and strode across the room, grasping his mate in his arms.

“Dean! This window opens out onto the front of the estate! People might see!”

The alpha growled in the omega’s ear.

“Then let’s give them something to see, beloved. I can still make that meeting if I leave in half an
hour. Bed, now!”

Castiel laughed, and allowed his husband to carry him back to the huge four-poster bed. Dean
placed him gently down on the sheets, taking a moment to savour the sheer beauty of the young omega.

That priest had been right after all. Good things did happen. In the end.

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