Sugar Rush
by coffeeandcas

Summary

Dean Winchester’s life is pretty damn awesome, for lack of a better word. He loves his family, he’s getting married to the love of his life, and he has an awesome job at a bakery downtown which he seems to have a natural flair for. All is going great - up until the day everything falls apart.

Castiel is trying to do it all - and struggling. He’s balancing planning a wedding with relaunching his career and caring for his children, and in the midst of it all his relationship with his brother is sharply deteriorating. He’s plagued by nightmares and anger issues as he digs up skeletons from his own closet.

Can Dean forgive himself for what happened back in Kansas when it seems like nobody else can? Will Castiel and Jimmy reconcile in time for the wedding? Will Dean and Cas even make it down the aisle, especially when a sudden and serious illness takes hold of someone close to their hearts?

Notes

Happy Christmas, everyone! Here’s a little gift from me, I hope you like it.
My big announcement is that I'm now working with a lovely, very talented beta and someone I'm sure you already know thanks to her awesome work: tricia_16. So thank you, Tricia, for your help, advice and agreeing to work with me. I'll try not to make you tear your hair out too much :P

This will be slow posting because I currently have no internet connection at home and posting from my phone is really awkward. But good things come to those who wait, right?

Anyway, enough from me. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Christmas (noun):

synonyms: Xmas, Noel

1) the annual Christian festival celebrating Christ's birth, held on 25 December in the Western Church.

2) celebrated on December 25 and now generally observed as a legal holiday and an occasion for exchanging gifts.

3) most definitely not in the middle of fucking July. In any country, anywhere, as far as Dean (and the rest of the world) is concerned.

♡♡♡

Dean Winchester squints curiously at the blue vintage radio on the shelf, which is currently spewing out a cheerful rendition of *Jingle Bell Rock*, then out at the glorious summer’s day and the sun reflecting off the water. It must be a hundred degrees out; everyone is in shorts, tees, or dresses, yet inside the bakery the atmosphere is surprisingly festive. He's not sure if he's the one losing his marbles, or if it's his boss, Gabriel, who is currently in the kitchen rolling out another sheet of cookie dough to cut into reindeer shapes. Earlier, it had been Christmas trees. Later, it will probably be holly bushes or candy canes, and by then Dean may very well have strangled him with the first thing he gets his hands on. Some goddamn fairy lights, probably.

They've been open for two weeks following a sudden renovation and he isn't sure if this is some dippy marketing ploy of Gabriel’s to try and entice new customers in by acting totally fucking weird or what the hell’s going on. Either way, it seems to be working. The elderly ladies who normally
swing by on Wednesday afternoons had cooed over the glittery cookies clustered in one of the glass cases by the window (“Well, it's such a waste to save it all just for one day, when you think about it!”) and the children who had walked by in a neat little line like ducklings had pressed their noses up against the window and oohed and aahed until their teacher had allowed them five minutes to look around while she surreptitiously bought a box stuffed full of sugar cookies and chocolate logs.

As Dean arranges yet another display of raspberry-mint cupcakes he thinks he might just have to concede: Gabriel may be a little wayward, but he knows how to draw a crowd.

He'd really, really missed working here during the time it was being renovated. He and Meg had come into work one morning in early May to find the place barely more than a pile of ashes and kindling as a distraught Gabriel screamed into the phone at some poor insurance associate who must have been quaking in his boots. Some faulty wiring had caused a spark during the night and the place had all but burned to the ground.

Meg had consoled Gabriel through her own shocked tears, while Dean tried to help the firefighters clear out the remains of the mess and salvage what he could - which wasn't much. They had closed the place down, and six weeks later after all three of them worked twelve hour days alongside a team of workmen, they reopened with a new name, a new logo, and a new layout.

There were now little chairs on the street outside with circular tables for customers to sit and drink their espressos at. They serve ice cream and gelato. They've launched, after Cas’ shy suggestion at dinner with Gabriel and his wife Kali one night, a gluten-free and dairy-free range of cookies and pastries. Dean had poked warily at them before trying one and still won't admit to Cas that they taste just as good as the sugar and cream laden delicacies he tends to go for. They'd taken advantage of the damage from the fire to extend the cafe and fit a new white marble countertop flanked by glass cabinets, and have lined the walls with shelves to display Gabriel’s handiwork. Dean himself is slowly learning to bake and enjoys it. His signature is chocolate and cinnamon croissants, and they always sell out every day.

The shop smells, as always, fantastic. Sugary, buttery sweetness fills the air mingling with cinnamon and the rich scent of ground coffee. Aside from his home by the beach, this is Dean’s favourite place. He wipes down the counter for the tenth time, making sure it shines, and rearranges a pile of cinnamon rolls beside the till which stare up at him tantalisingly. Out the back, he's already got two boxes of goodies ready to take home with him. As he tucks a plaid towel into his apron pocket and his fingers brush a little extra pudge that definitely wasn't there a few months ago, he wonders guiltily if he should cut back on the treats. Cas is so healthy and Dean has tried so hard to mimic him - doing extremely well if truth be told - but the cookies and cupcakes and brownies sold at Sugar Crush are just too good to be true, and his waistline is proudly displaying the effects. He runs a hand self-consciously over his stomach and retreating back behind the counter to rearrange a display of raspberry snickerdoodles, finding himself humming along to Rockin’ Robin and stopping instantly with a grimace. What the hell is wrong with Gabriel?

The doorbell jingles and Dean looks up, a smile splitting his face as he sees who it is. Even after over a year of being together, seeing Cas brings butterflies to his stomach. His boyfriend - no, fiancé, and damn he still can't get used to that - holds the door open for two little twin boys dressed in blue denim shorts and t-shirts with inspirational slogans on them, and smiles as they immediately run up to the counter to press their noses and palms against the glass. His gaze then travels to Dean and the look in his eyes warms immediately, then fades in confusion as he hears the background music playing.

“You know it's July out there, right?” Cas approaches the counter and Dean leans over to give him a peck on the lips. “And over a hundred degrees?”
“I know,” Dean represses an eye-roll. Billie is gazing up at him with a huge smile; the kid is at the stage of copying everything Dean does so he has to be very careful about what he says and the actions he allows Billie to see. He's already accidentally taught Billie how to say ‘fuck’ and ‘asshole’ by not watching his tongue when the boy is around. He still hasn't lived that one down. “I dunno what's up with Gabriel. I think Rudolph bit him in his sleep.”

He winks at Lexie who smiles back, standing close to his father and holding his hand tightly. He's looking around the shop with the same awe-filled expression that usually takes hold of him when he enters the bakery, like he's just walked into wonderland. After a gentle nudge from Cas, and a quick check behind him to make sure they're the only people in the bakery apart from Dean, Lexie approaches the glass case and presses his nose against it to look at all the brightly-colored cookies and the sticky goodness of the eight varieties of brownies they now stock. On the top shelf a selection of cupcakes sparkles brightly down at them, the frosting glittery and inviting. Lexie stands on tiptoe and his lips move as he carefully reads the word 'strawberry' to himself. A fresh wave of pride pulls through Dean; Lexie is excelling in school, well above his reading abilities, and his teacher always sings his praises. Billie bounds up to his side and together they whisper and point at the things they'd like, reading secret smiles while their parents watch.

“What time are you home?” Cas is absently playing with the glinting band on his left ring finger, the one Dean put there only a few months ago. “I thought we could have a barbecue on the beach? Jimmy wants to come over too.”

Dean is possibly imagining it but he's sure there's a barely-suppressed note of irritation in Cas’ voice as he finishes speaking. Somehow, his relationship with Jimmy seems to have become a little strained over the last few weeks and Dean can't quite put his finger on why. He's not even certain that Jimmy has noticed. He's sure Cas isn't doing it on purpose, isn't being intentionally snappy with his brother or rolling his eyes behind Jimmy’s back whenever he says something Cas disagrees with. It started just before Dean’s workplace burned down and seems to be slowly getting worse. Dean’s been meaning to talk to Cas about it, to check in and make sure everything is okay, but he just hasn't had the time. He's been working all hours to get the bakery back on its feet and when he gets home either he's either exhausted or Jimmy is there.

Cas looks tired, Dean notices. He's got dark circles under his eyes and a tense, pinched expression on his face that makes alarm curl unpleasantly in Dean’s gut. How long has he worn that expression? How long have his frown lines been more prominent? When was the last time he smiled? Thinking about it now, he can't actually remember the last time Cas laughed and guilt joins the alarm now pounding in his chest. He reaches across the counter to take Cas’ hand.

“Are you okay?”

Cas actually looks startled to be asked then nods ruefully. “Sure. Just tired. Kids are running me ragged today and my editor is badgering me for a revised draft. Everything’s fine.”

He offers up an unconvincing smile and Dean squeezes his fingers.

“Well, how about I do dinner tonight and you can relax? The boys can help me. You know how Billie is starting to enjoy cooking.”

“That would be nice, Dean, thank you.” A fresh, genuine smile washes over Castiel’s face and the knot in Dean’s chest unclenches. “It’s just been a long week. I'm looking forward to seeing you properly this evening. And the kids. And Jimmy,” he adds as an afterthought but smiles and runs a hand through his hair, messing it up even further. Dean watches him, considering. Perhaps he's over analyzing the elder set of twins. Maybe Cas isn't being as sharp with his brother as it seems. He sure looks happy to be seeing him tonight. He's certain they go through phases like everyone else, and
Cas gets naturally grumpy when he's a bit stressed out. And his editor has been hassling him more than usual lately. Perhaps his twin is just the one on the receiving end of it, and Jimmy is so used to it by now that it doesn't even bother him.

Jimmy bought a new place in the last few months, too, and Cas has been busy helping him unpack and get settled. It's a four-storey house right on the edge of town, expensive and tastefully decorated (so right up Jimmy’s street) backing onto lush woodland leading into a deep forest. They've been hiking there already a few times as a family, and Dean smiles as he recalls the grin on Cas’ face as he watched his sons climb trees and swing from them. They both watch now as Billie reaches for his twin and pushes his dark hair back off his face. There's been a marked change in the twins since joining kindergarten: Billie, who had started off disliking school, is now making lots of friends but causing more trouble than Cas and Dean would like, acting out and talking back to his teachers, while Lexie still has a few friends but has retreated more into himself. Dean thinks that likely goes hand-in-hand with the amount of school he's missed over the last couple of months, probably causing his confidence to drop. He immediately turns his thoughts away from that subject; he's hated how sick Lexie has been lately. He's had one thing after another: colds, the flu, a cough that didn't want to quit and, following some blood results that showed an immune deficiency, eventually Dr. Bradbury had prescribed him a dose of steroids which would tackle any underlying infection and, thankfully, they seemed to work. He's got another few weeks of taking them and then he should be back to his normal self. It's been a harrowing time, but the kid is on the mend, slowly.

Dean still has to pinch himself from time to time to make sure he isn't dreaming. That he is a part of this family, that the two boys call him daddy, and that this is all real. It has been a somewhat rocky road getting here, but finally it seems like everything is really falling into place. He's got his job, his husband-to-be, his children, and his brother back in his life plus a brand new niece. Sure there are a few kinks to be worked out, a few bridges to build, but nothing happens overnight, and in general, he's pretty thrilled with how everything is going. He rests on his elbows and peers down at Lexie who smiles at him and leans forward. Cas hoists the boy up under his arms and sits him on the countertop; Lexie immediately twists around and wraps an arm around Dean’s neck.

"Are you coming home now, daddy?"

"Not yet, kiddo. Got a few more treats to sell, floors to clean, then I'm all yours.” He blows a raspberry onto Lexie’s neck and the boy giggles and wriggles away. “See anything you fancy?”

"It looks like Christmas in here!” Billie announces proudly, reaching for Cas with arms full of neatly-wrapped Christmas tree sugar cookies. “And it smells like it, too!”

The kid is right: the scent of cinnamon and cloves is heavy in the air now, and Dean is sure Gabriel is probably only moments away from breaking out the eggnog and mulled wine. Dean takes the cookies from Billie and puts them into a paper bag - recycled, another suggestion from Cas that Gabriel leapt at - and stows them behind the counter to take home later. At Billie’s pout, he shakes his head.

“No sugar until after dinner, kiddo. You know the rules.” Dean wipes his brow with the hand that isn't holding onto Lexie. The shop is swelteringly hot in spite of the air conditioning and he vehemently wishes he could leave and go home with Cas and the twins to enjoy the sea air.

“That's a horrible rule, Dean Winchester, and I demand you break it immediately.” A cheery voice sounds from behind them and Gabriel appears with a tray of cinnamon swirls and a grin on his face.
“Hey, Cassie, how are you?”

“Fine,” Castiel’s cheeks pink up a little at the nickname. “The kids wanted to see what you're up to.”

“Cookin’ up a storm as usual.” Gabriel deposits the tray on the counter then slides two cookies into a bag and leans over to hand them to Lexie, either missing or ignoring the expression of irritation on Cas’ face. Cas hates people giving the children sugary food without his permission; Dean has to turn away to hide a slightly guilty smirk. The boy takes the bag with a shy smile and a whispered thank you, and Gabriel ruffles his hair affectionately.

“No problea, amigo. Dean, get on home. Meg and I can clean up; go enjoy this beautiful day with your family. And take a photo of you and Cas skinny dipping for me.”

Gabriel winks lewdly while Cas blushes scarlet and Dean glares half-heartedly. Gabriel is a consummate flirt, and it doesn't seem to matter one jot that he's straight as an arrow: he loves to hit on both Dean and Cas on the regular. But Dean isn't one to say no to an early finish, so he high-tails it to the break room to unwind his apron from his waist and grab a change of clothing. He can hear Gabriel and Cas making small talk and strains his ears to listen. Castiel isn't the biggest fan of the candy-loving baker. He's never said as much, but Dean has caught him shooting jealous glances whenever Gabriel gets too flirty, and his tone is always stiff and formal whenever they hang out. Like it is right now.

“So, any particular reason for all the festivities?” Cas asks, politely.

“None at all!” There’s a clatter, the sound of Gabriel messing about with baking trays. “Just a flash of inspiration, Cassie.” Dean smirks in spite of himself; Cas really hates that nickname. “Why reserve all the festivities for a few short weeks? An the customers are loving it - look!”

No doubt he's pointing to one or both of the boys, dazzled by the sugar and the lights, and Dean tugs a clean t-shirt over his head with a grin. As weird and kooky as his boss is, he can't deny that Gabriel has some sort of charm about him. It's a shame Cas doesn't quite see it that way.

Less than ten minutes later, he's walking down the Main Street with Lexie on his shoulders and Billie tottering along happily crunching on a cookie, while Cas follows a few paces behind talking on his phone. The weather is blissful, hot and dry with a refreshing breeze on the air, and as they wander towards the car to head home Dean thinks life in this small town is pretty damn good.
Castiel wakes in the middle of the night, gasping. He's sitting bolt upright, eyes glazed unseeingly, with his hand outstretched in front of him as though he's reaching for something... or someone. It takes him a full minute to realise where he is and that he's been trapped in the throes of a nightmare, and when he finally lowers his hand he clenches it into a fist in an effort to stop it trembling.

Glancing down, he takes in the prone figure of Dean sleeping soundly next to him. Dean's face is relaxed in sleep, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth, and he's snoring softly. One hand pillows his cheek and the other twists gently in the sheets around his waist after being almost tugged off him by Cas's tossing and turning. As his heartbeat slows, Cas reaches out and winds his fingers through Dean's hair, finding comfort in the touch, though his hand still shakes and he's drenched in cold sweat and shivering. Hugging his knees in to his chest he rests his forehead on them for a moment before pushing the sheets away and getting up. The hardwood floor is cool beneath his bare feet. His throat is tight and he swallows reflexively. Has he been talking in his sleep? Crying out? He must not have been. Dean surely would have awoken if he was.

The living area is bathed in balmy light from the full moon so he doesn't bother to turn on the lamps. There's a breeze getting in from somewhere, likely from one of the windows that must have been left open, and he shivers as he crosses to the stove to put the kettle on to boil. It's a ritual of his if he wakes in the night to brew a peppermint tea and sip it slowly to try and calm himself and lull himself back into near-sleep. Lately, it hasn't been working.

He gazes down vacantly at the beach outside. The weather has been almost unbearably hot even for this time of year, yet he's cold everywhere all the time. Dean has passed a couple of absent-minded comments about Cas being wrapped up in sweaters and cardigans while the rest of them are in summer clothing, but he dismisses it with a shrug and a smile. Castiel leans back against the counter and waits impatiently for the water to boil. The kids want to go to the beach tomorrow, he suddenly remembers. It's Saturday and they want to play in the water and build a sand castle. He can do that, they can all do that. He doesn't need to think about the day Lexie almost drowned yet again. He can relax and enjoy himself. He doesn't need to worry about the mounting pile of emails he needs to respond to either, or the fact that they still haven't settled on a date or location for their wedding. Or how the very thought of the wedding makes an anxious knot twist in his stomach. It's fine, it's all fine, he can worry about those things later... or never. That works too.

A buzzing sound snaps him from his reverie and he turns to see his phone, which he had abandoned on the counter earlier in the day, lit up with a text message. He ignores it for a moment, filling his cup with hot water and pausing to take a few deep breaths. The hand pouring the water still shakes, and he forces himself to rein in his anxieties. It was a dream. There's nothing here to hurt him. It isn't real. Well, it was real but it isn't any more. It's in the past, and the past can't hurt him any more. Right? Sighing at his own confusion, he scoops his phone up and reads the message through narrowed, squinting eyes, the screen too bright in the dim room.

**Cas? You awake?**

Cas sips his tea and rubs his temples, eyes closed. The pounding behind his eyes isn't ceasing one bit. He wonders if Jimmy has awoken suddenly too, sensing his distress, or if that's possibly a bit far-fetched.

**Yes. How did you know?**

**Twin thing. Is everything OK?**
Cas glances at the clock: two in the morning. There's every chance Jimmy hasn't gone to bed yet, is sitting up watching documentaries with a glass of wine after grading his final term papers. His summer break starts next week, which means he's been up to his eyeballs in paperwork yet has still found time for his brother and nephews. Cas feels a swell of affection towards his twin and picks up his cup and phone, settling on the sofa beside the open screen door and finding the source of the draught. He must have forgotten to close it properly before bed. That's not like him. There's a sweater of Dean’s thrown over the arm and he pulls it on, feeling chilled as per usual these days. The remnants of the nightmare still cling to him, images of things he can't forget, and he blinks to try and clear them. The shadows in the living room seem threatening somehow and he turns on the lamp beside him, pulling his knees to his chest.

Is everything OK? His thumb lingers over his phone's keypad as he hesitates, unsure how to respond. He's fine, generally speaking. But sometimes…

Fine. Bad dream.

Jimmy’s response is immediate. Again? Same thing?

Yes...

Cas pauses before hitting send. He doesn't want Jimmy to worry; he's perfectly fine and just going through a weird phase. He's always been prone to nightmares, or night terrors as his parents used to call them, so this is nothing new. He just hasn't suffered with them in a long time. Since right after Cole’s death. In the months that followed he had been like some macabre animated corpse: pale and thin and plagued by horrific nightly visions of his husband lying dead before him, of his children crying, and himself collapsing to his knees with his baby boy in his arms unable to look away from the scene before him. It had been the worst period of his life, and the fear of ever feeling that way again is causing him more stress than he dare admit. He can't pinpoint where it's all come from lately, but the worry of what could happen in the future and the ‘what if’s that slink in whenever he's alone and his mind wanders. Sipping his mint tea he shakes his head dully, trying to come back to himself, and erases the word he's typed.

No. Just something silly this time. I'm fine, Jimmy, don't worry.

You sure? Cas can picture his brother’s doubtful frown. I'm here if you want to talk about anything.

Thanks. But no. I'm going to go back to bed. Talk to you tomorrow.

But he doesn't go back to bed. He sits with arms around his knees and watches the ocean lap at the beach outside. He watches as the sky grows pale with the approaching dawn, and only when he knows Dean will be stirring soon does he climb back into bed beside him and feign sleep. His partner doesn't need to know that his sleep is so disturbed. Dean has been working so hard over the past month. He needs his rest and doesn't need anything else to play on his mind. He shivers, still cold despite the sweater and Dean’s body heat. It’s the kind of cold that seeps deep into his bones. The kind that he can normally dismiss with a cup of tea or a hot shower. But that reprieve hasn't come to him tonight.

Soon, warm lips brush the nape of his neck and Dean’s arm winds around his waist, pulling him close against his body.

“Morning babe.” Voice rough with sleep, Dean yawns hugely and snuggles against Cas’ back. “Did you sleep okay?”
“Yes…” Cas hears himself answer. He's staring, blank-eyed ahead of him out of the window at the dunes.

“Fine, thanks.”

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Another night, another nightmare. Three o’clock the next morning sees Cas wide awake and trembling all over again, sipping tea and pinching the bridge of his nose to ward off a headache. Dean sleeps on in their bedroom, the kids are peaceful in dreamland, and this time no comforting text messages have arrived from his brother. It's just Cas, alone, and hecurls up on the couch to watch the ocean again, lost in thought, just like last night. And the night before. And the night before that.

Monday night, Dean had caught him awake and he had lied, saying he was up working on his novel and that was why he couldn't sleep. Dean had smiled that big, beautiful smile of his and wrapped him in a warm hug, telling him he was so proud of Cas’ dedication. That had felt like a bucket of ice water being poured over him as guilt seeped into every pore. His novel is unfinished. He hasn't touched it in days. His own smile had been brittle and false, and when Dean had padded back down the corridor to bed Cas had collapsed onto the sofa with his head in his hands, feeling dejected.

He doesn't know what's going on with him lately. He's tense all the time. He snaps at the children, he gripes at Jimmy, and yet nobody seems to have noticed. He knows they're all busy with their own lives and that's good - he doesn't want them fawning all over him constantly anyway. He should be happy. He's got everything he's ever dreamed of and more: his career has taken off again, his kids are doing great, he's getting married… He swallows a lump in his throat at that thought. He's getting married. They're getting married. Something he never thought he would do again. He's shared his worries with Dean already, his concerns about him screwing things up and ruining it all, and Dean had been so adamant that would never happen that it had sated Castiel’s fears at the time. But now a gnawing anxiety is eating away at him and he's struggling to keep it at bay. What if he does screw everything up? Sometimes, when he looks at Dean playing with the kids and laughing with such carefree joy, he feels an ugly knot of envy in his chest that he can't unpack. He should be overjoyed at the connection Dean shares with his children. He is. He was. But now sometimes he feels like he's being pushed aside, and his exhausted, rattled mind can't work out if that's actually happening or if it's a figment of his imagination. And if it isn't happening, if it is all in his head, what kind of partner and father does that make him?

“Daddy?” A very small voice drifts from the hallway and Cas turns to look over the back of the sofa at Lexie, rubbing his eyes and stumbling softly across the room. “I can't sleep.”

“Neither can I, sweetheart. C’mere;”

Cas lifts the corner of the blanket and Lexie climbs onto his lap, curling up on top of his crossed legs and winding an arm around his neck. Instantly, Cas feels warmer. Like the ice in his chest is thawing. Lexie nuzzles his neck, sighing softly and making quiet wet sounds as he sucks his thumb. He smells of strawberry and lime, Dean’s body wash, and Cas inhales deeply, stroking his son’s hair. It's getting long now, dark curls almost touching his shoulders, and he kinda loves it.

“What's up? Why are you awake?”

“Why are you?” the boy counters and Cas smiles. Lexie has his cheek pillowed on Cas’ shoulder and is staring up at him with wide eyes. Cas naturally rocks him a little and Lexie lets out a content sigh. “It's nighttime.”

“I know, Lex. We should both be sleeping and we’re not.”
“I have a monster under my bed,” Lexie says, almost conversationally. “He's keeping me awake.”

“Oh really?” Cas winds one of Lexie’s dark curls around his finger. “Is he a nice monster, then?”

“No, he's awful. He's going to eat me if I fall asleep,” the child pouts, eyes downcast and lashes suddenly damp with tears. “But I'm not allowed to be scared because if he knows I'm scared he will eat Billie, too.”

“That's…” Cas flounders for a second, his overwrought brain struggling to keep up. “Not very nice. Where did he come from?”

“I don't know.” Lexie shrugs, cuddling closer to his father. His bare feet are cold and Cas catches them both in one hand to warm them. “Billie said he was there.”

Ah. Now things make a little more sense. Billie has been coming up with tall stories for a few weeks now, some of them funny and entertaining, and others not so much. And this sounds like one of the less amusing ones.

“Well,” Cas presses a kiss to Lexie’s forehead. “Why don't we go and see about this monster? I'll get rid of him, then you can go back to sleep. How does that sound?”

Secretly, he doesn't really want to do that. What he wants to do is lie here on the couch with his son and fall asleep together. Would that be so bad? He lies back, pulling Lexie on top of him and dragging the blanket up to cover them both. Against his chest, the boy shakes his head adamantly.

“No. You can't. Billie said if you try and talk to him, he'll stay forever. He won't leave. You can't, daddy!” His little voice is tear-filled and melancholy. “I'm scared.”

“Oh, baby, no.” Cas wraps his arms tightly around his son, his heart aching. “Listen, there's no monster, I promise. It's just a silly story Billie made up to scare you.”

“There is! Daddy says so, too.”

“He - what?”

“He says so, too. He says I need to be careful climbing into bed in case it bites my toes!”

Oh, Castiel is going to kill Dean. Dean is fantastic with the kids, he really is, but moments like this make him realise that there's still a lot he needs to learn. Things he should and shouldn't do when it comes to the boys. And teasing Lexie, who is impressionable and imaginative at the best of times, is one of those things he shouldn't do.

“Right.” Cas hoists them both up, Lexie on his hip, and walks towards the bedroom with the blanket still wrapped around them. “There's no monster, baby, and I'm going to show you.”

Billie is sprawled out in his own bed, his toy elephant in one hand being dangled off the edge, and he's breathing deep and slow, snoring a little on the exhale. Cas deposits his other child on the bed and wraps him up in the blanket while he kneels down, silently lamenting his knees not being what they used to be. Lexie clings with his little fingers tight around Cas' arm, and he stares with wide eyes as Cas lifts the covers and reaches under the bed with his free hand finding, as he expected, only dust bunnies and toys.

“See? No monster.”

“Will you stay here though, Daddy?” Lexie pats the bed best to him. “I don't want to go to sleep by
myself."

“But you're not by yourself, baby.” Cas brushes dark curls off the boy’s forehead, confused. “Billie is right there.”

Lexie casts a dismissive look towards his brother then tugs at Cas again. “Stay.”

And that's how Dean finds them the next morning: Cas curled awkwardly in Lexie’s kid-sized bed with his child draped over his chest. It's Cas who he goes to first, stroking his lover’s hair and waking him slowly, smiling and leaning in to steal a morning kiss when Cas’ eyes soften and he smiles up at him.

“Hey, baby. Lexie have a bad dream?”

Cas nods, unable to verbalise his lie. It's better this way, better that Dean thinks everything is fine. Because it is. It will be. It always is.

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Castiel wakes at midnight on a Wednesday to the sound of one of his children coughing. But when he reaches their bedroom, they're both curled up sleeping soundly in their bedroom, coloured shadows dancing across the walls and the sound of the ocean seeping in through the open window. He approaches Billie first, kneeling down and stroking his son’s forehead. Billie is frowning a little in his sleep, dreaming, and Cas smooths the line away with his thumb, pressing a kiss in its wake. Lexie next, and he combs gentle fingers through the curling locks. Lexie is breathing deeply, wheezing slightly, and Cas watches him for a while until he's sure his son is settled.

Back in bed he's cold again, and even the heat of Dean’s body doesn't seem to warm him.

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He wakes suddenly, eyes open and staring unseeingly ahead of him, to the smell of bacon and coffee coming from the kitchen, and the twins’ lilting voices chattering away animatedly. His hands are clenched in the sheets and every muscle feels wound up tight. Was he dreaming? Another nightmare? He can't remember. Everything feels hazy as he blinks sleep from his eyes and sits up - then panic sets in as he realises how light it is outside and how late it must be. He casts about for his phone or the clock, his heart hammering against his ribs. He's overslept, he must have. Is he late? Who's taking the kids to school? Why isn't Dean at work? Then, with a rush of relief, he realises it's Sunday morning and it doesn't matter how late he's slept. They have nothing to do and nowhere to be. He collapses back against the pillows with a sigh, rubbing his temples and turning to snuggle down under the pristine white sheets... well, they were pristine until Billie decided to bring his colouring books into Dean and Cas’ bed one morning. Now they're streaked with blue and green crayon.

He dresses slowly, yawning as he does, and follows the sounds of his family down the hall into the kitchen and is immediately grabbed around the waist by Dean who kisses his neck and murmurs, “Morning, darlin’,” into his skin.

“Morning,” Cas says, stifling a yawn. Dean's arm is warm around his waist and he wraps his arms up around his neck, leaning into the kiss. Then Dean smiles against his lips mischievously before Cas is dipped backwards, low to the ground with their lips still joined, and a laugh bubbles up inside him and breaks free as the children giggle somewhere in the background. When Dean lifts him upright again he's breathless and smiling.
“What was that for?” With one arm still around Dean’s neck, he touches a fingertip to his own lips. This close, Dean’s freckles seem magnified and his pleased smile is almost dazzling.

“What? I need an excuse to kiss my fiancé?” Dean pecks him on the mouth again then retreats to finish breakfast.

As he eats, he rolls his shoulders and sighs in discomfort. Less than thirty seconds later, Dean is behind him and massaging the nape of his neck with gentle, deep strokes of his thumbs. One hand comes up to wind through his hair while the other works its way across his shoulders and down his spine and he groans at how good it feels. How long has it been since Dean has touched him like this? It feels like months but he knows it can’t be more than a few days. He closes his eyes and relaxes into the massage, losing all sense of time for a moment or two. He’s exhausted, mentally and physically, and doesn’t even realise his hands are trembling until Dean covers them with his own. Soft lips meet his neck and track a warm trail up to his jaw.

“You’ve been working so hard, baby. Why don’t you go back to bed, and I'll take the kids to the library in town?” More neck kisses and Cas melts into him. “Try and get some shut-eye. You look kinda dead on your feet.”

That's exactly how he feels. He nods, fighting an impending headache as Billie slides down from his seat and makes his way over to him.

“I want to go back to bed, too.” The kid traces patterns onto Cas’ jeans. “Can I nap, daddy? Can we all nap?”

“Me too!” Lexie smiles widely, gazing up at Dean with soulful, pleading eyes. “We can all nap!”

So that's exactly what they do. The boys are in their footie pyjamas, Dean in sweats, and Cas in his plaid PJ pants and a sweater, and they pile onto the bed with Cas in the middle and wriggle about until they’re all comfortable. There’s an elbow digging into Cas’ ribs, Billie is a dead weight on top of him, Dean’s leg is too heavy draped over his thigh, but somehow he feels his muscles unwind as he closes his eyes and sighs deeply.

For the first time all week, he’s warm. And for the first time in as long as he can remember, he doesn’t dream.
It's late and they should be in bed. The sun has long since set and the only light now comes from the full moon and the scattering of stars, and a low light emanating from somewhere down the hallway inside. There are four empty beer bottles and two empty plates on the table, and Cas has his bare feet up on the arm of the rattan outdoor sofa with his head in Dean’s lap. Dean is stroking his hair idly, winding his fingers through the strands, and they're both gazing up at the skies lost in thought.

Dean is relaxed. He's sipping occasionally from a beer bottle, has his head tipped back against the sofa, and is quietly humming *Nothing Else Matters*, a song he knows Cas loves. He's content. He's more than content, actually, he's fucking awesome. What could go wrong? He has the most fucking insanely awesome house in the world, the most handsome fiancé he could want, and a job he's excelling at. Life is damn good. It's especially damn good tonight because the twins are with Jimmy in their shiny new bedroom in Jimmy’s shiny new house, which means Cas and Dean have had a real, official date night with the house all to themselves. They've cooked dinner together, laughed and grinned their way through games of Scrabble and Jenga, and now they're relaxing in the evening starlight and Dean thinks life doesn't get much better than this.

Cas seems chill tonight too, and that's another thing that Dean counts as a victory. Cas has been tense lately, distracted, tired, but tonight he seems like a weight has lifted. Perhaps that's what's been bugging him, Dean muses as he runs his fingers through Cas’ hair, smiling as Cas presses into the touch. They've had no them time, no time together as a couple, and this evening has been pure bliss. Burgers, beer, games, cuddling. Dean Winchester is officially a cuddler, and he doesn't give a shit. It feels damn good to cuddle with Cas.

“You OK?” he murmurs, and Cas’ blue eyes flash up to meet his.

“I'm great,” he replies, almost slurring his words as a relaxed smile spreads across his face. “Nearly asleep.”

“Yeah?” Dean smirks, glancing out at the water. “I think I know a good way to wake you up…”

He nudges Cas off him and stands, tugging Cas down the dunes and towards the beach. Laughing and shoving each other they break into a jog, then a run, racing each other to the water. Cas wins, his running regime giving him a head start, and Dean retaliates by tackling him around the waist and they go sprawling into the ocean with cries of laughter, fully-clothed without a care in the world.

They make love right there on the beach in the moonlight. Dean covers Castiel’s body with his own, worships every golden inch of skin with his mouth, and their gasps and moans go unheard by anyone as the beach stretches on, remote and deserted aside from their naked bodies. Afterwards, lying between Cas’ legs with his face buried in his neck, Dean wonders if heaven is anything like this. Cas’ arms are around him, one hand at the base of his spine and the other in his hair, and it takes him a moment to come back to himself.

When he does, it's with a jolt of horror that he realises Cas is crying.

And not the kind of relaxed, post-coital single-glistening-tear-of-happiness crying the situation warrants, either. This is sadness, deep and soul-wrenching, the type that makes Cas shake and struggle to draw breath, and Dean has to forcibly push himself up onto his forearms to get Cas to release him.

“Baby? What's wrong? Did I hurt you?”
He wasn't rough, not at all. His mind is going a mile a minute as possibilities stream through it, each more unlikely than the last. Cas shakes his head, tears trickling down his temples to lose themselves in his dark hair. His arms come to fall above his head and he closes his eyes, biting his bottom lip in sorrow.

“I don't know…” It comes out as a whimper and Dean cups the back of his head in concern. “I don't know what's wrong…”

“Cas…” Worry chokes him like a noose. He moves to sit up, to climb off Cas and find their wet clothes, but suddenly the warm arms return to hold him around the waist and keep him in place.

“No, don't. Please, don't get up yet. I want…” Cas’ blue eyes sparkle in the starlight, tears clinging to his lashes. “I want you to stay.”

“I am staying…” he reassures him.

God, he's so confused and freaked out. Cas’ voice catches on another sob and Dean does the only thing he knows how to do: pulls Cas’ face into his neck and they lie there on the beach, nude and covered in cooled sweat and sand, Cas clinging as he cries for a reason beyond Dean’s reach. All he can do is stroke his skin, pet his hair, hold him close and whisper to him as the waves crash upon the sand.

“I am staying, baby. Of course I'm staying. I'll never go anywhere, Cas. You and me, it's forever. I'm staying…”

“I love you…”

“I know, baby. I know.”

It's very, very late when they finally stumble into the house and collapse into bed, too tired to rinse off the sand and the evidence of their activities down on the beach before it all went sideways. The sheets will wash. Cas falls into a restless sleep on Dean’s chest, huddling close, and Dean lies awake until sunrise, a nauseating concern taking root in his gut and the sand beneath his legs chafing his skin. The pleasant, happy, everything-is-right-with-the-world feeling is long gone, the glow replaced with a cold anxiety gnawing away at his insides.

Cas isn't OK. Something's wrong.

•••

There’s a letter on the kitchen counter.

It's in a white envelope with Cas and Dean’s names written on in neat cursive, and they've both been steadfastly ignoring it for the past week. It's an invitation to parents’ night at the school tonight to round up the school year, and neither of them are excited about going. Cas is nervous, both fretting about the kids not doing well and reiterating that it doesn't matter either way because he knows his kids are smart and doesn't need anyone else to tell him so. He gets this look about him whenever he goes on one of his rants about it, and Dean has to hide a smile behind his hand. As for himself, he just plain doesn't want to go. He still isn't good with crowds - when the bakery gets packed out he feels tense and sweaty - and he can't help but imagine people staring at him at the school, talking about him and Cas, talking about the twins. His fears are unfounded, he's sure, but he can't quite crush them down.

They also don't want to go because Lexie is sick again. He hasn't been at school for two days, has been coughing and feverish, and Dr. Bradbury has him scheduled for an appointment in two days’
time if he hasn't perked up. He's been clingy and sad, constantly wanting Cas, and as a result they've both been spending very little time with Billie - who in turn has been acting up.

Currently, Billie is reaching for the camera Dean bought for Cas for Christmas, and is just turning it over in his hands with a curious, mischievous expression on his face. Dean notices, glancing up from where he's chopping carrots for dinner and humming Metallica under his breath again, and opens his mouth to ask the child to put it down when he's beaten to it.

“Billie!” Cas’ voice comes sharply across the kitchen, strung out with exhaustion as he rocks a fractious Lexie. “Put that down, it’s expensive!”

Doe-eyed and frowning, Billie reaches up to put the camera back onto the table then he turns away, clearly sulking. The strap of the camera catches on his shoulder and Dean watches it happen in slow motion: the camera crashes to the wooden floor and breaks, glass from the lens and pieces of plastic skittering out around Billie who freezes in shock. For a heartbeat, there's total silence in the room.

“Billie!” Castiel’s furious cry is so loud that even Dean flinches. The child gapes at his father and immediately starts to cry, covering his eyes and backing away from the mess towards the sofa. “Look at what you did!”

Dean swears there are tears in Cas’ eyes as he deposits Lexie on the couch, crosses the room and bends down to pick up the pieces of his broken camera. Tentatively, Dean reaches for Cas and tries to take his arm but he's roughly brushed off.

“Go to your room,” Cas commands, his voice thick with definite emotion, and for one bizarre second Dean thinks Cas is talking to him. “And don't come out until I come get you.”

With a quiet sob, Billie turns and runs off down the hall. The sound of his bedroom door opening and closing is the only thing that echoes after him.

“Cas, it was an accident,” Dean begins, but Cas stands with the broken pieces of his camera clutched in his hands and turns away.

“He was careless, Dean,” Cas’ voice is choked and he wipes at his cheeks fiercely with his fingertips. “You told him not to play with it and he didn't listen.”

“We can replace it. Hey,” Dean forces Cas to look at him and slings an arm around his shoulders. “It was an accident, nobody got hurt. He didn't mean it, he knows how much you love that camera. I'll get it fixed for you or I'll get you another one. C’mere.”

He kisses Cas’ forehead and pulls him into a tight hug, feeling the older man sigh and nod against his chest, relaxing into the embrace.

Across the room, Lexie coughs into his hands.

“...”

“How's Lexie?” Jimmy asks, the first words to leave his lips as he pulls open the front door.

He reaches for his nephew, scoops him out of Cas’ arms and into his own, and the twins walk together into Jimmy’s place to leave Dean and Billie standing on the doorstep. Billie is holding Dean’s hand and looking at the floor, and wanders in silently when Dean shifts his rucksack higher onto his shoulder and follows Cas. He's brought the kids’ pyjamas, some books, and their nightlight in case the parents’ night goes on later than they expect and Jimmy winds up putting them to bed.
Cas had gone to Billie’s room while Dean sorted out the broken parts of the camera, and he could hear low murmurs and hushed voices floating down the hall. He had sidled close enough to peek through the door and had seen Cas on his knees with Billie’s arms thrown around his neck. There was tension in every line of his partner’s body; he was clearly still upset and Dean was sure the boy could sense it.

“I’m sorry, daddy,” Billie had snuffled into Cas’ neck. “I can fix it.”

“I don’t think you can, kiddo,” Cas sighed. His hand had stroked shiny dark hair back from Billie’s forehead before he kissed his temple. “I think it might be broken.”

“Forever?” Billie pulled back and gazed wide-eyed at his father looking, for a second, more identical to his brother than ever. “I broke it forever?”

And then he had started crying again. Cas had scooped him up and they had sat together on the bed for a while as Dean retreated, flitting about to prepare dinner and give Lexie his Tylenol. By the time burgers and sweet potato fries had been deposited on the table, father and son had appeared again, both red-eyed with their hair messed up, and Dean just grinned at them, trying to lighten the mood, and kissed Cas who responded with a slightly watery smile.

There’s something up with Cas, he thinks once again, worry sitting low in his gut. Dean has been trying to figure it out for days now, ever since the incident on the beach. He looks exhausted constantly yet seems to be sleeping just fine, and whenever Dean tentatively enquiries as to how he’s feeling he’s swiftly dismissed or rebuffed. Cas is fine, apparently. Everything is fine. Apart from the fact that it isn’t, not really. Cas refuses to talk about what upset him on the beach, claiming he hasn’t got a clue and he was just swept up in the moment. Dean calls bullshit, and they’ve argued about it. They’d almost had another argument last night too, when Dean brought up the wedding and Cas had got this almost haunted look in his eyes and suddenly declared he was tired and wanted to go to bed. They had just put the kids down, it was eight PM, and Cas had just retrieved a bottle of wine for them to share out on the deck, so Dean didn’t believe his excuse for a second. His temper flared, he had accused Cas of not wanting to get married, and Cas had shut down, telling Dean he was being ridiculous before he’d retired to bed. They hadn’t spoken another word to each other all night.

Perhaps that explains why Cas reacted so harshly when Billie broke his camera. He’s still suffering a hangover from their fight and, truth be told, Dean is too. Something feels off between them, and he wants desperately to rectify it. He’s hoping they can get parents’ night over and done with quickly, grab the kids and head home to send the evening together and brush away all the cobwebs.

He takes the kids up to their room while Cas talks to Jimmy. The twins love their bedroom here: it’s spacious with lights strung across the window ledge, the walls a pale grey with hand-painted elephants making their way across one wall (turns out Jimmy is something of an artist) and the beds are comfy with soft blankets and stuffed animals already waiting for them. Lexie runs across the room and jumps onto the bed, already reaching for the fluffy owl Jimmy bought him and waggling its wings, chatting happily to himself. Billie doesn’t move, just scuffs his toe on the painted wood floor and looks at his feet.

“You alright, kiddo?” Dean kneels in front of him and Billie nods without looking up. “We won’t be long. Be good for your uncle.”

“We will!” Lexie sings happily, now lying on his back and holding the toy up in the air above his head. “We are always good!”
It breaks his heart a little to leave the kids, as it always does, and he fervently hopes the evening will be over soon. Dean casts a look back over his shoulder at the boys as him and Cas climb into Cas’ car to head to the school. Lexie is in the window, waving to them with a vague, dreamy expression on his pale face. Jimmy stands in the doorway holding Billie by the hand and the look on the little boy’s face makes Dean’s heart clench. Billie looks so sad, like he's been told Santa isn't real or something. He's looking down at his feet and his eyes are huge and melancholy. Dean decides to speak to Cas later, to tell him to forgive his son, to remind him that accidents happen. The weird thing is that Cas knows that, and he normally would have forgiven his kid easily by now. Something is eating at him, something he's keeping hidden, and Dean is determined to find out what.

The drive to the school is tense and silent, Cas focused on the road with his jaw clenched and Dean playing Words With Friends against Sam on his phone - and getting his ass kicked. He could have put down quetzals if he’d only had a Q. And a Z, T, L and U. He still ain't convinced Sam hasn't made the word up but he can't be bothered to question it. He's hiding it better than Cas, but he's actually kinda nervous about this parents’ night. He's never been to one before and while Cas has bitched and moaned about standardised schooling not being an accurate measurement of a child’s abilities he knows they both want the children to be doing well.

He puts down his phone as they pull into the school parking lot and tentatively reached across for Cas’ hand.

“You OK?”

“I'm absolutely fine, Dean,” says Cas in a tone that suggests he is, in fact, anything but.

“You and Billie OK?”

“Yes.” Cas pulls into a parking space and unfastens his seat belt.

“Good. He didn't mean it, you know. It was an accident-”

“I know that. Thank you, Dean. Shall we go?” Then he's gone, out of the car and halfway towards the doors before Dean can even really process his words. Great. This evening looks to be shaping up no better than the last one.

He follows Cas in and immediately the hall is too hot and too crammed. Parents are everywhere, all different but all looking the same mixture of harassed and over-keen. Cas is already talking to the twins’ teacher, Jo Harvelle, and Dean lingers back for a while, tugging at his collar. He really hates crowds.

Eventually he sidles over to a table where a round-faced woman has snacks on offer with a small card reading all proceeds go to charity and Dean digs in his pocket for some cash.

“Which charity, ma’am?” he enquires as she wraps up some brownies for the twins and a slice of carrot cake for Cas.

“Bereavement services,” she tells him with a slightly sad smile. “For parents who lost their little ones too young.”

Immediately, green eyes and pale skin appear in his mind’s eye and he has to blink the image away. Thanking her quickly, he pays and backs away, leaving almost ten bucks change for her collection. He didn't want to think about that, not tonight.

As he’s scanning the room for Cas, feeling hot and over-wrought, he feels his phone buzz incessantly in his pocket and frowns at the name on the screen when he fishes it out.
“Hello?” Dean covers his other ear with his hand to drown out the background noise, turning away from the small crowd of parents. “Jimmy? Everything OK?”

“Dean! I tried calling Cas but his phone isn't on. Thank god you answered!”

There's an edge to Jimmy’s voice that Dean has heard only once before and, in alarm, he pushes open the door to an empty classroom to take the call in peace. The last time he heard Jimmy sound this distressed was almost a year ago, when Lexie was lying motionless and not breathing on the beach after being dragged from the ocean. Jimmy is panic-stricken.

“Dean, I can’t find him. I can't find Billie. He's missing.”
“Cas!”

Jimmy launches himself at his twin the moment they're through the door, gripping him by the arms and gasping out panicked apologies and nonsensical explanations for how it all must have happened. He's white-faced, red-eyed, and his hair is standing on end from where he's clearly been gripping it in agitation. Cas is white-faced and seems to stare through Jimmy before pushing him aside to kneel down and gather a whimpering Lexie into his arms, standing and striding past his brother into the kitchen of his expensive town-house. Dean can see his shoulders shaking as he goes. One thing is abundantly clear: Billie is nowhere to be seen.

“Jimmy,” Dean takes hold of Jimmy’s arm - finds him trembling too - and waits until watery blue eyes lift to meet his before continuing. “What happened? When was the last time you saw him?”

“After dinner,” Jimmy grips his hair again, looking wrecked. “He was playing on his own in the den, and Lexie was coughing really bad. I took him to the kitchen for some water, and I think I heard Billie call out to me but…” Jimmy trails off, tension pulling at every line in his face. “Then when I came back he was gone. I searched the whole house, so did Lexie, and I just…”

He breaks off, the last word hitching on a sob, and Dean grips his shoulder firmly.

“We’ll find him. He's probably hiding somewhere, explorin’ the place.” Even as he says it he knows it's a lie; Billie doesn't do that sort of thing. “We’ll all look. I'm sure we’ll find him.”

“The door was unlocked…” Jimmy gestures to it wildly. “I locked it, I know I did, but I left the keys in it. He must have unlocked it himself, I've been up and down the street calling for him -”

“But you haven't found him.” Cas interrupts, standing in the kitchen doorway with a face like stone. He isn't shaking or crying; instead he looks cold and eerily calm, detached almost, and Dean knows this won't last. Cas will break, and probably soon when the gravity of the situation hits him. He only hopes they can find the boy before that happens, or before anything happens to Billie. “Where is he, Jimmy? I left him with you, I trusted you -”

“Cas,” Dean interjects quickly, sensing a sudden spike in tension and not wanting Cas to say or do anything he might regret. “We’ll find him. He can't have gone too far. Jimmy, you checked the street, right? I'll go look again, just to be sure. Cas, stay with Lexie.”

“Don't tell me what to do!” Sparks practically fly from Castiel’s eyes; they seem to glow in the dim mood lighting of Jimmy’s hallway. He spits the words at Dean then turns and vanishes back into the kitchen, presumably to tend to his son and try to quell his panic.

“I'll follow in a minute,” Jimmy says quietly and Dean nods, heading out into the street and next door, heart hammering in his chest as he knocks. The neighbor is sympathetic but hasn't seen Billie. She offers to help him look and he thanks her, saying he will let her know if he needs extra help. The next neighbor says the same. And the next. And the next. By the time Dean returns to Jimmy’s almost two hours later, panic is firmly taking root in his stomach, knotting his insides and threatening him with nausea. A nausea that doubles in intensity when he pushes open the front door and is greeted by raises voices.

“… was keeping an eye on him, Cas! I always do!”

“You weren't! If you were he would be here! This is all your fault, Jimmy! How could you do this to
us?"

"Cas, I was with Lexie, I -"

"What if he's dead, Jimmy?" Cas shouts, bordering on hysteria. "What then? This is all your fault!"

Dean hastens to the kitchen to see Cas, red-eyed, and Jimmy, ashen faced with distress, and wraps an arm around Castiel, pulling his face into his shoulder where Cas lets out an exhausted, desperate sob and tightly grips the back of Dean’s t-shirt.

"You didn't find him?" Jimmy looks utterly defeated, frightened and lost.

"No…"

With a low, dry sob, Cas pulls away and sinks down at the kitchen table and lowers his head to his crossed forearms.

"I'll call the cops." It sounds like Jimmy is struggling to talk. "They can help. They'll find him, Cas. We’ll find him."

He back away, the buttons on his cell phone beeping as he dials, their tone giving away the number. 911. Then he leaves to speak in the hallway, his voice shaking with grief.

"We’ll go out again in the morning, Cas, I swear to you." Dean wraps an arm around Castiel’s shaking shoulders. "First light."

"No, Dean," Cas’ voice is muffled into his own arms. "I can't leave him that long. We can't."

And he's right. Dean had known as the words left his lips that he wasn't going to leave anything until the morning. He plans to search all night if he has to. All week if that's what it comes to. He's going to find his son no matter what happens.

"I'll go now. Jimmy and me, we'll go look in the woods. See if he just went exploring on his own."

He kneels down by Cas’ chair and takes his biceps, forcing his partner to turn and look at him.

"We’ll find him, baby. I swear to you."

"You can't promise that." Cas looks vacant, his whole body trembling with suppressed fear and grief.

"What if he's…"

"Don't." Dean kisses him on the forehead. "We’ll find him. We have to."

Because the alternative is too much to bear.

• • •

"Billie!" Dean shoves a branch out of the way, ducking as it pings back towards him. "Billie! Answer me, dammit. C’mon! Billie!"

His throat is sore from shouting, his voice growing hoarse as the hours drag on. It's nearing midnight and he's only managing to quell the panic inside him by convincing himself that he'll find Billie any moment now. Just around the next tree, just over the next incline. He’ll find him. He’ll bring him home, because he has to. Because the alternative is too ghastly to even begin to comprehend.
Billie!

They don't even know if he went into the forest or not. They don't know if he was alone, or if he went with someone. And if he did, who did he go with? And why? Panic threatens to choke him and he crushes that thought down immediately as the words child abduction swim to the forefront of his mind. No. That didn't happen. That can't have happened.

“Billie! Where are you? Billie!”

Jimmy’s voice, choked and rough, reaches him and he blinks back tears. Jimmy has been shaking constantly since they arrived home from parents’ night, eyes wild and frightened, made worse by Cas’ tirade against him. And still, he's been the driving force behind finding Billie. He rallied his neighbors, banging on their doors calling for help, called the local Sheriff - a woman with cropped dark hair who brought a team and has called for tracking dogs - and he’d been the one pleading the hardest with them to stay when they wanted to give up and search again in the morning. Jody Mills, a kind-faced woman with a soft voice, has taken pity on them and kept her team out in the forest to continue the search, but as time drags on, they’re all becoming increasingly tense and fearful.

“Billie!” Dean stumbles and crashes to his knees, a knot in a fallen tree jamming painfully into his calf, and he cries out in frustration, hurling his flashlight into the darkness ahead of him. It spins, casting bizarre shafts of light through the trees, then disappears down into a ditch leaving him in darkness. “Fuck.” He hauls himself to his feet and picks his way slowly towards where he saw it disappear. “Damn. Stupid fuckin’ thing…” He stumbles over a tree root and curses. “Billie!”

Then he hears it. A soft, broken little cry and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end as he freezes to listen. He heard something, he's sure of it. The breeze rattles the leaves on the trees, dry from so little rain.

“Billie! Billie, it's Dean! Where are you, buddy?” He moves forward slowly, trying not to make too much noise in case he drowns out a reply. Then he hears it again and he almost passes out with relief. A small, frightened voice coming from somewhere ahead of him, a voice he knows all too well.

“Daddy…”

He crashes forward through the bushes and gazes down into the ditch where his flashlight fell - and he sees him. Right there. Curled up in a dip beneath a fallen tree, his pale face highlighted by the beam of the flashlight, streaked with dirt and muck, the boy sits up and reaches for him and promptly bursts into low, frightened tears.

“Daddy!”

“Billie,” Dean skids down the embankment and coaxes the boy out, wrapping him tightly in his arms and allowing his own tears of relief to soak into Billie’s dirty t-shirt. His heart is pounding so hard he's sure it's audible in the space between them. “Thank god. Jesus, fuck, thank god. Are you hurt? Talk to me, kiddo, are you hurtin’ anywhere?”

He forces the boy backwards, gripping him by his upper arms and checking him all over with quick, cold hands to feel for any injuries. Aside from being filthy and shaken up, he seems miraculously unharmed. Billie shakes his head, still crying, and throws his arms back around Dean’s neck, unable to do anything but sob. Dean hauls himself to his feet, one hand at the back of his son’s head to hold him close and the other underneath his bottom. Billie’s legs come around his waist and he clings like a koala bear.
“Jimmy! Jimmy, I've found him! Jimmy!”

A moment later, hands are dragging at his arms and pulling them both back up the embankment and Jimmy is buying his face in the back of Billie’s neck and wrapping them both in his arms.

“Where have you been?” Jimmy gasps, and Dean allows him to take Billie, who just cries harder and grips tightly to Jimmy’s shirt, his little hands streaked with dirt and leaving muddy prints in their wake.

“I'm sorry, Uncle Jimmy!” Billie’s howl is jarringly loud in the depths of the forest. Around them, Jody and her team have materialised and Dean can hear their murmurs of relief, can hear them talking into radios. “I'm sorry!”

“It's alright, kiddo,” Dean buries his face in the boy’s hair, inhales the scent of mud and grass and sweat, and beneath it the innate scent of his kid. “Let's get you home.”

••

It was difficult to process it all at first, but now things are beginning to make sense. Billie ran away. He ran and hid in the woods because he wanted his family to come and look for him, to pay attention to him the way they have been doing with Lexie. But he went too far in and, as he choked and sobbed into Dean’s t-shirt back at Jimmy’s house, he explained he hadn't been able to find his way home.

Both boys are curled up on Dean’s lap now - Lexie hasn't been able to stop touching his twin and hugging him since they all arrived home - while Cas and Jimmy speak to Jody Mills, taking final statements from them both. He can hear her soft voice from the next room, telling them how relieved she is and that she was glad to be of help. Jimmy seems almost incoherent, dizzy with relief, while Cas remains stonily silent. Dean doesn't want to picture his face, but can't help it: frown lines deep between his brows, mouth tight, the pallor of his skin pale in spite of them finding Billie alive and well.

Cas had dragged Billie from Dean’s arms, checked him all over and then held him close with one had on the back of his head as he had fiercely scolded his son and told him never to scare them like that again. Billie had just nodded, frightened by the whole experience, and had eventually retreated back into Dean’s t-shirt back at Jimmy’s house, he explained he hadn't been able to find his way home.

Jody eventually leaves, and Dean ventures into the kitchen with Lexie on his back and Billie in his arms, staggering a little under their weight. It's dim, the only light coming from the under-cabinet lights, and the window is open to let in the summer breeze. The elder set of Novak twins are sitting at the kitchen table, cups of lukewarm coffee in front of them, neither speaking nor looking at each other. Jimmy looks gaunt and faint with relief but Cas… Dean doesn't remember seeing such a cold look on his face before and he never wants to see it again.

“Um, guys, I'm gonna get the kids to bed.” It's two in the morning and both boys have been yawning hugely, their eyes struggling to stay open for a while now. “Cas, you wanna say goodnight?”

“I'll be up in a minute.”
Cas doesn't look at Dean; he stares at the table and the circle he's drawing on the wood with one shaking finger. He seems relieved to have his child back, but there's something underlying and Dean is becoming increasingly concerned that whatever it is is about to rear its head. Reluctantly, he leaves the twins alone and heads for the stairs with the children, listening to Lexie wetly suck his thumb right by his ear, smearing saliva all up his neck. He doesn't care. He doesn't think he'll ever care about any gross thing the kids do ever again, not after tonight. Not after fearing he was going to lose Billie forever.

The kids settle fairly quickly in their freshly-painted room, and for that Dean is thankful. Lexie, wiped out, falls asleep almost before Dean has managed to get him tucked in. Billie gazes up at Dean from a pile of pillows and toys, blue eyes soft and vulnerable in the dark.

“Where's daddy? Is he coming to kiss me goodnight?”

“Yes, baby, of course he is. He'll be up soon.” Dean brushes his hair back off his face. There’s still dirt clinging to the dark strands, but it doesn't matter right now. Getting the little guy settled and asleep is more important. They can bath him in the morning.

“He's mad at me.” Billie looks melancholy, gazing down at his toy elephant with sadness in his eyes.

“He's not mad, kiddo. He was worried, that's all.”

“Does he hate me?”

“What?” Dean blinks in shock. “Of course not, Billie. Never think that, ever. Your dad loves you, we both do.”

“Not as much as Lexie.” Tears fill the big blue eyes and Dean pulls the boy up into a sitting position and into his arms, hugging him close in dismay, a sinking feeling dragging at his stomach.

“Of course we do. We love you just as much as Lexie, c’mon now, you know that.” Dean winces as Billie snuffles against his chest. “Lexie hasn't been very well lately, so we’ve had to look after him a little bit more. But it don't mean we love you any less, right? You understand?”

Billie nods, cuddling close, and Dean is awash with guilt. They hadn't realised just how much attention they've been giving to Lexie lately, nor how sidelined Billie has felt. It explains all the wild stories he's been conjuring, all the acting up at school, and it definitely explains tonight. He just wants his parents’ attention.

“You've been doing a great job at looking after your brother too, you know?” Dean glances over to where Lexie is asleep in his bed, lying on his stomach with his head turned to face the wall, dark curls spilling over the pristine white pillow. “Your daddy and I both think you're doing awesome with him.”

“I don't like it when he's sick.”

“No, me neither.”

“Is he gonna be OK?”

“Yes.” Dean says firmly. “He's going to be just fine.” He kisses Billie on the head and lets him lie back down in between his toys. “Now, you close your eyes and count some sheep. Your daddy will be up soon.”

He doesn't leave, though. He sits on the end of Billie’s bed and watches him fall asleep, his breathing
evening out and his eyes falling closed. Across the room, Lexie is sucking his thumb noisily.

But he can't quite relax, not yet. Not when the tension between Jimmy and Cas is so thick. It feels like something is brewing, a fight that has maybe been a long time coming. But maybe he can take Cas to bed, comfort him a bit, and by morning all will be forgiven. The kids can come and jump into bed with them, they can all have breakfast outside in Jimmy’s sprawling garden, and they can share their relief that nothing worse had happened. That Billie is fine. As he watches the kids sleep, he convinces himself that’s exactly how things are going to go.

As it turns out, Castiel has other ideas.

Harsh voices from downstairs draw his attention away from the sleeping boys and he slinks out of the room to investigate, closing the door quietly behind him. He peeks down over the banister rail and is stunned at what he sees. Jimmy is backed up against the wall in the hallway with Cas inches away from him. Cas has his forearm across his brother’s throat, pinning him in place while his body positively vibrates with fury.

“…all your fault! If he had died tonight it would have been your fault!” Cas’ voice is a low hiss of fury and makes Dean’s skin crawl to hear it. He hastens to descend the stairs, heart hammering at the wrecked look on Jimmy’s face.

“I'm sorry, Cas, I'm so sorry…” Jimmy is clearly stunned, barely able to form words. “I…”

“I trusted you to look after them! How could you be so fucking careless?” Cas is clearly overwrought and his nerves are raw with emotion. Jimmy turns his head away, but doesn’t make any attempt to push his brother off him, silently taking the vicious words thrown in his face. Dean finally snaps out of his horrified trance and rushes to Cas’ side, gripping his upper arms and pulling him forcefully back, away from his twin.

“Cas! What the hell are you doing?”

He spins his partner to face him; Cas looks wrecked, his cheeks scarlet and his eyes bright with tears. Fury swirls in his sparkling blue eyes and he shoves roughly at Dean in an attempt to push him away.

“Get off me, Dean. It's his fault! He did this!”

“He didn't! It isn't his fault, you heard Billie! He ran away, Cas. He wanted our attention and he ran away. This isn't Jimmy’s fault.” He's seen this once before, this rage, this wild fury. But the last time Cas was angry like this it was all directed towards Sam. Cas was lashing out at Sam with his bare hands because he was so incensed at Sam’s actions towards Dean in the past year. That anger was frightening to behold and it had been Jimmy who had calmed Cas then. Now it's Dean’s turn.

“He should have been watching him! He just let him wander out into the street, he could have been killed! Or taken, or -”

“But he wasn’t!” Dean grips his arms harder. “He's safe! He's upstairs with Lexie, asleep. He's safe, Cas, they both are. Dammit, Cas, don't do this to yourself, or to Jimmy. It wasn't anyone's fault.”

Cas pulls away, his face still twisted with anger and residual grief, fire in his eyes. He looks like he's about to say something else then shakes his head, turning on his heel and heading for the stairs. Dean releases a breath he didn't realise he was holding, hears Jimmy do the same next to him and sees him relax a little from where he was still standing pinned against the wall in shock.

“Cas,” Jimmy ventures quietly, shakily. “It won't happen again. I swear to you, I'll never let you
“No, you won't.” Cas spins to face Jimmy, and the look on his face is chilling. It's pure, icy fury, and his eyes glitter with what Dean can only describe as hatred and that chills him to the core. His voice is calm and acidic; Dean thinks it would have been easier if he'd yelled. “We're done. You've been forcing your way in between me and my kids for too long, and it's over. Just because you haven't bothered to form a family of your own doesn't give you the right to shoulder your way into mine. You're not a part of this family, not any more. I can't forgive you for tonight - how can I forgive this? I thought my kids were as important to you as they are to me, but clearly I was wrong. I can't ever trust you again.” Cas' eyes sparkle with tears which he allows to fall shamelessly. “I want you out of our lives. I hate you for this. I hate you.”

Then he's gone, up the stairs two at a time and back into the twins’ bedroom, and the door closes behind him with a click, leaving Dean and Jimmy standing frozen in the cool hallway in horrified silence.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my amazing beta Tricia for getting this done so quickly! And for picking up all the obscure autocorrect fails!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cas without Jimmy is something Dean never thought he would have to witness. And the scary thing is, Cas seems fine. If anything, he seems better. He’s less wound up and tense, and he's smiling more than he has in weeks. And it's boggling Dean’s mind. The two of them have always been so close, almost joined at the hip sometimes, and now Cas is acting like he's finally got rid of something that has been bugging him for a long time. And aside from the fight the night Billie went missing - well, it wasn't exactly a fight since Jimmy was too shocked to retaliate - he's barely heard them have a cross word to say about each other beyond general day-to-day irritations. And now this? It's confusing as hell and, of course, Cas won't talk about it. He breezes about the house, smiling, laughing with the kids, and Dean trails after him like a bemused puppy trying to work out what's gone wrong and how to fix it.

The morning after Billie’s disappearance was awful. Worse, if possible, than the night before. None of them had slept well at all, and when Dean had finally dragged himself out of bed and into the shower he found the bedroom empty when he returned, with the bed neatly made and his clothes laid out for him - something Cas had never done in the past. Downstairs, the atmosphere had been so cold he had almost shivered as the kids sat quietly and Cas sat rigidly on a stool waiting for them to finish their breakfast. He even had his jacket on already. He was white-faced and stared at his nails a lot, avoiding anyone’s gaze, and Dean knew better than to approach him. Jimmy kept his distance, looking like he had spent the entire night fighting back tears, and his hands shook as he poured coffee for Dean and himself. As soon as Lexie had finished chewing his last mouthful of toast, Cas was hurrying them all into their jackets and out of the door without so much as a backward glance at his twin.

As Dean fastened the kids into their car seats, feeling drained with his shoulders aching from tension, he heard Jimmy’s quiet voice addressing Cas from the doorway.

“Cas, please don't leave like this. We need to talk this out.”

“No, Jimmy, we don't.” Cas sounded dog tired. Dean pretended to be fiddling with some toy of Billie’s and strained his ears to listen. “I'm tired. I want to go home.”

“What you said last night,” There was a quiver to Jimmy’s normally cool, composed voice. “You didn't mean it. You were just angry. Worried. Right?”

A long, painful silence followed, which made Dean cringe in sympathy for Jimmy.

“Cas?” Jimmy prompted. From the reflection in the car window, Dean sees him reaching for his twin and Castiel turning away. “Can you come back inside for a minute? Can we talk? Whatever it is I've done -”

“I just need some space.” Castiel said it so quietly Dean wasn't sure he'd heard it right at first. He
definitely heard Jimmy’s sharp little intake of breath, though. “From you. From us. Just leave me alone for a while, Jimmy. I need to focus on my family.”

And that was it. Jimmy had said no more, the door had closed with a terrible finality, and Cas had been distant and quiet all day, battling every attempt of Dean’s to bring him round. The next morning he had tried to suggest that the twins patch it up, and Cas had responded with a quiet, “You just don't understand, Dean.”

And it's true: he doesn't. He doesn't fully understand why Cas has cut his twin off, but something in him is certain it won't be long-term. So he doesn't understand how three weeks have now passed without the twins exchanging a single word. Jimmy has sent Dean a few short, prim text messages enquiring after the kids and checking in, but has avoided all conversation beyond the basics. Dean doesn't want to betray Cas by staying in touch with his brother but he can't just sever a friendship for no real reason. Cas just wrinkles his nose every time Dean mentions that he's spoken to Jimmy and turns away. It's frustrating as hell. Still, he's sure Cas will break sometime soon and want to patch things up.

Cas and his damn mood swings. Dean is days away from shaking him so hard his teeth rattle and dragging him kicking and screaming to Jimmy’s doorstep to force them to make up. However, a gnawing concern is building in the back of his mind. What will happen when Cas eventually does go crawling back to Jimmy? What if Jimmy decides he doesn't want him back?

•••

It's Wednesday night and the kids are in bed early after a full day at kindergarten. Lexie has a doctor’s appointment scheduled for the morning and it's obvious Cas is overthinking it. So Dean hatches a plan to distract him, one that he hopes will work like a charm.

“Let's have an early night.” He presses a kiss to Cas' lips and pulls him up from the sofa. “I can see you're tired. And I think I know how to help you relax…”

Ten minutes later, Cas is nude and spread out on the bed on his stomach and Dean is just standing there admiring him. His tan is so dark at this time of year and he's thickly muscled from running most days. Cas turns his head, pillows it on his hands, and smiles enticingly at Dean.

“What you waiting for, cowboy? An invitation?”

Dean grins, uncaps the massage oil and straddles Cas’ hips. He's nude too, thinking it rude to be the only one in clothing, and his cock is nestled between Cas’ ass cheeks, already beginning to thicken in interest. He hears a sound of approval from below him and drizzles a stream of scented oil from Cas’ neck down his spine then tosses the bottle away and gets to work. As he works the knots in Cas’ shoulders he loses himself in the feel of his silken, oil-slick skin and the soft murmurs of pleasure-pain he draws when he hits a particularly tough spot. It sounds so erotic that his cock twitches, hardening further, and he angles his hips a little so that he can rub gently against Castiel as he continues to massage his shoulders. He hears a little huffed laugh and suspects he's been caught - then Cas pushes back against him and he knows Castiel is onto him. He smiles, leaning up to kiss the back of the tanned, oil-slick neck and Cas parts his legs slightly in invitation. An invitation that Dean certainly can't reuse.

He kisses his way slowly down Cas’ spine, listening to the subtle changes in his breathing, noting the shift of his hips, all the signs that say he's aroused by Dean’s touch. He traces a line directly between the dips at the base of Cas’ spine and with one hand holds him still while the other reaches down to cup and squeeze his ass cheek. Cas lets out a low sigh of enjoyment that spurs Dean on; he parts
Cas’ cheeks and breathes hotly over his tightly furled hole and Cas jerks, pushing himself up onto his elbows in sudden defence.

“Dean, no, I… I haven't…”

But his protests fall on deaf ears as Dean presses his mouth to Cas and licks a slow, wet stripe over his hole before repeating it again and circling it with his tongue. He knows exactly what Cas was about to say: he hasn't had a shower since last night, almost twenty-four hours ago, but Dean doesn't care right now. He just wants them to be close, and he really wants to hear Castiel moan. He eats him out until Cas is writhing, gripping the sheets and pleading quietly for more.

“Dean, I need you. Please. I want you inside me. I can't wait any longer, please. Take me.”

And that's all the encouragement he needs. With one last slow lap to Cas’ slackened hole, he wets two of his own fingers with his tongue and pushes them inside with a long, firm, thrust and Cas gasps in reaction, arching his hips and wordlessly begging for more.

They haven't had sex in a while, and their most recent little session on the beach had only served to whet Dean’s appetite. They haven't had much time, and Cas has been caught in the grip of so many mood swings that Dean had all but given up trying. Now that he's elbows-deep in a feud with Jimmy, however, that tension has given way to a more relaxed nature and Dean is thrilled to be reaping the benefits - and feeling more than a little guilty about it. Then, feeling grossed out by thinking about Jimmy while he's fingering Cas, he shakes the thoughts away and pushes his fingers in experimentally, pressing a little deeper. Cas’ hands twist in the sheets and he chokes out a needy little sound.

It doesn't take long to get him ready. They're both needy, wanting to get to the main event, and after making sure Cas can take three fingers deep with no pain Dean decides they can't wait any longer. Cas’ skin is slick with massage oil and he lines himself up with a slightly trembling hand. It's been too long. It feels like weeks since they were last together this way. He kisses the back of Cas’ neck as he pushes in, watching his cockhead press into the tight ring of Castiel’s body, and they both groan at the sensations. Cas is tight, and Dean has to hold himself still and catch his breath for a second, already closer to the edge than he would like.

“Dean, oh! God, yes.”

“It's been too long, babe,” Dean leans down and kisses the back of Cas’ neck, tasting the fake watermelon massage oil. “Missed you. Love you.”

“Yeah, it has, ah!” Cas gasps and shifts his hips to encourage Dean to move. “Love this. You feel huge, Dean, fuck.”

Grinning at the compliment, Dean sets a torturously slow rhythm that has them both panting and making soft little moaning noises in the back of their throats. He touches Cas everywhere, kisses his neck, wraps a hand into his hair, holds onto his hips and pulls him up onto his knees just enough for him to reach around and cup his lover’s straining cock. Cas mewls quietly as Dean squeezes him, feeling him throb and pulse in his hand.

It's over too quickly, and they finish with Cas in Dean’s lap, reaching back to grip his hair and crying out through his orgasm. Coming down from the high takes a while, then they're entwined on the bed together, sticky and gross but still kissing, and Dean’s thankful that Cas thought to open a window before they began.
“You need to hire someone new,” Dean grouses at Gabriel as he wipes sweat off his brow, dumping a tray of brownies unceremoniously down on the counter. It's too damn hot in the coffee shop yet again, and his t-shirt clings to him unpleasantly under his arms and at the base of his spine. He should have known better than to pick a black one in this heat.

“Already on it, Dean-o.” It's Meg who answers him. He notices she looks hot and bothered herself, her blonde curls hanging lank with a few strands clinging to her forehead. She's fanning herself with a menu. “Gabe hired someone yesterday, she starts this week. I think you'll like her.”

She winks lewdly and Dean makes a face at her. Right now, he would like anyone if they came in and picked up some of the slack. The place has been jammed all week with people wanting ice cream and iced lattes to combat the heat and Dean is about ready to collapse. He's also counting down the hours until his shift comes to an end because Sam is coming to stay for the weekend and he's trying to keep a lid on his excitement. He'd asked his brother if he needed a ride from the airport and has been assured that Sam will take a cab, so all Dean can do is wait for him to arrive. And dammit, work is just getting in the way.

At home later, he throws open all the windows and the sliding glass doors in the living room, much to Cas’ amusement, and collapses on the sofa with a groan of relief.

“Long day?” The sounds of Cas making iced tea float across from the kitchen and Dean's mouth waters.

“Hot day. You remember Sam’s coming tonight?”

“Of course.” A perspiring glass is pressed into his hand and Dean takes it gratefully. “I've made up the guest room. The kids are excited to see him. It's just a shame Jess and Mary can't make it, too.”

“Tell me about it.”

Mary has come down with croup and Jess decided at the last minute to stay at home and look after her. While he's disappointed not to be seeing her and his niece, Dean can't deny he's looking forward to having some quality time with his brother. Things still aren't quite right between them ever since they reunited, and he wants to put an end to it all. Every conversation feels a bit strained, every goodbye has a weird undertone, and sometimes he and Sam struggle to keep eye contact. As a result, Dean has spent the last few evenings planning things for them to do over the weekend to help them bond. Cas has looked over his shoulder a few times and made sounds of approval, and overall he has a good feeling about this weekend. He's sure it will bring the closure they so need.

He closes his eyes for a moment, the drink balanced precariously on his stomach, and soon enough falls asleep and dreams of home.

Dinner is a quick affair, with the boys excitable and giddy about seeing their uncle. Cas explains to Dean that Lexie has been put on a course of steroids to combat what Dr. Bradbury now thinks may be a lingering form of pneumonia and Dean spends most of dinner cuddling the kid and cutting up his carrots for him. Pneumonia sounds awful. Serious and scary and just not something he wants his kid to have to go through. Lexie has been off school again, coughing and lethargic and feverish, but Cas is convinced he can see an improvement already after twelve hours on the medication. Actually, in hindsight, it's probably a good thing Mary isn't coming.

He's also privately hoping that either Sam can talk some sense into Cas over his feud with Jimmy, or that seeing the Winchester brothers together will stir up some nostalgia in Castiel and force him into...
reconciling with his twin. He has all his fingers crossed in that respect.

Dean is lying on the sofa in the sun, trying to gather up the energy to tidy the place up and get changed, listening to the sound of Cas playing with the boys out on the decking. It's still hot, though the sun is sinking slowly towards the horizon, and he's enjoying the ocean breeze as it caresses his skin. As his eyes fall closed again, he wonders if he has time for another nap. Then, distant at first but growing steadily louder, he hears the rumble of a car’s engine. Shit, Sam’s early. He glances around the room, at the scattered kids’ toys and their plates left out from dinner - then pauses to listen as the car draws closer. That isn't just any engine…

It can't be. It can't be…

Dean is pushing the door open and stumbling outside in a heartbeat, shielding his eyes from the glare of the early evening light with his hand, and his mouth drops open in shock because it is! He would know that sound anywhere. And, as she draws closer, he takes in every inch of her as she turns a bend and winds her way up towards the house: bodywork gleaming black and silver, the windows polished and glossy with the sun reflecting off them, the sound of her engine - her heart - low and rumbling and jarring something deep within him. It's her, it's his Baby, his Chevy Impala that he had once thought was written off at the bottom of a lake, now beautifully restored to her former glory. A lump forms in his throat and he feels Cas come up behind him and take his arm with a little sound of surprised awe.

The driver’s door opens and Sam gets out, grinning from ear to ear, his hair longer than Dean remembers it and his shirt sleeves rolled up in an attempt to combat the heat. He stands leaning on the open door, watching Dean’s gaze as it roams lovingly over the surface of his beautiful car, the only love of his life before Cas. His car! She's here, and she looks incredible. Bobby has done a tremendous job restoring her and suddenly he wishes painfully that the old man was here for him to thank. He steps forward with an outstretched hand, ready to touch her again, speechless with shock.

Then the passenger door opens and Dean freezes.

He can't help what he does a second later: he rushes forward and throws himself into the arms of the man before him, a man who hugs him back just as tightly and ruffles his hair as Dean blinks back tears and grits his teeth to stop from bawling. The mingled scent of gunpowder, motor oil, and whisky fills his nostrils and he closes his eyes as memories cascade down around him.

“Aw, c’mon now, boy. Nothin’ to get all worked up over, ya idjit.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 6

It takes some time to get everyone settled inside. Dean pulls away with tears blurring his vision and has to take a minute to walk towards the decking with his hands on his hips and taking deep breaths to regain control over his emotions. He’s waited so long for this; to see Bobby and to know he’s forgiven for everything that happened - for the accident, for running away, and for hiding out with Cas in the beach house for so long. When he received the photo of Baby, fully restored and back to her former glory, that was Bobby’s olive branch. But now he’s here, he’s actually here! He’s driven across the country with Sam to see him, and it feels so good. Almost too good, like he shouldn’t be allowed to feel so elated. Everything seems to be falling into place, and he can’t quite believe it. Dean Winchester never gets everything he wants, ever. But his family is around him, finally, and he’s slowly allowing himself to believe that maybe, just maybe, this is it for him. God is done screwing with him. He sends up a silent prayer, chases it with a thanks, and turns back into the house.

Cas has ushered everyone inside and is pouring glasses of iced tea, looking surprised and a little frazzled, but with a genuine smile on his face. Bobby is sitting on one of Cas’ bar stools looking completely uncomfortable and shifting every few seconds, glancing downward like he’s going to plunge off to his death. Dean hides a grin behind his hands and approaches Sam from behind, clapping his brother on the shoulders.

“So glad you guys came, seriously. How was the drive? Did you look after my girl?”

“Always.” Sam grins, lifting his glass to his lips and taking a long swallow. “Cas, this is great, thank you. It’s kind of you to have us.”

“Always,” Cas echoes, sipping his own drink and handing Dean one. “You know you’re always welcome here. You, Jess and Mary.”

Dean watches the exchange over the rim of his glass with a warm glow of pride in his stomach. A few months back, he never would have imagined this possible. Cas and Sam not only in the same room voluntarily but sharing a drink and smiling at each other. Cas welcoming Sam instead of wanting to strangle him. He thinks back to the explosive moment when Sam and Cas met for the first time and feels a pang of regret as he remembers that it was actually Jimmy whom Sam met, mistaking him for Cas. A frown drags at his brows with the memory. The twins haven’t exchanged a single word in too long. Maybe now that Sam is here Cas will thaw out a little. Having all the people he loves in one room at once would be truly awesome. Upon hearing Bobby clear his throat self-consciously, he grins. If anyone can make Cas see sense and snap out of his funk, it’s Bobby. He just has to give them time.

“So, uh…” Dean sidles up to Bobby with a sheepish smile. “What’s up? Ouch!” He staggers back, rubbing his head as Bobby stares at him incredulously.

“What’s up? Dammit, boy, have you lost your mind? You vanish off the face of the goddamn planet and the first thing I hear from you is what’s up?”

Off to one side, Sam snickers. “Don’t worry, Bobby, he did the same thing to me.” At a glare from Dean he quickly backtracks, “But it’s cool. I mean, it’s Dean. If he ever let his emotions get in the way of anything we’d all be worried, right?”

And just like that, they’re all smiling like old friends, even Cas who keeps himself a little apart from them all, a little off to one side. Dean notices hee looks guiltily grateful when Billie comes running
into the room and straight into his legs, drawn by the sounds of all the commotion. Lexie follows him at a slower pace, rubbing his eyes and sniffing, and Dean watches Cas lift them both up with some effort and turn them towards Sam and Bobby, murmuring quietly to them. Bobby, to his credit, gives the kids a gruff hello combined with a smile and a tilt of his baseball cap, to which Lexie giggles at and Billie grins hugely. Dean can already tell that the kid is going to want a cap of his own before long.

The evening plays out with mellow conversation over a couple of beers, with Dean shooting Bobby fervent, nervous looks every so often, trying to convince himself that everything is as fine as it feels. That Bobby isn’t waiting for the opportune moment to snap and launch an attack on Dean for his little desertion episode. But everything seems cool so he tries to focus on his drink and his brother and the relaxed atmosphere that has descended onto the house. Cas plays with his kids for a while in the living room, leaving them all to it, but eventually gives in to Lexie’s tearful snuffles and pleas for bed and hauls them both to their feet.

“I’m just going to put the kids down. I won’t be long.”

Dean kisses them both and Billie hangs around his neck like a monkey. “Can we sleep with you tonight, daddy? Please?”

“No tonight, kid. We’re going to be late to bed. But tomorrow you totally can, OK?”

“Yes, tomorrow, Billie. You two need to sleep in your own beds tonight. Say goodnight, Lexie.”

But Lexie has had enough and buries his face in Cas’ thigh, little hands reaching up and demanding he be picked up. Sighing, Cas gives in to his son’s request and scoops the medication off the countertop to give to Lexie in the bathroom with a glass of milk before he brushes his teeth.

“I won’t be long,” Cas murmurs but Dean can already tell that he probably will be. Having people in their house is always stressful to Cas, so he wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t see him for at least a half hour. He watches them wander off then turns back to Sam - and groans inwardly.

The expression on Sam’s face as he watches Cas walk away is very familiar, and Dean hopes his brother will keep his sense and not open his mouth. His brother is frowning, a disapproving twist to his lips, and he turns back to Dean with a concerned look.

“Dean, aren’t the boys a little old to be sleeping with you and Cas?”

“They’re fine, Sammy. Lexie is sick, and it isn’t like we do it all the time.” That’s only a tiny lie; they don’t let the boys sleep in their bed that often. He’s sure they don’t. And he definitely doesn’t want to have this discussion right now, with Cas still within earshot. He gets very defensive very quickly over anything he perceives as criticism towards the children or Dean.

“Even still, I’ve heard that co-sleeping can be really bad for children in the early years. I’m not trying to pry or to judge how you guys parent, but I just want what’s best for the boys,” Sam continues earnestly. Across the table, Bobby looks up and shakes his head minutely but Sam doesn’t appear to notice him. “I’ve heard it can lead to attachment issues, abandonment issues, and I’m sure they should be comfortable in their own beds by this age. Castiel should know that. I’ve read that -“

“Excuse me, Dean, do you think you could put something on for dinner while I get the kids to bed?” Castiel’s acidic voice cuts into their conversation like a knife and Sam starts so violently that his hair flops in front of his eyes. He pushes it back, blushing furiously, and both Winchesters turns to see a tight-lipped Castiel standing a foot away, holding a fractious Lexie who is starting to squirm in his arms and whine. He’s clearly heard everything and Dean opens his mouth to apologise on his
brother’s behalf but Sam beats him to it.

“I’m sorry, Castiel, I don’t mean to question your parenting. Not at all. I was just saying to Dean, I’ve just been reading -“

“I don’t tell you how to bring up Mary.” Castiel spots one of Billie’s toys on the table and leans over Dean’s shoulder to swipe it up with more force than necessary. “So I’d appreciate it if you didn’t criticise the way I raise my sons. Or at least, if you plan on doing so in the future, at least do it to my face.”

Then he’s gone, stalking off down the corridor towards Billie, who is standing with his finger in his mouth looking so freakishly like his brother that only the length of their hair tells them apart, and Sam buries his face in his hands. Dean leans over to helpfully clap him on the shoulder.

“Nice one, champ. Insult the hosts, why don’t you.”

“I didn’t know he was standing right there!” Sam groans, and Bobby makes a disapproving sound from his stool.

“It don’t matter if he was standing right there or not. You’re in his house, eatin’ his food and drinkin’ his beer. Show him some damn respect. If that’s how Castiel and Dean wanna raise their kids, that’s their damn business. You don’t hear him bleatin’ on about your decisions for Mary, do you? Idjit.” Bobby sips his beer and fixes Sam with an expectant stare from beneath his cap. “You owe him an apology.”

“Shit, you’re right. I’m sorry, Dean, that was… kinda insensitive. I guess I’ve got a lot to learn about parenting.” Sam runs a hand through his hair then scrapes his chair back. “If I’m not back in five minutes…”

“I’ll help Cas bury your body down on the beach, don’t worry.” Dean raises his beer and tilts it cheerfully at Sam. “Good luck!”

He watches his brother walk down the corridor to the kids’ bedroom as though he’s going to the gallows then turns to Bobby with a grateful smile.

“Thanks. For… For that.”

“Didn’t just do it for you, kid.” Bobby downs the rest of his beer and deposits the bottle on the counter, looking around for another. “That’s a good man you’ve got there. Now Sam ain’t told me everythin’, not by a long shot. But you two have been through some shit, together and separately, so I figure we can cut you both some slack. Staring by not judgin’ you in your own damn house.”

For a minute, Dean can’t quite think what to say. Bobby has summed up the last year and a half so succinctly and given his forgiveness so freely that it almost feels like he hasn’t quite earned it yet. But then Bobby is cracking open another beer, sliding one across the table to Dean and turning the subject towards how he went about restoring Baby and Dean relaxes back into his chair, the sounds of Castiel and Sam reconciling floating down the corridor towards them. He would swear they’re talking about the different types of baby wipes and the difference between formula and breast milk now. He shakes his head ruefully, suddenly very thankful for Bobby’s company. He’s missed the old guy way more than he realised, and he has to admit it’s a nice change to be talking about cars and Bobby’s latest hunting trip rather than school and baking and their wedding plans. It feels easier, somehow. Like nothing has changed between them, and as he looks into Bobby’s expressive eyes and watches him talk about fitting Baby’s new catalytic convertor, he realises something: nothing has changed, not between him and Bobby. It was just a brief interlude.
“Son of a -“

Dean drops the tray with a clang as the floor at his feet is showered with chewy oatmeal cookies and icing sugar dusting. For a moment, he just stands there and stares at the mess in dismay, then groans and wipes his sweaty forehead with his forearm.

“Goddamnit. Sorry, Gabriel. Guess you’re gonna need another batch,” he grumbles to himself, squatting down to pick up all the cookies, breaking off a chunk and shoving it in his mouth as he does. “Cleaned the damn floor myself an hour ago, these tiles are probably cleaner than Gabriel’s -“

“If I’d known my colleagues were as delicious as Gabriel’s devil’s food cake, I’d have applied to work here much sooner.”

A voice, soft and saccharine-sweet cuts into Dean’s whining and he starts, turning and squinting upwards against the light to see a girl standing behind the counter right by the cash register, one hand on her hip, staring down at him. He’d totally forgotten the new girl was starting today, and while her comment is something that Meg would quite cheerfully come out with, the girl in front of him is most definitely not Meg.

She’s petite, tiny in fact, with long dark hair in a sheet down her back, and she’s pretty. Really pretty, Dean notices, and her delicate features and honey-gold tan are accentuated by the little white sundress she’s wearing beneath her apron. She leans one hand on the counter, a small, conspiratorial type of smile pulling at her lips as she gazes down at him. He’d totally forgotten the new girl was starting today, and while her comment is something that Meg would quite cheerfully come out with, the girl in front of him is most definitely not Meg.

“Hello, Dean. Is it Dean, right?” Her voice is like satin and her smile somehow grows even sweeter. Dean finds himself blushing as he nods, wiping the sweat from his brow and silently cursing Meg for not fixing the air-con yet. “It’s very nice to meet you, Dean. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

She extends a delicate hand and he takes it, surprised at how strong her grip is.

“Really? All good, I hope!” He laughs self-consciously and she sends him a secretive little smile in response, turning towards the counter as the door chimes, alerting them both to their first customers of the day.

“Oh, all good, Dean. Believe me.” She shakes back her dark hair and turns her back on him, welcoming the elderly couple as they approach the counter talking in muted tones and admiring the array of treats on offer. “Hello, welcome to Sugar Crush. I’m Eve, how can I help you?”

Castiel leans into the car, sweat beading on his brow thanks to the heat, and unbuckles Billie’s car
seat. His son is smiling up at him warmly, and Castiel ruffles his hair before lifting him out and setting him down, where he immediately runs towards the house. Lexie is dozing in his own car seat and Castiel lifts him up into his arms carefully, one arm firmly under his bottom as the boy clings close and sighs in his sleep. Castiel kicks the door closed and heads into the house after Billie, relishing the cool air inside. It’s a welcome reprieve from the scorching summer, and he tosses his satchel down on the sofa and shifts Lexie to the other hip. Billie is on his tiptoes, reaching into the fridge for a bottle of water, and Castiel’s eyes sweep the living room. The house is quiet, still, and outside the sun is setting. It’s such a beautiful view that he stops and stares at it for a moment, mesmerised. He’s lived here for so long now that sometimes he forgets how stunning the scenery is and how lucky they are to have somewhere so perfect to live. He knows he’s probably becoming immune to the simple beauty of a sunset and feels a pang of sadness. Right now, standing here with just him and his kids, he feels just as in awe of Mother Nature’s glory as he did the very first time he saw it through these windows.

“Daddy?” Billie holds up his water bottle which is now empty and being crushed in little hands. “More.”

“More, please.” Castiel ruffles his son’s hair again, takes the bottle and refills it from the tap, Lexie’s little body pressing hotly against him.

“Thank you!” Billie shouts, a few decibels louder than necessary, and runs into the living room to find his toys. Lexie makes a displeased, sleepy sound and presses closer to his father, wanting cuddles. Castiel rubs his back and kisses his forehead, casting one last loving glance at Billie before turning to take Lexie to bed.

“C’mon, baby, let’s put you down. I think your nap is well overdue.”

He checks his watch and frowns. The house shouldn’t be this quiet, not right now. Something feels a little off.

“Hello?” He calls quietly and is met with the sound of silence in return.

He walks down the corridor to his bedroom, Lexie cuddling sweetly into his neck and the joyous sounds of Billie playing with his toy elephant following him. The bedroom doors are all closed and he nudges his open quietly, not wanting to wake the man he suspects is dozing inside. The room is still and dark, the blinds pulled down to block the summer sun, and he can just make out a figure lying on the bed. A gentle smile tugs at his lips then fades as he registers the unnatural heat in the room. He frowns, scenting the air, and recognises something bitter and coppery. Lexie shifts in his arms, opening his eyes and lifting his head as Castiel reaches for the light switch and flicks it on.

The scene before him shocks him into a stunned, horrified silence.

The wall behind the bed is slick with blood. The white sheets are soaked in it. The heat is suffocating, clawing at his throat, and the air is thick with the smell of blood and death. Castiel feels his throat tighten, feels his son wriggle and squirm in his arms, and can’t take his eyes off the body on the bed. The body of a man who has clearly taken his own life in bloody brutality right there in his bedroom. The body of someone he recognises, someone he knows he loves despite the face being turned away towards the window. One hand hangs off the bed and blood drips slowly from the ghostly-pale fingertips to the floor to form a thick, dark puddle.

Then the man slowly, painfully slowly, sits up and turns to look at Castiel with blank, hollow eyes as blood drips from his lips and a cry sticks in Castiel’s throat, choking him. Lexie begins to cry and the sound fills his senses as he tries to stumble back but finds he can’t move, is pinned in place. The walls are pulling in, the bed drawing closer, the air so hot and thick it feels as though it’s invading his
lungs and seeping into his core. Then the man smiles and Castiel feels bile rise in his throat. It isn’t Cole, it isn’t even Dean - who it has been so often in Castiel’s nightmares of late. The grey-faced, blood-drenched figure sitting on the edge of the bed in front of him is achingly familiar and Castiel feels a howl of distress building within him when he realizes it’s his brother this time.

It’s Jimmy.

Castiel wakes up, in the arms of a very shaken Dean, screaming.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Thank you once again to Tricia for being so awesome and getting these beta'd so fast. Where have you been all my life?!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Castiel lies quietly in Dean’s arms in the wake of his nightmare for over an hour, skin tacky with sweat and his heart racing. He feels sick. He can't get the image of his dead, bloodied twin out of his mind, and as he stares up at the ceiling in the pale light of the approaching dawn he feels tears leak from the corners of his eyes to run down his temples and disappear into his hair.

“You sure you don't wanna talk about it?” Dean murmurs into his hair.

Castiel shakes his head. He doesn't. Dean had been understandably freaked out when he woke up screaming, clawing at the air in front of him, and trying to fight off Dean’s worried hands. It had taken him a good ten minutes to calm down, and in that time Dean had to send the twins and Sam back to bed after they'd all congregated in the hallway in concern. Billie had ducked under Sam’s arm and run into the bedroom, throwing himself onto the bed and cuddling up to Cas who, still shaken, had wrapped his arms around his son and buried his face in his hair. Dean could see his shoulders rise and fall as he inhaled the scent of his boy. He could see Cas shuddering with each breath.

“Are you OK, daddy?” Billie had sat back and reached up to wipe a stray tear from Cas’ cheek. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“Yes, baby,” Cas had murmured, taking his son’s hand and pressing it to his cheek and closing his eyes, clearly trying to rein himself in. “It wasn't nice. But I'm fine now, so go on back to bed.”

Now they're lying together in silence. Dean’s tracing patterns onto his shoulder, pressed up against his back as Cas stares sightlessly out of the window with one hand under his pillow and the other clenched in the sheets. The sensation of nausea threatens to drag him from his bed to the bathroom and his skin feels prickly and hot. He isn't one to believe in omens but he's left wondering if his subconscious is screaming at him to patch things up with Jimmy. Jimmy, who he would normally call after a nightmare and who has been his crutch lately when his sleep has been so disturbed.

The dreams had started a few weeks after Dean proposed, and back then they were just snatches of memory that could be brushed away like cobwebs. Memories of Cole, memories of the twins as babies, memories of the police and the coroner and the sick feeling of horror were twisting his guts. Then he and Dean had begun to discuss wedding plans and his dream had taken him back to his wedding to Cole, to the circus it had turned into despite Cas’ requests for a small, private ceremony.

Two hundred guests, a diamond white theme, and a day that Cas hadn't enjoyed much of at all. Cole wanted to impress his friends and relatives, so it had been glamorous and showy, but also ended up being l completely impersonal. Every time Dean mentioned a date, a venue, or food, or anything, Cas’ mind would go into overdrive and right back to the stressful months of trying to plan his first
wedding. He remembered the never-ending feeling or trying to get everything right, and he couldn't shake it all off.

Then the dreams took a worse turn: Cole, in his wedding suit, sprawled on the bed in macabre horror before his eyes. Himself, palms slick with blood, reaching for his children who screamed themselves hoarse at the sight of him. Dean lying dead. Dean taking his life and haunting Cas, clutching at him and asking why nobody saved him.

Those nights were the worst. And try as he might, he's now struggling to separate the memories of losing Cole from the present with Dean. Fear is coiling around him, paralysing him, and the idea of the wedding terrifies him more than he dares to admit even to himself. Jimmy knows. Jimmy is the only person who knows the reason behind Cas’ nightmares and he found out entirely by accident - by noticing the shadows under his brother’s eyes and their utter lack of wedding plans, and putting two and two together in a way only his twin brother can.

“It will be fine, history won't repeat itself,” morphed into, “Dean would never leave you all that way,” then into, “You need to talk to him, Castiel,” and eventually, shaken by his brother’s insistence and stressed beyond belief, he had pushed him away. And now he can't help but wonder if his twin will ever take him back.

A low whine of distress escapes his lips and Dean presses closer behind him, kissing his neck and stroking his hair in an attempt at comfort, but it only makes Castiel’s skin crawl. He feels trapped, claustrophobic, and the only person he wants is the only one who isn't speaking to him. And yet his body craves Dean’s touch - he feels chilled and panicked whenever he tries to pull away and he cuddles closer, ignoring the crawling feelings of must have space. What he really needs is Dean, and things to be as they were.

He wants to talk to Dean. He's tried, but aborts after just a few words, pinned yet again, by fear. He's deeply afraid that if he voices his concerns about their wedding to Dean that the other man will call everything off and leave. He has his real family now back home, and he's not bound to Castiel by need any more. He could easily cut ties and vanish, leaving him and the twins standing in the dust. And he can't bear for his boys to lose another father. Tears dampen his lashes and he turns his face to wipe them on the pillow. When did he become so utterly wrecked? Too weak and scared to open up to the man he's supposed to marry, and too damn afraid to be on his own again with his kids? They did it once, they could do it again.

“Talk to me baby, please,” Dean’s voice is low, husky with sleep and concern, but Cas just shakes his head. He grips tightly onto Dean’s arm where it’s draped across his waist and links their fingers together, holding him close and pressing his body back into Dean.

He can't, not tonight. But maybe he should whilst Sam and Bobby are here. At least that way, if Dean does decide to leave, he can go home with them in the car he adores so much. It will be easier for him that way, with his brother and his uncle at his side.

Castiel will cope. He always does.

***

“Cas?”

Dean taps gently on the open bedroom door. Castiel is sitting in the middle of the bed, cross-legged and wearing faded jeans and a t-shirt loudly proclaiming We should all be feminists and is frowning down at his laptop. He's got dark tortoiseshell-framed glasses pushed up into his hair - which looks
like he's been running his hands through it for hours - and bare feet. Dean’s heart swells with fondness at the sight of him, and he knocks a little louder.

“Cas, babe?”

Castiel glances up and it's obvious from his vacant expression that he was in ‘the zone’ as Dean calls it. When Cas is immersed in his writing he switches off completely when it comes to anything else around him, and always looks like a startled deer when he's snapped out of it.

“I'm sorry, Dean, what were you saying? I was…” He gestures vaguely at his laptop and Dean smiles.

“It's fine, I didn't mean to disturb you. Sam, Bobby and I want to take the kids to the bowling alley. Do you wanna come? It's a nice evening, thought we could go for a walk on the beach afterwards. Get ice cream. Hang out.” He approaches the bed and reaches - slightly tentatively - for Cas and is relieved when his partner leans into him, nuzzling at his stomach and inhaling deeply. His hand comes up to stroke Cas’ hair and he can't ignore the wave of sadness that threatens to overwhelm them both. He sits down on the edge of the bed and takes both of Castiel’s hands in his, ducking his head to catch his eyes. “Babe? What's going on lately? Please tell me. I’m damn near worried sick here.”

“It's nothing, I promise. Just work, worried about Lexie, and all this stuff with Jimmy…” Cas sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “It's all just a bit much.”

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” Dean is trying hard to battle the hollow feeling inside of him. Castiel won't meet his eyes, not properly. His gaze keeps flitting away to anything and everything else around him, yet he's holding Dean’s hands tightly and pressing close into his space. All these mixed signals are confusing. Cas seems to be emotionally pulling away whilst physically needing comfort, particularly over the last few days since his nightmare.

It was about Jimmy, that's all Dean managed to glean from Castiel in the wake of it all. It was about his brother and it was horrible, and when Dean suggested Cas should call him up to calm himself, Cas just shook his head and went quiet - all the while twisting his fingers together and looking increasingly distracted, as though the very same thought was running through his head. Even before Cas sighs and opens his mouth to reply, Dean knows what's coming. And he's right.

“I know. But I'm fine, Dean. Really. Bowling sounds like fun. I’d love to come.”

Then there's the usual scuffling of shoes on, toys to collect, deciding who is riding with who (Dean is desperate to take the Impala out for a spin and opts to drive Sam and Bobby to town, missing the tight smile that crosses Cas’ face when he turns away to buckle the kids into their seats) and the children are giddy with excitement. They love the bowling alley, love the noise, the lights, and the tinny sounds from the game machines, and Dean knows Cas loves it too. He hopes an outing will help them all relax, and as he catches a glimpse of his lover in his rearview mirror as he climbs into the car he feels a pang of sudden longing. Which is kinda ridiculous since they'll only be apart for the length of a car journey.

“Come on, princess, get goin’.” Bobby grunts from the backseat. “If I have to watch you moon over him much more I ain't gonna keep my lunch down.”

“Yeah, alright old man. You didn't have to come, you know.” Dean smirks as he pulls out of their driveway, window down and shades on, already falling back in love with his Baby. This is the freedom he's been missing.
“Do I look like a ditchable prom date to you? Besides, someone gotta bat for the Winchester side. You two can't bowl for shit,” Bobby says.

“Hey now! I'm better than Dean!” Sam twists in his seat, indignant. “At least I stick to my own lane! Dean almost knocked a kid out last time we went bowling, couldn't aim to save his life!”

Dean grins happily to himself as the two of them bicker over his shoulder. He’s missed this. His favorite people together, just like old times. He wishes Cas were here too, crammed into the backseat with the boys on his lap. Now that would be perfect.

Cas does seem to relax a little when they get there, allows Sam to tie the boys bowling shoes and buy them hot dogs from the childrens’ menu without too much fuss about them being junk and full of chemicals. And he even laughs when Dean skids and almost trips over his shoelaces in his haste to be the first one up when they reach their lane.

By the time they finish their final game, Cas is relaxed and grinning. He and Sam had teamed up with the kids against Dean and Bobby, winning spectacularly despite Dean’s grumbled protests that he had to play badly to let the kids win, and as he watches Billie and Lexie high-five with Sam he feels a little better. A little more sure that he and Cas will be fine. They just need to do more things out of the house to stop Cas from sinking into his thoughts.

Because if he isn't going to talk about them, he can damn well distract him from thinking about them.

...•••

“Dean? Could you do me a favor?”

Dean sticks his head into the kids’ bedroom to see Lexie curled up on his side, asleep, and an exhausted-looking Cas lying next to him and stroking his hair. Down the hall, he can hear Sam and Bobby laughing at something and the smell of barbecued pork wafts tantalisingly through the air.

“Sure, babe, anything.”

“Billie really wants some coloring books that he had over Christmas, but I think I put them in the attic with all the decorations. Could you go get them? I’d go, but Lexie whines if I move a single muscle, so…” Cas shrugs and Dean leans down to kiss him. Cas has dark shadows under his eyes, hasn’t shaved for a day or so, and he looks on the edge of falling asleep.

“Of course.”

Internally, Dean is cringing. He hates the attic. It’s narrow and cramped, running the full length of the house, and it’s dark as hell. The one tiny bare light bulb swinging above the hatch does nothing to help him see anything up there, and the thought of rifling through a bunch of dusty boxes isn’t exactly exciting. But if Cas and Billie want a coloring book, then a coloring book they will get.

Contemplating and then dismissing the idea of asking Sam to help, he heads up the rickety staircase which hasn't been stepped upon in many, many months, and the dust in the air instantly makes him sneeze. He casts around in the gloom until he finds what he's looking for and squats down with his knees popping to sift through the boxes of Christmas stuff.

He yanks open the box he thinks the coloring books are in and fishes out a handful of books, dropping two of them and cursing in irritation as he bangs his head on a beam. He reaches down to pick them up and realises that they aren’t books, they’re photo albums. Settling down on his knees,
feeling just a tad guilty for invading Cas’ privacy, he opens the first one to see a photo of the twins standing at the beach, arm in arm. But after a closer look, he notices the photo doesn’t look recent. It’s old. *Decades* old judging by how faded it is, and he realises with a jolt that he’s looking at Cas and Jimmy as children, and he can’t tell them apart at all! Their hair is lighter, a dirty blonde, and they’re both grinning widely. He flips to the next one and it’s Cas and Jimmy on a bike, now older, with Jimmy pedalling with a gleeful look on his face and Cas sitting on the handlebars looking torn between fear and exhilaration. The next one is of the boys in school uniforms, covered in flour and cocoa powder, messing about in the kitchen in a clear attempt to bake something. Cas is frowning, staring down into a mixing bowl with his tongue between his teeth, but it's the look on Jimmy’s face that makes Dean’s heart fill with warmth. He's looking at his twin so fondly, one hand raised as though he's going to help, and Dean shuts the album with a lump in his throat. Cas and Jimmy *have* to reconcile soon, they just have to. It doesn't feel right.

Then he opens the next album and stills in shock as he sees it. It’s Cas and Cole, hand-in-hand outside of what looks to be a museum in Los Angeles. Another of them at a restaurant eating dinner, smiling slightly rigidly. Another of them at their wedding, Cole grinning and raising a glass while Cas looks on with a tight sort of smile and wooden, firmly set shoulders. His heart aches in a different way now as he looks at these. Especially when he flips to the next photograph and it’s of Cole alone, sitting on a sofa with a tired smile on his face and two white bundles on his lap. The twins can’t be more than a few weeks old, and Dean feels an ugly coil of possessive envy at the knowledge that Cole knew them first.

“Dean? You've been ages, are you OK?”

He jumps and bangs his head on a beam again, the albums skittering from his grasp to land on the floor at Cas’ feet, and he wants to kick himself for being so careless.

“Sorry, babe. I found these and I got kinda distracted. I didn't mean to pry.”

Cas stoops to pick them up and his eyes widen as he sees the photo of Cole with the twins, lips parting into a silent ‘oh’. Then he turns the album of he and Jimmy over in his hands, and even in the gloom it's clear that his eyes begin to mist up.

“I, uh, found the book.” Dean holds up the coloring book awkwardly. “Do you want me to put those back for you?”

“No.” Cas’ voice sounds strangely distant even in the small confines of the attic. “I'll take them. I haven't looked at these in years…”

Then he’s gone, back down the narrow stairs and Dean follows at a slower pace, a low note of worry gnawing at him. Does all of Cas’ recent behavior have to do with Cole? With Cas’ past? He's determined to get an answer out of his partner, and soon, before things start to implode more than they already have done.

Maybe, he thinks as he shuts and locks the door and brushes dust from his clothes, the photos of Jimmy might spur some sort of reaction at least. The twins were clearly very close as children, as they have been as adults until now. It seems a sad waste to throw it all away now.

Dean leaves Cas kneeling on the living room floor with the photograph albums in his hands, and goes to check on the kids. Sam is reading to them quietly from a book called *Fantastic Mr. Fox* which Cas had picked up at a thrift store, and Bobby is dozing outside on the decking with a beer in hand and his cap pulled down over his eyes to block out the setting sun. When Dean comes back a long time later after getting distracted folding laundry and cleaning up the bathroom after the kids’ spent too long playing in the tub, Cas is asleep on the sofa. He has a frown on his face and a picture
out of its protective cellophane resting on his stomach, held loosely between his fingers. Dean twists his head to see what it is and his heart clenches with dismay.

It’s Cas and Cole, at a diner Dean doesn’t recognise, taken by someone who must have accompanied them to dinner. Milkshakes and empty plates with scraps of salad are on the table behind them, and a scraped-clean ice cream dish sits with two spoons sticking out of it. It looks like the photo was taken a long time ago, before the wedding judging by the lack of glinting gold band on Cas’ finger. Cole is kissing Cas’ cheek, leaning across the table to reach him and Castiel is laughing, nose all scrunched up and eyes watering, laughing in such a joyous and carefree way that it looks as though he’s never been so happy in his entire life.

Dean wonders if he’s ever been that happy since.

Chapter End Notes

Updates might be a little slower over the next few weeks because I fly to Thailand today for honeymoon. But since I wrote the majority of Rise and Shine while I was in Rome, you never know! ♥
Chapter 8

I’m going to ask you all to trust me. But for now, I’m sorry.

Jimmy Novak hasn't had the best few weeks. And it’s beginning to show. Three people at school have now taken him aside and asked if everything is alright. Each time he’s given them a brittle smile and said that he’s fine, he’s just having family troubles, he’s sure it will all blow over and everything will be back to normal soon. His colleagues have clapped him on the shoulder, told him to call if he needs anything, and carried on with their lives and Jimmy is trying valiantly to do the same.

He’s still reeling from his explosive fight with Cas. That entire evening had been a nightmare from start to finish, and he keeps going over and over it all in his mind, thinking of different things he could and should have said. He wishes he’d tried harder to stop Cas from leaving, regrets not keeping a closer eye on Billie, and wonders what else he could have done to avoid the inevitable fallout. Anything? Sure, he could have locked the front door, he could have kept a closer eye on the child, he could have fought back when Cas threw such cruel words at him... but ultimately, would it have made any difference? Would this argument have happened at another point down the line anyway? It feels like it. It feels like Castiel has been storing up grievances for some time now, perhaps longer than Jimmy dares to imagine, and they were bound to come out sooner or later.

He knows he’s too heavily invested in his twin’s family, and he knows it’s come at the expense of his own personal life. But after everything Castiel went through with Cole, the thought of pulling back and letting him get on with everything on his own was too painful to go through with, so in the end he just... didn’t. He didn’t pull away. Instead, he spent more and more time with Cas and the twins until it almost felt like the four of them were a family unit. A slightly odd, slightly dysfunctional family unit, but a family all the same.

Then Dean arrived and Castiel changed. He was happy once again for the first time in years - for the first time since before he and Cole got married - and Jimmy knows now he should have used that moment to step back and allow Cas and Dean to build their own home together. He should have turned his focus back to his own life. But somehow that never happened, and now that Castiel and Dean have been ripped away from him he’s found that not only is there a gaping hole where they should be but there also isn’t anybody else in his life he can turn to. He’s allowed so many potential friendships and romantic relationships to pass him by because he was too busy with Cas and the twins, and now that he’s in need of someone he finds himself alone. He’s contemplated calling his mother more than once, but dismissed that thought immediately. He hasn’t spoken to Naomi Novak in almost a decade and doesn’t plan to start now. She’s estranged from he and Cas, and he intends to keep it that way.

You’ve been forcing your way in with me and my kids for too long.

Jimmy shudders at the memory, getting up from his desk where he’s been grading papers to pour himself another glass of wine. He frowns at the almost-empty bottle. He only opened it two hours ago. And, as it always does when he’s had a little too much to drink, anger swirls up inside him, dark and clawing.

“I’ve done everything for you, Cas,” he says to himself. He stands at his kitchen window, his glass
clasped in his hands, and stares out into the night. The trees sway in the breeze, some of their branches brushing his upstairs windows, and he remembers Billie all covered in dirt and crying. “I’ve sacrificed so much that you don’t even know about. And this is how you repay me?”

His glass is empty and he stashes it in the sink, deciding against finishing the entire bottle.  

*Just because you haven’t bothered to form a family of your own doesn’t give you the right to shoulder your way into mine.*

He can’t sleep. He lies in bed staring at the ceiling, hearing the boys’ laughter in his memories, seeing Cas grinning at him, and remembering Dean’s excitement the day they got engaged. Remembering meeting Dean for the first time and disliking him with horror-filled dismay. Even back then it was obvious that the handsome stranger with the good looks of a Calvin Klein model and eyes as green as the forest which Billie had gotten lost inside of was going to come in and steal Castiel’s heart. He was never jealous, never. But he was sad that his place in his twin’s life seemed to be dwindling.

He wants a family of his own. He wants a wife and children and a dog and the white picket fence and barbecues in the summer. He wants it all. He can see it so clearly: a son and daughter of his own, playing with the twins, Lexie and Billie old enough to help take care of the younger ones. Lexie would carry Jimmy’s little girl around in a piggy back, his hair long and curly and blowing in his face with the ocean breeze as they play on the beach. Billie, sharp as a tack, would be talking to the adults and showing Jimmy and his wife the newest book he got for Christmas or his birthday. Sam and Jess might even be there. They’d all be laughing and having fun. But that dream always fades away to nothing, to the way his life is now: alone in a too-big house with a sick nephew and a brother who won’t speak to him at all. In his mid-thirties now, pushing late-thirties, he’s been consistently fighting off the gnawing fear that he’s left it too late.

*I can’t ever trust you again.*

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

He misses the children so much. They’ve been such a big part of his life ever since they were tiny, even when he and Cas lived miles apart. The boys are rays of sunshine in their own ways - Lexie very sweet and caring, and Billie adventurous and outgoing. He used to love lazy evenings in at the beach house, out on the terrace in the late afternoons, when the twins would fall asleep on top of him all warm and cuddly. Cas would sit with a glass of wine and just smile at them, watching them in silence for hours. In truth, moving to be close to his brother had been a split-second decision and one he had never regretted.

Until now.

He’s considered selling the house and moving away back to their hometown, but it feels like a knee-jerk reaction to something that can hopefully - possibly - be remedied. If he does that, ups and leaves at the first sign of trouble with his brother, it will likely be the final nail in the coffin of their relationship. And becoming estranged from Cas - never seeing Dean or the children again - doesn’t bear thinking about.

The *look* Cas gave him. It haunts his dreams.

He’s never felt so hurt in his entire life. He always thought nothing could come between him and Cas and truthfully he isn’t entirely sure what it is that has. He knows Cas hasn’t been right for a while.
He’s been having horrendous nightmares about his dead husband and has been on the phone to Jimmy at three in the morning countless times over the last few weeks, shaken and nervous, murmuring things about Cole and Dean and almost delirious with exhaustion. He knows Cas is struggling to plan the wedding, worried about what Dean wants and worried it isn’t gelling with his own desires. But, as Jimmy has told him countless numbers of times, how will he know if he doesn’t ask? But Cas hasn’t asked, doesn’t dare to. He just chokes it all down and eventually it's going to come to the surface and who knows what will happen then? He's seen Cas and Dean fight, and it isn't pretty. He’s worried about his brother, especially now that he can’t call him and see how he’s doing. He’s tried, of course. But Castiel never answers his phone.

And Jimmy is miserable without him.

Cas isn’t well. Jimmy, above anyone else, knows that. And he's sat alone in his study night after night, wondering if he should call Dean and speak to him plainly about Cas’ mental state. It's clear to him that he’s depressed. He’s pale, he's lost some weight (although he's still solid muscle on his thighs and biceps), and he looks like he barely sleeps an hour a night. Frown lines have made their home between his brows and his fingernails are bitten down to the quick. But it doesn't appear to be visible to anyone else - Dean seems to carry on as though everything is fine, in spite of his shock on that awful night where it all went to hell. But the nightmares… Jimmy knows they're just a side effect from what's plaguing his brother, not the actual cause. Castiel is afraid. He's afraid of making a mistake in getting married, yet he's afraid of losing the man he loves if he speaks his mind. It all stems directly back to Cole, and Jimmy has wondered more than once if Castiel dealt with it all adequately at the time. It certainly doesn't seem like he did. Surely if he had, these old fears of being left alone with his children wouldn't be resurfacing during a time he's supposed to be so happy.

He doesn’t know what to do to help his twin, but he does know that contacting Dean would only push Cas further away from him. Cas has been betrayed by people in the past, Dean included, and adding himself to that list of people could break them forever. It may be a price he's willing to pay in the future, but that day hasn't come yet. For now, he's wallowing in his own misery and doing a damn fine job of it.

But one morning, as he gathers an armful of laundry and heads downstairs to laundry room, the sight of one of the items of clothing he's carrying brings a smile to his lips. One thing has been going right lately, and long may it last. He dumps the pile onto the work surface and busies himself with the washer, his thoughts suddenly interrupted by a knock on the front door upstairs. It's soft, tentative, and he frowns, not recognising it. Perhaps it's a delivery of something he's forgotten he's ordered - books, probably. Since he and Cas fought, he's been burying himself in the latest crime and thriller novels, trying to put it all out of his mind.

The distraction hasn't worked, but his bookshelves look a lot fuller. At least something is bringing a little life to this vast house, a house that is hauntingly too big for one person alone with no family regularly visiting.

Standing and swallowing down that thought, he heads upstairs and unlocks the heavy front door, pulling it open and welcoming the morning summer breeze that winds its way in from outside. Words, half-formed, die on his lips at the sight of his visitor.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Cas says, and for a moment they just stare in silence at each other.

Jimmy can't quite work out what to say. He stands there holding the door open, blinking in the sunlight. He's about to ask his brother what's wrong, what he's doing here, when he sees his twin’s eyes are red, bloodshot, and his lips are chapped and sore from being bitten. Over his shoulder is a rucksack, old and battered, and he's thrown on an oversized sage green sweater, completely unsuitable for the warm weather, and it makes his normally tan skin look washed out. He looks like
he's left the house in a hurry, and Jimmy glances behind him to see the car parked at a tragic angle on the sidewalk and no children in tow. His twin is alone. Before he can speak, Cas beats him to it with the words distorted by a choked sob, lashes sparkling with tears.

“I can’t do it, Jimmy. I can’t marry Dean.”
Chapter 9

Jimmy makes them both drinks (coffee for Cas, iced tea for himself) and they sit at the table outside in the sun - Cas with his sleeves pulled down over his hands and his feet tucked underneath him on the expensive rattan sofa and Jimmy with sunglasses on. It's sunny enough to need them, but they also give him a sense of distance, a fine layer of protection that he finds he needs. Cas is vulnerable yet volatile, and Jimmy hasn't forgotten the harsh words thrown at him in anger the last time they were together. He doesn't think he'll ever be able to truly forget them.

His brother looks like shit, for lack of a more eloquent word. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, his hair unwashed and salty, standing on end, and his lips are pale and chapped as though he's been biting them. He's intently focused on his hands, on the cup he's holding between them, and seems to be struggling to meet his brother's eyes. Jimmy, sensing it's wiser to sit quietly rather than launch into a barrage of how hurt he's been, just watches him and sips his iced tea, wondering what the hell has happened to bring his brother here - and how he can fix it all.

“I'm sorry, Jimmy.” Cas says after a long, drawn-out silence.

Wary, Jimmy asks, “For what?” and Cas sighs.

“You know what. For everything I said.” He sits back, draws one knee up to his chest and scrubs at his eyes with his sleeve. “I didn't mean it. You know I didn't mean it.”

Jimmy is silent again, considering his answer carefully. It would be so easy just to tell Cas not to worry, that he forgives him and they should forget about it all. But he can't quite bring himself to do that. It's evident something is really upsetting Cas, and he has an inkling as to what it might be - he has for a while - but that really doesn't excuse the way his brother treated him. Cas pushing him away so viciously hurt him deeply. He knows he'll forgive his twin always, but if he makes it too easy is Cas likely to react that same way in the future, knowing all it takes is a ‘sorry’ for him to be forgiven?

“I was awful to you. Vile. I don't know how you've even let me in today. You're a better person than I am.” Cas stares at his hands, defeat in every line of his body. “I took it all out on you and I'm sorry. Really sorry.”

“Yeah, you kinda did.” Jimmy wants to let it go but something angry coiling inside him won't allow it just yet. “It was an accident, Cas. I thought you'd know that.”

“I did! I do! And those things I said about you not being a part of the family…” He runs an anguished hand through his hair. “It was all bullshit. I was just so angry and worried, and it all came out wrong.”

“So why haven't you called me? I've tried, Cas. I've tried to make this right.”

“I know you have. But... Jimmy, you're the only one who knows what's going on and I guess... I was worried you'd push me too hard and I'd have to talk about it. I wasn't ready to talk about it.”

“And you are now?”

“Yes.”

“So you've come to me because you want something. Not because you're sorry.” Jimmy can't help the bite in his words. It's clear that Cas regrets everything but it still stings that his brother couldn't
have come just to apologise. Guilt crosses Castiel’s face and his cheeks pink up.

“No. Both. I know I should have come earlier. I meant to. I had this awful dream, Jimmy, and I meant to call you. I’m sorry.”

He means it, it’s clear. And his eyes look so sad, so bright red and bloodshot that Jimmy decides to cut him a break and park his own feelings - for now. He’s always been the more altruistic twin, deep down.

“So what’s going on. Has something happened? You and Dean OK?”

“Yes. No. I don’t even know anymore.”

“Don’t you want to marry him?” Jimmy asks gently and Cas ducks his head to look down into his coffee. A muffled, ‘yes’ comes from his twin’s lips and Jimmy tilts his head in confusion. “Then why…?”

“Because I can’t, OK?”

Cas’ head snaps up and his eyes are bright, flashing with emotion. There’s a tremble to his lower lip that makes Jimmy want to reach for him and comfort him the way he did when they were kids. But he doesn’t: he isn’t going to make this easy on Castiel. If Cas can’t even explain himself right now to him, how the hell is he going to talk to Dean?

“I can’t.” Castle’s voice drops to a whisper and he sits back in his seat, knees to his chest with his ankles crossed, balancing his coffee precariously on the arm of his chair. “I can’t put myself through it all again.”

“Through all what?” Now Jimmy is really confused. “I thought you loved Dean? I thought you guys were good together?”

“We are! We’re fantastic, everything is perfect. At least, it was.” Castiel stops talking and looks away, out into the forest backing onto the yard.

“Until…?” Jimmy prompts and Cas sighs.

“Until we got engaged. I was so happy, you know? I thought it was what I wanted, what was right for us. But lately it just seems so huge. And I love Dean, I love him more than anything and I want to spend my life with him. But…”

“But you don’t want to get married.” Jimmy finishes for him, feeling like a stone has settled somewhere in his stomach. This cannot be happening. Of all the things bugging Cas, he never thought it would be this. He leans forwards, his expression earnest. “Cas, you and Dean belong together. Is it possible you’re just overwhelmed? Freaking out about it all?”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. Freaking out.” Cas huffs, finishes his coffee and put the cup back on the table. “But with good reason.”

And he pulls from his pocket a photograph and tosses it onto the table between them. Jimmy spins it to face him and a frown drags at his brows. It's Cas and Cole, at a diner, smiling happily. Happy, relaxed, and in love.

“I don't get it,” he says slowly, turning the photo over to see if anything is written on the back, looking for clues. “Where did you find this?”

“Dean found it. And I haven't been able to get it out of my head.” Cas exhales, sifting back and
stretches, clasping his hands behind his head, tension vibrating in every line of his body. “Look how happy we were. We weren't married then, we got married later that year. And it all went to hell.”

“So… Because you and Dean are happy now, you're worried the same thing will happen.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“Because Dean isn't Cole.” Sometimes Jimmy really wants to slap his brother. For all his intellect, he can be incredibly obtuse on occasion. “Dean loves you, all of you. It's obvious, from the way he looks at you to your track record. You've been through some shit together already, Cas. That counts for something.”

“I can't risk something like that happening again. The kids are older now, if things between Dean and I go wrong they'll know. They'll remember. They'll never forgive me.”

“And what if they go right? What if everything goes perfectly, Cas? You and Dean… I look at you guys together and it just feels right. Like you belong there.”

“Really?” Cas turns shining, watery eyes on him. “I used to think the same but now I can't get my head straight. I can't sleep, I dream all the time about Cole and imagine what will happen if Dean leaves…”

“Stop, Cas. You have to stop this.” Alarm spikes inside Jimmy. “You can't carry on this way, you'll destroy yourself. You can't go through life waiting for the worst to happen and hiding away in case it ever does. You'll never be happy that way. This isn't you, you're not like that.”

“I never used to be.”

“So what changed?”

“I don't know. I just…” Cas swallows, eyes glassy with pooling tears. “I just want…”

“What?” Jimmy leans forward, reaching a hand to Cas’ thigh. “What do you want?”

“I wish things could go back to the way they were,” And that does it, the tears fall and Cas collapses back into his chair with a sob, covering his eyes with his hands. “Before Dean proposed…”

Then he's crying, and despair floods from him like a tsunami, emotions he's clearly kept locked up tight for far too long. Jimmy tries to reach for him but Cas turns away, curling in on himself and sobbing into his hands, shoulders shaking with the effort. Jimmy makes an aborted movement towards him then backs off, trying not to freak out himself. He hasn't seen Castiel this distraught in years and it's awful to witness. Especially since this all, very sadly, could have been avoided if only he'd talked to Dean.

Eventually, Cas’ crying subsides and he slumps, exhausted, in his chair wiping his eyes and nose on his sleeve, running his other hand through his hair and messing it up even more.

“You need to talk to him, Cas. Desperately. You should have talked this out weeks ago, how could you let it all come to this?” Jimmy’s tone softens his words.

“I know.” Cas drops his head into his hands, snuffling out a breath through his blocked nose. “I know, I've fucked this all up so badly. I'm an awful person,” His voice catches on the final word and the very last of Jimmy’s resolve crumbles. He moves to sit beside his twin and wraps an arm around his shoulders. Cas feels thinner than he remembers, less muscle tone and his shoulders feel sharper -
it only makes Jimmy hug him tighter.

“I'm sorry for everything,” he whispers into Cas’ hair. “I never wanted us to fight. I should have
been there for you.”

“It wasn't you.” Cas sits up and scrubs a hand across his tired, wet eyes. “It was me, all of it. You
were just trying to help. And now I can't see any way to fix it all. Dean and I…” He swallows,
gazing sadly down at his hands. “I can't give him the future he wants.”

“What are you going to tell him?” A sudden cold sweeps over Jimmy at the possible meaning of
Cas’ words. Surely he can't think… “He'll understand, Cas. You can go back to just being
boyfriends again, he won't want to lose you over this.”

“You think?” Cas sounds entirely unconvinced and looks down at his hands.

Jimmy is silent for a moment, heavy-hearted, knowing where Cas is heading with this. But maybe,
just maybe, when they talk it all out Cas will see that Dean wants him no matter what. Wedding ring
or no wedding ring.

“Do you think you should maybe… see someone?”

“Like whom?” Cas’ response is both weary and challenging. “Like a psychiatrist? You think I'm
insane for not wanting to marry my charming, caring, handsome partner who is the best father to our
kids in the world? Right?”

“No!” Again, Jimmy wants to clout Cas with the nearest hard object. “But you've been through some
shit and it might help to talk to a therapist. Before you make any rash decisions.”

His meaning hangs heavy in the air and Cas just shrugs, fingertips pressed to his lips, and doesn't
answer. The vacant expression on his face could mean he's either taking in the suggestion or…

Or that his mind is already made up. And if it is, no amount of talking him down will be any help.
Jimmy hopes they aren't at that stage yet; he doesn't have the energy, or the supply of wine.

“You guys are going to be fine, you know?” Jimmy’s arm tightens around his brother’s shoulders,
squeezing him in a reassuring hug. “You just need to talk about it all. He’ll understand, I'm sure. You
guys are a unit. A family. You'll be just fine.”

No response, just Cas sniffing grossly and biting his bottom lip.

“Where does he think you are now?”

“I said I was coming here. I think. I don't really remember, I just grabbed a bag and left, I was in a bit
of a funk.”

Jimmy is sure that's an epic underestimation but doesn't question it. He holds a hand out to his
brother and Cas takes it with a sigh, allowing himself to be hauled to his feet and together they head
into the house.

“Just send him a text, Cas. He’ll be going out of his mind with worry. Tell him you're staying here
tonight, that we’re sorting things out and you’ll call him in the morning. He can come for brunch and
I'll take the kids out while you talk. I've missed those little monkeys so much.” A flash of guilt
crosses his twin’s face as he says this, and he looks away. “Sound fair?”

“Yes,” Cas nods, collapsing down onto the sofa with a sigh and fishing his phone out of his jeans,
coughing wetly into the back of his hand. “I hate this.”

“I know,” Jimmy manages to contain a shiver of revulsion at hearing the word hate from Cas’ lips. He can't shake off how awful it felt to have it directed at him, from his own twin. He will shake it off, they'll be fine, but it's going to take some patching up. His head in the refrigerator, he hears Cas snuffle out a laugh and looks up to see what's so funny. Cas is still on the sofa, one foot tucked beneath him, and is swinging a pair of pink lace panties from the tip of a finger.

“Is there anything you want to tell me, Jimmy?”

“Give me those!” Flushing, he snatches them out of Cas’ grasp and stuffs them in his pocket, glaring at his brother who can’t contain a snort of laughter. “They’re not mine, OK? They’re…”

And he falters, unsure if he should share. Cas is going through relationship troubles so it seems unfair to suddenly start spouting about his own love life which, for once, is blossoming. But Cas is sitting forward, intrigued, and looking more like himself, so perhaps it would be alright.

“They’re…?” He prompts. “Are you seeing someone?”

“I… OK, yeah,” Jimmy runs a hand through his hair, unable to keep a smile from his lips, a smile which Cas returns genuinely. “I am. She's kinda great, Cas. You'd like her.”

“Sit.” Cas tucks both legs underneath him, his eyes still a little red but all other traces of his earlier sobbing completely gone now. “I want to hear all about her.”

“Okay,” Jimmy sits as directed, on the sofa beside his brother, and it feels like a weight has been lifted from both their shoulders as Cas leans in, eager to hear more. “You know Lexie’s friend from school? Claire? Well, her mom is called Amelia, and we met at a book club…”

***

*Staying at Jimmy’s. Need some space. We're sorting things out.*

That's all the message says, and Dean throws his phone from him with a groan of frustration. Dammit, Cas. It's a clear, transparent lie and Dean despises it entirely. He doesn't know what the hell happened today. All he knows is that Cas woke up on the wrong side of bed and couldn't even look at him for the majority of the morning. Sam and Bobby were on the beach with the kids, and when Dean had tried to wrap an arm around Castiel’s shoulders in the kitchen to ask him what was wrong he had been frightened by the look in Cas’ eyes when he gazed up at him. It was as though Cas was realising something, something huge, and when he stepped away and out of Dean’s reach he looked like he had seen a ghost.

“I can’t… I… I have to…”

And he had vanished into their room, appearing not five minutes later with a bag and sunglasses on, choking out something about going to see Jimmy. Before Dean could formulate any kind of protest, Cas was gone with the door swinging shut behind him. Dean tried to convince himself it only *sounded* final. That his ears were playing tricks on him.

An hour passed, then a second, and at the end of the third Dean got that brief, shitty test message and now he feels even worse. What's going on? Cas can't just be making up with Jimmy, he would have said. And what's with the 'needing space'? They're getting married, for fucks sake! Or at least… they’re supposed to be. But somehow the wedding keeps feeling further and further away with every day that passes.
He sits up, suddenly irate with Cas. How is it fair to expect him to just sit about and worry himself stupid while Cas gets his ‘space’? It isn't. He hits the call button on his phone, but it rolls straight to voicemail. Cas has clearly switched his phone off after texting him - great. Just perfect. The knot of worry tightens in his belly and he scrolls to Jimmy’s name instead, pressing call and holding it to his ear. It rings three time, four, five, six… then Jimmy answers, sounding distant and guarded.

“Jimmy? It's Dean. Is Cas with you?”

“Yes, he's here.” Jimmy definitely sounds odd, and Dean can just picture him shooting Cas furtive looks. He doesn't elaborate, so Dean presses on.

“Can I talk to him? Just for a sec?”

There's a muffled sound in the background, a murmur of voices, then Jimmy is back on the line. “He's just about to have a shower. He says he'll call in the morning.”

“Right.”

Silence stretches between them, hot and loaded, and Dean rubs the back of his neck. He has a million things he wants to say to Jimmy but none feel appropriate.

“Are we… Is he OK?”

“Yeah. We talked.” Another silence. “Come for brunch tomorrow. All of you. Around eleven. I'd love to see the kids.”

“Alright. Just… Ask Cas to call me when he's out of the shower, yeah? I just wanna… Just tell him to call, OK?”

“I will.”

But as Dean hangs up, he knows he won't be getting a call of any kind from Cas tonight. He clasps his phone tightly in his hand, anger and worry swirling within him, and jumps a mile as someone touches his shoulder.

“Dean?” Sam approaches, running a hand through his sea-damp hair and holding out a pink cardboard box that he recognises immediately. “I forgot, your friend from work dropped these off about an hour so while you were showering. Said you might want them.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Inside are a pile of pastries, chocolate croissants, doughnuts, flaky pistachio flavoured goodies, and two small cupcakes with a flag in each. One reads ‘Billie’ and the other ‘Lexie’. It's normal for them to take home treats at the end of the day, when Gabriel will either throw things away or give them in the bucketload to the local shelter, and the mood Dean’s in he's grateful for them. “We can have them later, there's enough for all of us. Did Meg stay long?”

“No, just a couple of minutes. She's nice, Dean. Real pretty.” He smiles as a parting gesture.

“Yeah? Haven't noticed.” He supposes Meg is attractive. She’s not his type so it’s never really crossed his mind.

“Where's daddy?” Billie ambles into the kitchen, ducking between Sam’s legs with a giggle, and Dean stashes the box quickly to avoid it being seen and opens his arms to the boy who climbs willingly onto his lap. The kid smells of seawater and the watermelon ice pop he's been snacking on.

“He's with Uncle Jimmy, buddy. They're having a sleepover. We’ll go over for brunch tomorrow.”
“I want to go see Uncle Jimmy! Can we go now?”

“No, bud. They’re having some twin time.” Dean tries to keep the tremor from his voice. Need some space. What the hell does that mean? Who does he need space from? Sam and Bobby? The kids? Dean…? On one hand he’s glad Cas has gone to Jimmy, is relieved to think they’re making up. But with how depressed Cas has seemed lately, what else are they talking about?

And with that thought, his hand stills where it’s been brushing through Billie’s head. And he suddenly feels nauseous as a realisation hits. The mood swings, the nightmares, the crying out of the blue, shying away from everyone, seeming so vacant and withdrawn… Cas hasn’t seemed depressed lately. He is depressed. And Dean wants to kick himself, hard, for being so goddamn blind. But what the hell does Castiel have to be depressed about? He sits up, dislodging Billie who runs back outside again to be replaced almost immediately by Lexie, tired and smiling, climbing into Dean’s lap and cuddling like a koala.

“How are you feeling, munchkin?” Dean winds a hand through Lexie’s hair and the boy leans into the touch. He’s well enough to go back to school on Monday, and Dean plans to drop them off on his way in to work.

“I feel fine.” Lexie smiles up at him, cool, sandy fingers coming up to trace Dean’s cheekbones and jawline, a habit. “I have a secret,” he continues conversationally and Dean’s arm tightens a little around his waist.

“Yeah? What kind of secret?”

“A big kind. I can’t tell.”

“And who told you this secret?”

“Daddy did.”

“I see.” Dean tries to keep his expression neutral despite his heart hammering in his chest. Cas is keeping secrets? Keeping them with the kids? Surely that’s nothing to worry about. And yet he feels tense with concern. “What is it, Lex?”

“Well,” Lexie toys with a strand of his own dark hair, winding it around a finger. “He said I shouldn’t tell.”

“Shouldn’t tell me what, buddy?”

“Not you. Just that I shouldn’t tell anybody.” Lexie shrugs, seeming more adult than his five years. “So anybody means you, too.”

“OK, so what is it?”

“Can’t tell.” Lexie smiles and falls back into the crook of Dean’s arm, shaking his head so that his curls bounce and fall back as he tilts his head back, sticking his thumb in his mouth and grinning.

“Lexie. Is it something good? Or something bad?” Dean tries to scoop the kid up to face him but it’s as though his limbs have turned to jelly and Lexie is a pile of floppy giggling arms and legs. “Lexie! Come on, bud, tell me.”

“Uncle Jimmy knows,” Lexie is giggling now, so hard his eyes scrunch up, and his smile displays a little row of perfect white baby teeth. “Daddy says Uncle Jimmy knows too. But it’s a secret.”
“I'll tell you!” Billie comes back into the room and makes a run for them, forcing his twin to sit up indignantly. Billie is soaking wet - and it takes Dean a moment to realise that Sam and Bobby are hurrying in after him, towels and beach toys in hand. One glance out of the window tells Dean that a downpour has started. The skies are grey and heavy, angry looking, and out over the water a flash of lightning splits the skies. Across the room, Sam wipes his sweaty brow and mumbles something about a good storm clearing the air. Dean returns his attention to the children.

“No! Billie you can't! Daddy said! It's a secret!”

No amount of pleading or begging gets either of the boys to divulge their secret that evening. Billie wants to, Dean can tell, but his brother’s stern expression prevents him from doing so. All he can do is wait the evening out, have dinner with Sam and Bobby (Billie helps cook) and pretend he isn't driving himself insane with worry - over Cas, initially, and now over whatever the boys are hiding. Dean can't even ascertain whether it's something to worry about or something he will love, but judging by how giggly and sweet Lexie is being, snuggling close and helping ease the sick ache in Dean’s heart, it can't be anything bad.

Right?
“Dean? Get this…”

Sam comes out of the kids’ bedroom with a goofy smile on his face and a slightly wilted Lexie in his arms, snuggled into his shoulder. But he’s gesturing behind him and Dean can't help but smile at the sight of Billie. He's got hold of Bobby’s cap and has plonked it on his head, grinning up at them all in satisfaction, and he looks adorable. The sight of his kid looking so cute eases the nervous ache inside Dean’s chest just a little. The boys are good for him on any day but today in particular he craves their happy presence in his life. Sam hands Lexie to him and they wander down the hall towards the front door, Lexie reaching up to play with his hair and run cool fingertips across his cheek and jaw.

“Where’s daddy?”

“At Uncle Jimmy’s, and I'm taking you there for brunch right now.” He pushes open the door and tilts his head at Bobby in greeting, who is polishing a smear on Baby’s door. Billie pushes past Dean’s legs and runs outside, skidding to a halt and smiling up at Bobby who stops what he's doing to stare down at the kid with a hint of a smile on his lips.

“Now just what do you have there?”

“Can I wear it, Uncle Bobby? Please?” Billie puts on his best smile, links his hands behind his back and smiles up at the old man in a manner completely reminiscent of Simba from *The Lion King*. “Pretty please? I'll take care of it.”

“Well, you gotta. Special hat, that.” Bobby’s hand comes down on Billie’s head affectionately and the beam he gets in response definitely draws a smile from him. “C’mon, kid. Hop in, you're heading off for brunch with your daddy now, ain't that right?”

“Yup!” Billie climbs up into the Impala and Bobby fastens him into his car seat; Dean transfers Lexie into his and hands the kids two plastic tubs filled with an assortment of melon, strawberries and banana to keep them occupied on the journey. He tries not to think of the sticky fingerprints he will be cleaning off Baby’s upholstery later that evening.

“You sure you don't want to come?” he addresses Bobby, and the old man shakes his head with a wry smile.

“Nah, you kids go have fun. I'm plannin’ on taking advantage of the sunshine and raiding your fridge.” He holds up a classic car magazine. “Got me some readin’ material and everything. Now get goin’, that car’s like a damn sauna.”

They drive with the windows down and the music up, Dean tapping out a rhythm against the steering wheel while trying to mask his anxiety. Cas taking off, Cas not calling him back, him failing
somehow to notice that Cas has been depressed and struggling… he wants to kick himself for that. His phone pings at him and he scrabbles for it in desperation, praying for a message from Cas. But he's disappointed as he opens it.

*Gabriel has some leftover strawberry cupcakes. I thought the boys might like them?*

It's an unknown number but Dean deduces it must be from Eve since he has Meg and Gabriel in his phone already. He taps out a one-handed reply under Sam’s reprimanding stare for texting and driving, and tosses his phone aside irritably. Why hasn't Cas called him?

When he pulls up at Jimmy’s a while later he stares up at the house with apprehension. The last time he was here, Billie was missing and the twins were fighting. Now it feels somewhat tainted to him, like the house knows something and is watching his every move. Even in the summer sunlight it seems sinister somehow, oppressive. He manages to contain a shiver, hiding his discomfort by getting the kids out of the car and watching them run up the steps to bang on the front door with excited fists until it opens.

“Daddy? Uncle Jimmy!”

“Hey, guys!” Jimmy leans down and scoops them up, one in each arm, and kisses them both on the foreheads. “You've grown! Again!”

“No we haven't, silly!” Lexie laughs, wriggling in his uncle’s arms. “Where's Daddy?”

“Inside. Hi, Sam. Hi, Dean.” Jimmy looks suddenly very guarded, his smile tight, and Dean wonders what actually happened last night. Are the twins OK? Are him and Cas OK? Or does Jimmy know something he doesn’t? He follows everyone inside, the knot or fear in his chest refusing to subside until he’s laid eyes on his future husband and ascertained that things are alright.

The knot inside of him tightens when he sees Cas. He looks rough. Really rough, like he's got a bad cold or the flu, and whether it's the sight of him in Jimmy's clothes or because they've spent a night apart, Dean realises with startling clarity how thin he looks. He's still muscular but he's lost a lot of weight and Jimmy's shirt looks too big on him - which is even more jarring since Jimmy is the more slender of the two. Cas has his hands wrapped around a mug of coffee and is glancing between it and Dean with reddened eyes and Dean hastens to his side to wrap an arm around his shoulders and give him a kiss on the temple.

Which he's certain Cas almost flinched away from.

“Are you and Jimmy good?” he asks, chancing a look at the older Novak twin who is filling a glass of water for Lexie and studiously not meeting his eyes. Something feels off and he's not enjoying it.

“We're fine. We sorted things out.” Cas toys with his mug then finishes the dregs of cold coffee. “Dean, could we talk? In private? Jimmy thought they could take the boys out to eat; Billie really needs a haircut and Lexie could do with some fresh air and vitamin D.”

“Of course. Yeah, let's talk. I'll just tell Sammy…”

While they fasten the kids back into their car seats, Sam fixes Dean with a look drenched in concern. It's a familiar look, one that makes him seem akin to a worried puppy.

“Is everyone alright? Everything OK?”

“Yeah, we’re good. Me and Cas just gonna sort some shit out then we’ll come find you and hang out. Maybe go bowling again or go to the beach or something. Or the aquarium, the kids love it
there. Maybe get an ice cream or two and swing by the bakery, there are some cupcakes there for them. Not too much sugar though, or not before dinner.”

He's rambling, talking too fast, all of his nervous energy trying to come out at once and Sam is staring at him as though he knows something’s wrong. He doesn't say anything else though, and Dean straightens up with a sigh.

“Lexie won't want his hair cut because he likes it long. But Billie’s could use a tidy up. There's a place near Sugar Crush called Donna’s Hair Art or something like that. She's good, nice girl. Doesn’t stop talking. Take them there. And I'll call you, OK?”

He turns to head back into the house, and doesn't miss the look of concern Jimmy shoots him as he does so. But then the Novak twin is gone, climbing into the passenger seat of the Impala, and Dean watches them drive off from the top of the steps, listening to the comforting roar of Baby’s engine.

Then, with a heavy heart and more apprehension than he's ever felt in his life, he goes back to the kitchen to talk to Cas.

He walks up behind Castiel and reaches for him to put an arm around his shoulders and a pang of hurt strikes him as Cas very definitely flinches away this time and pulls out from beneath his touch to stand against the counter with his arms folded, looking down at the floor. A coldness sweeps over Dean but he tries to stay positive. Things will be fine, this is just a rough patch.

“Cas? What's going on?” He tries to keep his voice light and airy. “Is everything OK?”

A silence stretches between them, Castiel staring at the ground and Dean barely restraining himself from rushing forward and shaking Cas until the truth tumbles free.

Then, in a voice so soft and raw that the words are barely audible, Castiel whispers,

“I can't marry you, Dean. I'm so sorry.”

• • •

It takes him a moment to react. To realise what Cas has said and to parse the meaning of his words. Cas doesn’t want to get married. And it hurts. All manner of emotions rise up within him and he flounders, uncertain which one will win. Anger, pain, confusion, distress, fear, humiliation… Cas is just watching him silently, must see the internal battle taking place in the expressions crossing his face, but seems to know that whatever else he says in this moment is unlikely to make anything better. Eventually, confusion wins out and all Dean can croak out it, “Why?”

“I love you so much,” Cas says in a rush and part of Dean is soothed by this. Relieved. “You know I do, you have to know that. You mean everything to me, Dean, you have since the minute you walked into my life. You changed everything, and I’m a better person for knowing you. But getting married, I just… I can’t do it. I’ve been trying so hard to make it right, to convince myself that it’s the right thing for us. But standing up in front of everyone, having this huge fancy day, I don’t think I can put myself through it.”

And yeah, that stings. That Cas can’t put himself through something that’s meant to be joyful, exciting, a new step in their lives together. And also, what the fuck? Dean is well aware that Cas has
been cautious about discussing the wedding, has shut down more than one conversation about it, but he thought that was due to nerves, to stress about work, to worry about Lexie. He didn’t think, never thought that Cas was having second thoughts about their future. And to hear now that not only is he having second thoughts but he’d already goddamn decided? Without thinking of mentioning any of these thoughts and fears to Dean? Yeah. That fucking hurts.

“Well, can’t lie, Cas, that stings a bit.” He still tries to maintain nonchalance – because inside of him, a part of him is screaming. Cas doesn’t look like someone who loves him and wants to fix this. Right now he’s closed off, curling into himself where he stands by the counter and is having a hard time meeting Dean’s eyes. And every alarm bell Dean possesses is starting to go off. “But yeah, I guess we can talk about that. Move past it. I just wish you’d told me, babe,” he says, his heart aching as he does. “Why didn’t you tell me you felt like this? I could have made it better somehow. Is this why you’ve been so off lately?”

Not that ‘off’ really seems to cover it, now that he thinks back. His phone bleeps in his pocket and he fishes it out distractedly – it’s another message from Eve, something over excited about the kids, and he tosses his phone away onto the table, attention fully back on Cas.

_It’s OK, he’s thinking, his mind going a million miles a second trying to process it all. It's OK, we don’t have to get married. If he doesn’t want to, it's fine. It doesn’t hurt that much. We can just be boyfriends again, it's no big deal…_

“I’m so sorry, Dean. I wanted to shield you from all this. I thought I could work through it and be fine.” Cas looks distressed, his eyes red-rimmed and sore, lashes damp with sparkling tears and lines between his brows. “But the more I tried to get things straight in my head the more huge it all seemed to be. And I just can’t do it. I love you - please don’t think I don’t. And don’t think you’ve done anything wrong. But I just can’t do this, I can’t be this person. I don’t know what to do.”

The alarm bells are ringing louder now, and Dean approaches Cas slowly, certain his worry is evident in his eyes.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what to do? We talk it out, we move on. That’s what we do. That’s what we’ve always done. So our future might be a little different than I planned, but that’s OK. That’s fine; I can work with that. As long as I have you, it’s all good.” He tries for a soft, soothing laugh but it comes out hollow. Cas doesn’t respond, just drops his eyes, and Dean’s sure his blood is freezing in his veins now. “I do still have you, right? Cas?”

“I don’t know, Dean.” And the defeat in Castiel’s voice is chilling, absolutely awful to hear. “I don’t know what our future holds right now. I don’t want to hold you back... to force us to be something you don’t want. I don’t want to disappoint you. Maybe I’m just meant to be alone.”

_No, no, no, no_. Panic is gripping him, hysteria threatening to rise up inside him and he can’t help but lean forward, desperate for comfort, and wraps an arm around Cas’ tense shoulders.

“Cas, baby, we can be whatever you want us to be. Boyfriends, husbands, I don’t even care. I just want you,” Dean knows he sounds desperate. He’s wrapping Cas in his arms and trying to force his head up so that their eyes can meet. His heart is pounding out a tattoo in his chest and he's breathing hard. Fear is winning now; the fear of losing Castiel and losing his family, losing everything he loves and not understanding why. He thought they had this, thought they were in it for the long run. Him, Cas, the kids, Sam, Jimmy… Everything was falling into place. And now he’s been thrown into freefall again and he can’t even begin to fathom how he’ll land on his feet. This can't be happening - it can't be. They can't be breaking up.

But Cas won't look at him.
He's trembling in Dean’s embrace, arms wrapped tightly around himself, and his breath is hitching with every inhale. He tries again. “I just want you, Cas. Us. I just want to be a family.”

“I don't think I can, Dean.” And Castiel does look at him then, and the devastation in his blue eyes says it all. Dean breaks his hold and backs away a step, suddenly feeling cold all over, and reaches for the counter to steady himself. “You want to get married. I don't. I don't see how it can work.”

“Cas… I know it can work. I don't need to be married, not if you don't want us to be.” It’s a lie, borne of his desperation to just fix this. But he can lick that wound later, he just needs to get Castiel to see that they're going to be alright. They can be alright. This doesn't have to be it for them. They can go back to just being Dean and Cas instead of being Mr and Mr. If that’s all too much for Cas – and he can kinda understand it, he supposes, given past history – then fine, he'll work through it. But why the hell didn’t Castiel say something earlier? How long has all this been going on? How long has he been wanting to break off their engagement, their relationship, but been too scared to bring it up? Perhaps that’s not what’s going on, perhaps it hasn’t been a long-term decision taken behind his back, but in Dean’s feverish, distraught mind it seems clear as day that it has.

“I can't give you what you want,” Cas presses. His voice is choked now and it's evident from his expression and his posture that he's made up his mind. He's closing in on himself, turning away and dropping his gaze, and he looks so defeated that Dean wants to shake him and scream at him until he snaps out of it. This isn't the Castiel he knows, this isn't the person he's in love with. “You don't deserve to compromise on what you want, Dean. You deserve more than this. More than me.”

“No. Don't pull that shit, Cas. I hate that it's not you, it's me crap. I want you. I want to be with you. I know what I deserve, dammit, and it's you! If anything, you're too good for me, and -”

“Dean, don't!” Castiel looks stricken now, hurt by that accusation. “Don't speak about yourself that way. You're perfect. You're everything I ever wanted. And you deserve someone who can give you their everything. And that person…” He chokes a little on his words. “That person clearly isn't me.”

His mind races as he tries to make sense of the things Cas is saying while he keeps the conversation going.

“I don't understand. You gotta help me understand all this. What happened, Cas?” Dean approaches again, slowly, taking Castiel’s arm and spinning him so their eyes meet. “I used to have all of you. I thought I still did. What went wrong?” His eyes are dry and burning, and there's a lump in his throat that won't go away. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing.” Castiel gazes up at him, hurt and defeated and looking so, so tired. “I've messed us up, I know I have. I just can’t do it, Dean. I can’t marry you. I can’t put myself and the kids at risk like that again. I’m so sorry. The way Cole left us, it tore me up. And if I lost you too I don’t think I could recover from that.”

“So you’d rather throw in the towel than have a shot at happiness with me, that’s it?” Dean is incredulous with shock. “And the last year has been, what? Have you been lying to me this whole time? Faking it? Pretending to be happy? I thought this was real, Cas, I thought what we had meant something!”

“It does! It did!” Cas answers immediately. “Dean, you mean everything to me. But the last few months have been so hard, and I need to think about the future. I can’t give you what you want. You want a husband and I can’t be that person... and I have to step away before I hurt you even more.”

“Well, I don't think that's possible right now, Cas.” He pulls away, hugging himself, head spinning. “What the hell am I supposed to do? Everything I have is here, with you and the boys,” his voice
“I thought...” Castiel blinks up at him and he notices tears are clinging to his lashes. “That if this happened while your brother was here, it might be better. I was trying to think of any way I could to make this hurt less -”

“Well, that's mighty big of you, Cas.” Anger is starting to take root in his gut, threatening to obscure the pain. “Really. How can I ever thank you enough? Been planning this for a while, huh? Lying beside me every night while thinking about the best way to get rid of me?”

“Dean, I was trying to help,” Tears are glittering in Cas' eyes now and he's still hugging himself tightly, his own nails cutting into the skin of his forearms. “I thought… I thought if Sam and Bobby were still here that you could go home with them… That it might make it easier…”

“Home?” Dean spits out the word and Cas recoils; then realisation washes over him like a wave. “You don't trust me, do you?”

“What?” Castiel actually looks blindsided by the accusation. “Of course I do, Dean, it's nothing to do with that. I can't give you what you want and I -”

“Cut the crap, Cas.” Oh, the anger is definitely here now, coiling low and vengeful and it's hard to keep it at bay. “You still don't believe that I consider this place my home. It's not enough that my job’s here, that you're here, that the boys are here. It's not enough and it never will be. You're still scared I'll run back to where I came from and leave you in the dust. No matter what I say or do, you don't trust me. Don't trust that I'm staying. That I want to stay. Ain't that right?”

“I…” Cas' lips part but he trails off, and the sadness in his eyes says it all. He's hit the nail dead on: Cas doesn't trust him. Maybe Cas is only realising that for himself right now, but it doesn't ease the pain of realising that no matter how much they love each other they can't be happy together without trust. And just like that, like someone poured ice water down his back, the anger is gone to be replaced with shock and fear and agony and he suddenly feels like he could pass out.

“I can't believe this is happening,” he whispers through numb lips. “How long have you felt like this?”

“Not long,” Cas looks at the ground. His forearm is bleeding where he's scratched himself raw. “I tried to fix it, Dean. I did, I really did. All I wanted was you. It's all I ever wanted.”

_Wanted._

Past tense.

Oh god. It's over.

It's really over, Cas doesn’t want him, and Dean needs to get out. Get out of Jimmy’s house and away from the Novak twins - yet all he wants is the kids. He wants to grab them both and hold them close and cry into their hair and never let go. Because what's going to happen now? If there's no him and Cas, is there no him and the kids too?

“The boys…” he manages to choke out. Cas is staring at him with wide, heartbroken eyes and chapped lips and he feels like he's world has stopped turning. “What the fuck are we going to tell the boys? I can’t be without them now, you can’t expect me to lose you and them in the same day! I can’t!!”

“You're their father, Dean. They're yours as much as they are mine. If you still want to see them…”
And there’s a fresh crack in his heart when he hears that word.

“If? How can you even think that, Cas? Of course I want to see them - I need to see them, they're my family!” And so are you, he wants to scream but something stops him. Something holds him back, and he can feel tears burning behind his eyes as he stumbles back and grips the door frame for support. “I - I gotta go. I can't be here right now.”

He turns and makes for the door, eyes dry and gritty and feeling like someone has plunged a knife into his chest. All he can think is: it's over. And he wants to break down crying but the tears just won't come.

“Dean… you and the boys, we’ll work something out… Dean, I…”

Castiel’s voice calls from behind him and he sounds just the same as he did that first day when they met, when Dean was sick and feverish and vulnerable and Cas took him in and cared for him. Cared about him. Cared so much that it turned his whole damn world around. He gave him a home and a family, gave him unconditional love, and even more than that, gave him his self-worth back.

And now it's all gone, like ash turned to dust on a summer breeze.

“I'm sorry.” It’s everything and not enough all at once, and Dean’s eyes fall closed at the finality in his voice.

He can't reply. He barely manages to open and close the front door, makes it down the pathway to the gate which he unlatches then shuts behind him carefully, before walking away down the street all the while knowing that the beautiful blue eyes he fell in love with are watching him from a first-floor window. Everything is tied to this house now. Everything feels like the last time. The last time he’ll walk away from Cas, the last time he’ll close Jimmy’s gate, the last time he had someone and was someone, the last time he knew what happiness felt like.

When he entered this house the day Jimmy bought it he was elated. He had everything he never dared dream he would have, and they laughed and joked and played as a family. But now he knows he’s laughed his last with Cas, possibly played his last with the boys, shared his last drink with Jimmy and it’s all becoming too much to bear.

He manages to hold it all together for a moment longer. Then, when he's far enough away from the house not to be seen, he collapses down onto a park bench and buries his head in his hands as the tears finally come.

What is he supposed to do now? Where is he supposed to go? How can he carry on without Cas?
Chapter 11

He doesn’t know how long he sits on that bench for. The sun beats down on his neck and shoulders and his tears eventually dry on his cheeks, leaving itchy salt stains which he doesn’t have the energy to wipe away. He’s teetering on the edge between numbness and hysteria, unable to believe what’s happened. He never thought he and Cas would have problems in their relationship, let alone that it would all come crashing down – and so quickly, too. And what hurts the most is that Cas didn’t even seem willing to try to work things out. He had decided, all by himself, that he wasn’t right for Dean and in doing so had cast Dean aside. Or that’s how it feels.

He spent the first half hour waiting, hoping Castiel would come to him and wrap him in his arms and say it was all just a huge mistake, that of course they’re fine and they’ll get through this one way or another. Every time someone walked by or a shadow fell upon him he would glance up, glassy-eyed and fractious, only to catch the eye of a stranger who more often than not quickened their pace to pass him by. Nobody stopped to check if he was okay, nobody offered him any comfort - not that he would have accepted any. He doesn’t want anybody right now, he only wants Cas. The one person he can no longer have.

He’s been going over it all in his mind constantly, and it’s driving him mad with grief and anger. Is this really it? A year of happiness and love just decimated in a conversation lasting less than a half hour? A small part of him is still in denial and still expecting Cas to materialise and smile that rueful, sweet smile of his and ask Dean when they’re going home and what he wants for dinner. But instead, he feels like he’s been thrown out like an unwanted dog, and it hurts. He thinks of everything they’ve been through together: nights lying under the stars on the beach, time spent at Lexie’s bedside in the hospital after he nearly drowned on the beach, getting Billie through a rough patch at kindergarten, cooking dinner together, buying groceries and trying so hard to make sure they fit Cas’ strict rules on what he and his kids eat, lazy mornings in bed with the kids tangled in the sheets… It’s all too much and a bark of hysterical laughter mixed with a cry of pain escapes him. They’ve been through so much and now what? It’s all come to be nothing at all.

He’s jolted back to reality by the growl of a familiar engine, sounding like a thousand tigers all roaring together, and he tries in vain to pull himself together as he glances down the street in search of his Baby. Luckily he’s far enough away from where Sam is pulling the car into a space that he has some time to compose himself. He ducks his head and tries to take some deep breaths, staving off the impending feeling of panic and wiping at his tears feverishly. Having everyone see him like this won’t be good. The kids will panic, Sam will fret, and it isn’t fair to put Jimmy in between himself and Cas.

And isn’t it fitting that Jimmy is the first one to cross the street towards him, squinting in the sunlight and pushing his shades up onto his head as Sam deals with getting the kids out of the car.

“Dean? Is everything OK?” Jimmy is still a few feet away when he speaks and Dean can’t find the words to respond. What the hell is he supposed to say? Yes, I’m great, my entire life just crashed down around me but hey, no biggie. Or, No, I’m completely falling apart, what the fuck do I do now? Neither answer seems quite right.

“Dean?” Jimmy tries again, worry creasing his brow as he sits down on the bench next to him. “What happened?”

Past Jimmy, further down the street, Sam and the kids are approaching. Lexie is on Sam’s shoulders, squealing with laughter at something, his head tipped back and curls cascading between his shoulder blades. Billie, still wearing Bobby’s old baseball cap and barely able to see under the brim,
occupied with an ice cream. Unbidden, tears spring to Dean’s eyes and he scrubs them away harshly with the back of his hand. He doesn’t know what to say to Jimmy, only that it feels like his heart is breaking all over again at the sight of the children.

“Do you think…” He has to stop, has to take a breath to stop himself from bursting into hysterical sobs. “Do you think he’ll still let me see the kids?”

And at this, Jimmy’s face snaps in shock, in utter horror as he realises the meaning Dean’s words hold. Dean isn’t looking at him, is staring down at his hands again, but in his peripheral vision he sees Jimmy’s mouth open and close like a guppie. He reaches out and grips Dean’s forearm and he knows he must feel the tremors coursing through it. Dean manages to duck his head before the tears begin to fall again. He keeps trying to wipe them away but they’re coming too fast and it’s becoming difficult to breathe past the lump in his throat.

“Dean… I didn't think… I mean, I knew he was… But I thought he would…” Jimmy sounds almost as stunned as Dean feels. “He hasn't ended things? I mean, you guys are still -”

“It's over, Jimmy.” It comes out more harshly than Dean intended. “We’re over.” And what the fuck do I do now?

“I'll talk to him.” Jimmy’s resolution is instant and steadfast. “I'll make him see sense. You guys belong together, everyone can see that. He's not himself lately, I don't know what he's thinking. He doesn't mean it, I know he doesn't.”

“He does.” Dean sits up and wipes his eyes, trying to regain his self-control as Sam and the kids loom closer. “He means it. He doesn't trust me, Jim. He thinks I'm going to leave him, and how can I stay when he won't believe me? My job is here, my goddamn family is here and he still thinks…”

He trails off, shaking his head as the ache in his chest overwhelms him and he’s forced to drop his head again, crying silently and covering his face with his hands in humiliation. He never wanted Jimmy to see him like this, never thought he would ever have cause to.

“He thought I’d leave. Just go back to Kansas with Sam and Bobby,” Dean shakes his head incredulously. “It’s like he doesn’t know me at all. I could never leave, This place is my home.”

“You should go back to the house,” Jimmy suggests, his mind clearly working a million miles an hour, trying to form a plan and begin to do damage control. “Cas can stay here with me. You guys just need time, Dean. I refuse to believe this is it for you.”

“And if Cas wants me to go?” Dean wipes his nose on his forearm. “It’s his home, Jimmy. I just live there.” And boy, that hurts. That isn’t how he feels, isn’t how he’s felt for months, but if it’s remotely what Castiel is thinking then it’s like a punch to the stomach.

“You don’t,” Jimmy says roughly. “That’s your home too, and you know it. He won’t just kick you out, he’s not like that. Whatever he’s doing, thinking clearly isn’t a part of it. Let me talk to him, let this settle for a few days. You love each other – surely that’s enough.”

“You’d think.” Dean tries to offer a watery smile, one which Jimmy attempts to return. “I thought it was. I thought we could overcome anything at all. Seems Cas doesn’t feel the same.”

When he dares to glance over to see where his children are, he sees through blurred vision that Sam has stopped short on the sidewalk a short distance away, is holding Billie back and frowning in concern, his other hand holding firmly to Lexie’s calf. The boy on his shoulders hasn’t noticed anything is wrong, but Billie has and his eyes are wide and worried – he twists in Sam’s grip and
manages to free himself, ignoring his uncle’s shout and running forwards.

“Daddy?” Billie pushes his way in between Dean’s knees and his fingers come up to trace the tear tracks snaking down his cheeks. The kid pushes the baseball cap up with his other hand so he can see better and his face is a picture of concern, which clashes horribly with his young innocence. Dean’s heart constricts in his chest; he doesn’t want to be the one making his kid look like this. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, buddy.” He wraps an arm around Billie’s waist and pulls him in close for a hug, pulling off the cap so he can bury his face in his son’s hair. Billie smells like he’s just freshly walked out of the hair salon, his hair clean and styled and smelling of expensive coconut shampoo, and Dean squeezes his eyes shut to prevent any more tears from leaking out. What if this is the last time he gets to hold Billie? The boy gives incredible hugs, and he’s so funny and intelligent. What if he never sees Lexie again? Those soulful eyes and shy smiles are too beautiful for him not to see them every day. And he’s crying again, thoughts and memories of the kids swallowing him up as Billie just clings tightly, nuzzling his neck, not knowing what on earth to do. The ‘what ifs’ spiral around in Dean’s mind and Jimmy’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder again in an attempt to ground him.

“It’s going to be OK, Dean. I’ll talk to him. We can sort this out.” Jimmy’s voice sounds distant, and Billie pulls back to wipe tears from Dean’s cheeks again.

“It’s OK, daddy,” he echoes, and Dean swears his heart skips a few beats beneath his ribs. “Me and Lexie are here. We can make you happy again.”

Billie frowns in confusion, when instead of smiling back at him like he hoped he would, Dean instead huffs out a gasp of air as though he’s in pain and buries his face in his hands, and no amount of tugging from Billie can pry them away again.

He finds himself in the passenger seat of the Impala a little while later, forehead resting against the glass as he stares out into the forest feeling miserable and heartsick. Sam is driving, silent and frowning, his window down and the summer air cooling the oppressive heat inside the muscle car. The children are with Jimmy, who promised to feed them and get them to bed early, and who also promised to call Dean that evening once he’s spoken to his brother. Jimmy’s still hopeful and optimistic, but Dean isn’t so sure. He saw the defeat in Castiel, saw the way his eyes were dulled and fatigued, saw in him the very real possibility that he’ll retreat from everyone and become as cold and isolated as he once was before Dean crashed into his life.

He’s recounted the scene in the kitchen to Sam three times now, going over it, again and again, to try and make some sense out of everything, to see where he went so wrong and how he managed to miss the signs he can see so clearly now. Sam is understandably shocked and has been taking it all in, listening and evaluating, doing what he does best and trying to work out the answers.

“I don’t know what he wants, man,” Dean murmurs, swallowing hard. His throat hurts from crying. “I don’t think he even knows himself.”

“Well, don’t you think he needs a hand with working it all out?” Sam turns to gaze at him, his expression a mixture of sympathy and thoughtfulness. “You said it yourself, he’s depressed, he’s not himself. Maybe what he needs is for you to be there, no matter what.”

“I was there, dammit!” Dean’s hand slams down against the dashboard, making Sam jump and the car swerves precariously on the road. “I was right there, all the time, and he never said a goddamn word! I had no idea he felt like this! So don’t give me a goddamn guilt trip, Sammy, this is all on him. All of it. I thought we were happy, for fuck’s sake.” The ire bleeds out of him quickly and he slumps back against the seat. “I just wanted us to be happy.”
“I didn’t mean… I know you’re there for him, Dean. I know you have been. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pile it onto you. I just hate to see you hurting.” Again.

They lapse into a tense, forlorn silence for a while. Sam watches the road and the trees speeding past as they head back to the house, thinking hard, while Dean’s trying his damnedest not to think at all because every time he does all he can picture is Cas’ tear-filled eyes and the way he flinched when Dean touched him. God, this hurts. So, so much.

“He’s not right, Sammy. He hasn’t been happy for ages and I just didn’t freakin’ see it. I was so wrapped up in my own little world, so happy that everything was coming together for me that I didn’t see him falling apart. I should have seen it all. What kind of partner does that make me? Maybe he’s better off without me.” Dean scrubs his fist across his face, an attempt to wipe his streaming nose and eyes. He can sense Sam giving him that concerned puppy-dog look again.

“You know that’s not true, Dean. You two are made for each other.”

“You said it yourself, he’s not well right now. He’s making rash decisions when he’s feeling low, and we both know what it’s like to do that. If you both don’t try to fix this, it will wind up being the biggest mistake of both of your lives.” Sam’s eyes are on the road again but his jaw is set, and Dean looks over in mild surprise. He had no idea Sam felt this strongly about his relationship with Castiel, especially since they didn’t exactly hit it off to start with when Sam all but accused Castiel of holding him hostage. “Come on, don’t look at me like that. I like Cas, and I like you with him. He makes you happy, and it’s clear you’re head over heels for each other.” If the situation weren’t so serious, Dean is in no doubt that Sam would be making barfing noises and calling Dean gross for acting like such a kicked puppy over a boy. But it is serious, it’s the biggest crossroads of his life right now. It feels even bigger than his decision to leave Lawrence, which, in hindsight, was the best thing he could have ever done. This feels more poignant somehow, and much more pivotal.

“So what are you going to do?” Sam cocks his head at him, his expression grave, and Dean shrugs half-heartedly.

“I dunno, man,” He scrubs a hand down his face, more tired than he can ever remember being. “But I know one thing for sure. I ran away from my problems once before. Hurt you and Bobby somethin’ awful in the process—”

“Dean, that wasn’t on you.” Sam interrupts, guilt visible in every line of his face and his knuckles tightening on the wheel. “We weren’t there for you. We didn’t support you the way we should have. It wasn’t you. You did what you had to do.”

“Yeah, well I could have handled it better. So could you. We both got a lot to learn, I guess. But I ain’t making that mistake again. Whatever happens between me and Cas, I’m not running from it.” No matter how much I want to. “I love him and I love those kids like they’re my own, and I ain’t turning my back on any of them, not now. We were gonna get married, damn it. And what’s that in the vows about sticking together through tough times? They don’t get much tougher than this.” Dean swallows hard and focuses on the house on the horizon as they approach up the winding road. “I can’t give up yet. And I only hope he doesn’t, either.”

•••

“Cas?”

Jimmy knocks tentatively on the guest bedroom door which stands firmly closed. Cas stayed last
night and when Jimmy went to wake him up in the morning he found his twin sitting on the windowsill with the window open, staring out into nothing looking as though he hadn’t slept all night. He had rifled through his own drawers and brought Castiel a soft sweater and jeans that don’t quite fit him properly but will do for the day. He had tried to ask Cas what he’d decided, tried to talk to him about it, but his brother had been silent and morose. When he did answer, it was only with clipped, deflective responses and eventually, Jimmy gave up on trying. He hoped Castiel would talk to Dean, would confess his concerns and insecurities and that they could work through them. He hadn’t expected his brother to end it all. He’s happy with Dean, happier than he’s ever been with anyone, yet his descent into depression is pulling all sorts of walls up around him and Jimmy is becoming increasingly concerned that he’s out to sabotage himself and his own happiness. He can’t quite understand what’s going on in Castiel’s head, but he can take a guess: when it’s just Cas and the kids, nobody can hurt them. Nobody can come into their lives, carve out their place, then vanish with no warning and leave behind a gaping hole and broken hearts.

The problem with that, in this case, is that if he protects himself and his kids from harm, he’s also shielding them from happiness, too.

Downstairs, the children are playing out in the backyard with water pistols and bats and balls, their happy cries and carefree laughter echoing up throughout the house. When there’s no response to his second knock, he cracks the bedroom door open and peers inside. Castiel is lying on the bed on his side, facing the tall window overlooking the yard and the forest, and he doesn’t move when Jimmy enters. The window is open, yet the shutters are pulled almost closed and have plunged the room into semi-darkness. It may be a weak attempt to keep the room cool but it isn’t working and it feels like a sauna compared to the rest of the house. A fine layer of sweat breaks out on Jimmy’s brow and he wipes it away with the back of his hand. Cas would be better off with the window closed and the air conditioning turned on, but he’s sure his brother isn’t thinking of that sort of thing right now. Castiel shows no signs of acknowledging Jimmy’s presence as he clicks the door closed behind him, nor does he react at all when Jimmy sits down gently on the edge of the bed and reaches for his shoulder.

“Cas?” He’s almost whispering, not wanting to startle his brother. “Are you awake?” A small nod is all he gets in response. “I saw Dean outside. He told me what happened.”

A shudder runs through Castiel, and he brings a hand up to cover his face. Jimmy leans over and sees salty tear-tracks on his cheeks and temples, his nose and lips red raw from crying. Unable to bear seeing his twin so heartbroken, Jimmy climbs onto the bed and lies down at his brother’s side, wrapping an arm around him from behind in a tight hug.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” He whispers, listening to the shaky hitching of Castiel’s breath. “You don’t think things can be mended?”

“He doesn’t deserve this, Jimmy,” Castiel murmurs, his voice thick with emotion and fatigue. “He needs to be with someone who can give him their everything. I thought I could do that. But I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Don’t you think you might just need some time?” Jimmy presses, trying to think quickly of the right things to say so that he doesn’t push Cas further into his depression. “Take a while to think about things and then talk it all out. Dean loves you so much. He wants to be with you more than anything. He can help you through all of this.”

“I can’t,” Cas whispers, shaking his head and keeping his hand over his eyes, salty tears leaking out from between his fingers. “I just can’t do it anymore, Jimmy. I can’t.”

All Jimmy can do is hold him as he silently cries, listening to the children playing outside who are blissfully unaware that things in their lives are about to change once more. Castiel needs help, it’s
more than obvious he’s battling depression, yet Jimmy doesn’t know how to help him. The last time he felt this helpless was four years ago in the aftermath of Cole’s suicide, and he feels chilled just to think about it all.

He doesn’t realise he’s falling asleep, exhausted, until he’s out and gripped by memory, lost in the feelings of despair emanating from his twin brother lying sobbing in his arms.

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“Cas?” Jimmy’s distracted, but presses the Bluetooth button on his steering wheel to accept the incoming call and checks in his rearview for traffic before changing lanes. “Hold on, I’m just pulling over.” Silence greets him but that’s par for the course. Castiel has never been big on phone calls. “You still there, Cas? What time are you guys all arriving next week? Do you need a ride from the airport?”

“He’s dead, Jimmy.” Castiel’s voice is small and wispy - haunted - and Jimmy almost misses the words as he cuts across a lane, waves an apology to the irate driver who honks at him, and pulls the Audi into a layby. He has never been the most considerate driver.

“What? Who’s dead?” Jimmy kills the engine and reaches for his Starbucks takeout cup, taking a sip of his disgustingly sweet caramel latte. He assumes Cas is talking about a celebrity or something, someone neither of them are particularly interested in; he’s only listening with one ear, his mind on the assignments he has to give out later that day and the papers he’s going to spend all weekend marking.

“He’s dead,” Castiel repeats, his voice is even flatter than before, even more distant. In the background of the call, now that Jimmy is actually paying attention, he can hear a child crying, hear multiple voices, and he’s acutely aware that something is very, very wrong. “He’s dead...”

“Cas.” Jimmy sits up straighter, sharpens his voice, tries to get his brother to focus instead of repeating the chilling phrase over and over again. “Castiel. Who’s dead? Who is it? Where the hell are you?”

“Cole...” His twin’s voice catches on the single word and Jimmy forgets how to breathe. “He’s dead, Jimmy. He cut his wrists. I f-found him. He’s dead, he’s dead...”

Sticky-sweet coffee splashes across the steering wheel and Jimmy’s jeans as his drink falls from his hand in shock, listening to Cas as he repeats, over and over, that Cole is dead until someone in the background takes the phone from him, then Jimmy is suddenly talking to a paramedic and it’s all happening too quickly for him to grasp.

Castiel’s husband is dead by his own hands. Cas and the twins are alone. And when Jimmy hangs up the phone with his promise to get on the first flight hanging in the air, he just sits and gazes into space as the afternoon begins to wane.
Dean wakes up the next morning with a pounding headache, his mouth tasting of bitter bile, and every muscle in his body aching horribly. It’s early, very early, and every fibre of his being protests being conscious. He whimpers, pathetic and needy, as he rolls onto his back with one hand covering his eyes to block out the sunlight while the other reaches for Cas. He feels like roadkill. No, worse. Roadkill with the headache to end all headaches. Roadkill that watched from the afterlife as the truck that hit him came back for a second shot.

What the hell happened last night?

He hasn’t been this hungover in years. His stomach is rolling threateningly and his mouth is filling with saliva which he just manages to choke back in time to save himself from vomiting in his bed. The sheets are tangled around his legs and he feels chilled and sticky, as though he’s been sweating profusely in the night in spite of the open window. He cracks open an eye, seeing only a blurry outline of his own hand on the sheets, tan skin stark against the white bedding. Cas’ side of the bed is cold; he must be up already, Dean’s fuzzy mind concludes. He pushes himself up unsteadily onto an elbow, stomach clenching again in protest, and dares to crack the other eye open to peer blearily around the bedroom.

The curtains are half open, billowing in the breeze, and the bedroom door is open too. He waits, listening for the sounds of the children or the scent of breakfast, but nothing comes. What day is it? Is he late for work? Are the kids at school already? His clothes are thrown on the floor in a heap as though he’d shucked them all off in a hurry before collapsing into bed, and across the room two drawers are open with some of Cas’ clothes hanging out of them. Across the top of the dresser, Castiel’s sparse selection of cologne and hair products are strewn everywhere, some even fallen off onto the floor. He frowns. Cas is usually so tidy, what the hell?

Then, in sickening, high-definition clarity, it all comes crashing back to him. The breakup. The tears. Jimmy. The children, oh god, the kids. The car ride home with Sam’s puppy dog eyes staring at him the entire way. Getting blind drunk with his brother and Bobby out on the decking and sobbing into his hands as the old man rubbed his back and tried for gruff words of comfort. He closes his eyes against a wave of grief, and snippets of the night before start floating hazily to the surface.

“C’mon now, boy. Castiel will come around. Just a bump in the road for you both.”

“I don’t think it is, Bobby.” Dean had wiped his nose on his bare arm, sniffling and slurring his words a little. He had raided the alcohol stash in the house and made his way through a bottle and a half of merlot and had then moved onto beer. “He was so goddamn certain. So fuckin’ cold about it all too, like he’d just made his choice and that was it. I didn’t even get a fuckin’ say. Why didn’t I get a fuckin’ say? I’d fight heaven and earth for him, why didn’t he let me try?”

“He just needs some time.” Sam reached over at that point and tried to swipe a bottle from Dean’s hand, receiving a death glare in response through watery green eyes. “And some help. Depression
affects people in different ways, Dean. You said it yourself, he clearly isn’t over what happened with Cole and it’s all coming to the surface.” Dean doesn’t recall saying that at all, but he doesn’t recall a lot of last night’s slurred, broken conversation. “Staying with Jimmy will be good for him.”

“Why? ‘Cause he’s away from me, that it? ’S what he wants, ain’t it.” Dean had stared miserably down at his hands while Bobby and Sam exchanged exasperated, helpless looks... and he doesn’t remember too much after that. Some hazy vision of the pair of them helping him stagger down the corridor to bed and Sam reassuring him that things will look better in the morning, but that’s it.

He crumples back down onto the bed and covers his face with his hands, head pounding and nausea roiling in his stomach for multiple reasons now. Cas left him. Cas ended everything. Dean is alone.

He wants to cry again, but has no tears left. He feels raw, empty, hollow. Sick. His eyes are burning and sore, and the inside of his mouth feels like sandpaper. He curls up on his side, hugging Castiel’s pillow to his chest, and gazes out of the window feeling more despondent than ever. How could Sam think he would feel better? He’s never going to feel better, never going to fill the giant void that’s opened up inside him. And what the fuck is he supposed to do now? Stay here in their house while Cas lives at Jimmy’s? Fuck no, he can’t do that. But equally the thought of methodically packing up his things and checking into a hotel makes him feel cold all over with dread. At least here, he can try to get some peace and pull himself together somehow. He can just lie here in bed, wallowing and feeling like utter shit for as long as he damn well likes.

Or at least for another half hour. He glances at the clock, grimacing as he realises he promised to drop Sam and Bobby off at the airport before he has to head to work. Then his gaze falls to his phone and sees it blinking; he scuffles to grab it and knocks it on the floor in the process, then spends a good minute or two fishing for it under the bed. Cas, he thinks. Cas has called him, Cas has sent him a message. This is all some dumb mistake and he wants to talk. But his heart sinks as he reads the message and he falls back into bed, dejected.

Jimmy: I hope you’re alright, Dean. I thought you’d want to know that the kids are okay A bit confused and upset because they know something is up, but not exactly what. They miss you. I’m taking them to school then Cas and I are going to have a chat. He loves you. You’ll see.

He wears his armour to the airport in spite of the sweltering heat: leather jacket and boots, and sunglasses which maybe he ‘forgets’ to take off when they head inside to check in. He stands with his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground as Sam and Bobby sort out their tickets. He forces himself to give them the most lopsided smile he can manage as Sam gazes back at him with worry in his eyes.

“Start over again at home? Stay with me and Jess until you find your feet?”

“Nah,” Dean pulls back before he does something really girly, like crying in a crowded terminal. “Home is here, man. Has been when Cas and I were good, and will be now that we’re apart. The kids, man. I can’t leave them.” I need them in my life.

And Sam nods, understanding. He’s a parent too, he gets it. Dean can never leave the boys, not now. Not now that they’re such an intricate and vital part of his life. Swallowing yet another lump in his throat - when did he get so damn emotional? - Dean backs away as his brother and his surrogate father head through towards the security checkpoint, Sam’s shaggy head towering over most others, and he gives a small wave before turning away.

This goodbye is almost as tough as the one Cas said to him, in so many words yesterday. Fighting a
tirade of pain, anger, humiliation, and trepidation, he heads for the Impala and takes off to work with a set jaw. He can do this. He can get through today, get back home, and lick his wounds in peace and make some sort of plan. All he has to do is get through today and hopefully hide it all away from everyone at work.

Fat chance of that.

“Woah, who died?” Meg sashays past him with a tray of cookies, hips swinging, giving him a quick once-over with a raised eyebrow. “Not looking like your usual gorgeous self today, handsome. Haven’t you heard that sleep is a good idea once in a while?”

“Fuck off, Meg,” he growls, shedding his jacket and snagging an apron from behind the counter. The shop isn’t open yet, and the lights are off; it’s blissfully cool and dim and he rubs his sore eyes, exhausted already. Meg seems to sense that he needs space and gives him it, but when Eve arrives a half hour later it’s a different story and she fusses over him like a mother hen, all doe eyes and concerned frowns, until a CliffsNotes version somehow makes its way out through gritted teeth.

“I’m so sorry, Dean.” Eve’s hand comes to rest gently on his forearm and when he glances down at her he finds she’s standing very close to him, definitely invading his personal space. Usually he would take an instinctive step back, yet something in her eyes is captivating and compelling and he stays put. “I can’t imagine how you must feel right now, having lost everything.” She squeezes his arm and a lump forms in his throat. He hasn’t cried since the day Castiel broke up with him, yet her sweet words and concerned expression are pushing him pretty close to it. “If you need anything, any company at all, let me know. I could bring dinner up one night, be a shoulder to cry on. Whatever you need.”

Dean can only nod, choked up. When he feels as though he can speak again he says, “That would be good. Yeah. Sounds nice.”

She gives him one more sympathetic smile before she walks around him to head back out to help Gabriel with the customers. Dean takes a moment to compose himself. He finds he actually does want to take her up on the offer, because having someone in the house besides himself would make it more bearable, even for a few hours. He’s taken to her more than he thought he would initially; she’s sweet and kind, funny in her own way, and always makes time for him at work whenever she can. She’s taken up texting him every evening as well, just checking in, and it’s a nice feeling. He’s made a friend of his own in this town, one that isn’t connected to Cas in any way, and it feels like a win. Like he can actually make it here, on his own. Somehow.

Jimmy sends him a few text messages, updates on the kids, but he doesn’t mention Castiel again and Dean doesn’t feel he can ask. When he sees the boys for the first time after the breakup, it’s all he can do to hold back tears of mixed joy and agony. It’s two days after Sam and Bobby left to head home, and as Jimmy’s car pulls up outside he initially has to battle disappointment - he’d been hoping for Cas. It had been Cas who had sent him a short, to the point text message asking if he could look after the boys for a few hours on Saturday afternoon and he had leapt at the chance, replying enthusiastically and waiting for a response with a heart full of hope. None came, and that night he lay and stared at the ceiling, hollowed out and heartsick. The following day, when Jimmy climbs out of the car, eyes hidden by dark shades and customary stripe shirt with the sleeves rolled up, Dean worries a bit at the pinched, tense look on his face.

“Castiel is fine,” he says before Dean can speak. “He’s working. He… sends his regards.”

Dean tries to get a read on him, opens his mouth to ask some sort of probing, needy question but Jimmy turns away and unbuckles Lexie’s car seat and Dean’s reply is swallowed up by excited shrieks of, “Daddy! Daddy!”
“Why are we staying with Uncle Jimmy?” Billie asks conversationally, an hour later, picking up one coloring book after another and scrutinising them carefully. “When are we coming home?”

Dean has to pause for a moment to take a breath and swallow a sudden ball of grief that’s lodged itself in his throat. He was monumentally unprepared for Billie’s customary bluntness.

“I don’t know, buddy. Your dad and I, we’re just… spending some time apart. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

And oh, how he wishes he hadn’t said that. Because he can’t bear to think of the children when they’re older, not right now. The visions he had of them all together as a family have disintegrated and now he can’t even begin to work out how he’ll fit into the kids’ lives as they grow up. He doesn’t have too much time to ruminate on that, however, because Lexie appears as if from nowhere and wants to go down to the beach and paddle in the water. Dean scoops him up and Billie ambles along behind them, singing loudly to himself and tickling Lexie’s dangling feet.

Time somehow moves too fast and too slow. By the end of week one, he’s managed to eat a full meal without feeling physically nauseous afterwards. By the middle of week two he can sleep for more than a few hours without waking up reaching for Cas, or sitting bolt upright in a panic, certain he can hear the children crying.

He manages. He goes to work, makes it through his shift, then comes home to an empty house and feels like the hollow gap within him is growing steadily by the day. He thinks constantly of leaving, of getting a cheap place down in the town near work if his salary can afford it, and letting Cas and the boys move back into their house. But when he floated this idea past Jimmy, the response he got via text was: Don’t you dare. They’re fine here. Look after yourself, Dean. The house is yours for as long as you want it.

And part of the problem is that while he feels like he needs to be in the house, he doesn’t want to be. Every little thing is a reminder of his failed relationship. Castiel’s clothes, his books, the food in the cupboards, the organic wine stash, the beach outside, the all-natural hemp products in the shower, the smell of their bedsheets…

He drinks to forget every night. To forget the night it all came crashing down and to try and ease the ache in his chest, the one that only really goes away when he’s curled up in bed with Cas’ pillow pulled tight to his chest. He Facetimes Sam and pastes on a smile. He bakes, he tries out new recipes to attempt to distract himself but most of the time they fail because he’s more listless than invested. He’s pleasant to his customers, yet most of his regulars still comment on how tired and pale he looks.

“This boy needs a vacation,” one of his favorite customers comments, reaching across the counter to pat him on the cheek. “Gabriel, you’re working him too hard.”

“He’s fine, Missouri.” Gabe breezes past and plonks a paper bag stuffed to the brim in front of the lady. “We take good care of him, don’t we, Deano?”

“Yes,” he answers mechanically, eyes flicking to the door. His heart stutters in his chest when he sees Cas is outside on the other side of the street with the boys in tow. One of them - Billie? - is pointing across to the cafe and looks to be crying as Cas pulls him by the hand towards the library, purposefully not looking over himself. It breaks his heart, and he steps away as Missouri turns and slowly, deliberately, follows his gaze. He takes five in the back, hand braced on a high shelf and the other covering his eyes as he tries to pull it together.

He’d been doing so well, too. He doesn’t sleep at all that night.
At two in the morning a few days later, while he's sitting wrapped in a blanket outside watching a lightning storm break across the ocean, his phone buzzes with a text message. There are three empty beer bottles beside his bare feet and it takes him a second to fumble with his phone and get it the right way up. His eyes blur as he sees the name on the screen: it's Cas, and he has to take a deep breath before opening it. The message contains only four short words, and he stares at them for a very long time.

*I love you, Dean.*
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the lovely comments and I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to reply to everyone yet. I hope you're enjoy the progress here - I loved writing this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I love you, Dean.

He needs a minute to breathe. He’s never doubted that. Deep down, he knows Cas loves him. But his behavior has forced him to wonder otherwise, and he’s hurt Dean deeply. Again. Is that the behavior of someone who truly loves another person?

He’s not blameless in all of this, he knows it. But he’s the one who’s come off worse, the one who had the situation dropped on him like an anvil out of the blue. The image of Wile-E-Coyote reeling with birds twittering around his head as he sees stars is frighteningly accurate of his current situation and he barks out a sudden, nervous laugh.

I love you, Dean.

What is that? Honestly, what is Cas doing? Is he drunk? Does he want something? Is there a ‘but’ coming in a separate message? Or - and the thought strikes him with utter horror - is he trying to say something else? Is this a goodbye? Heart pounding, he begins to type a reply then thinks better of it and hits the call button instead. The three rings it takes for Castiel to answer seem to be the longest few seconds of Dean’s life, before a muffled, “Hello, Dean,” comes down the line to greet him.

Relief floods him, replaced quickly by nervous agitation and he doesn’t know what to say in response. Castiel doesn’t sound surprised to hear from him, nor does he sound particularly sleepy.

“H-Hey. Hey, Cas.” He doesn’t know what to say now and Cas clearly doesn’t either. A strained silence passes between them until Dean caves. “It’s two in the morning. Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I’m watching a lightning storm. You can see it from Jimmy’s attic - it’s kind of beautiful. Why are you still up? I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No, babe.” The endearment slips out, but he wouldn’t take it back for all the world. “I’m watching the storm, too. Out on the deck.”

“We used to do that all the time.” Castiel sounds wistful; Dean can hear him shuffling about, perhaps adjusting his position, getting comfortable. “Sit and talk, look out at the ocean. It was one of my favorite things to do.”

“Mine too.” Dean watches as forks of lightning split the sky, most likely striking the water a hundred miles away. There’s no thunder, no rain, just a gentle breeze ruffling his hair. It’s peaceful, and he aches for Cas to be here with him, the kids asleep in their arms.

“I’m glad you called.” But Cas sounds tired, distant, and far away.

“I’m glad I did, too.” Dean toys with his empty beer bottle, watching the lightning across the ocean
reflect off the green glass. “I've missed hearing your voice.” Cas doesn’t say anything for a time so Dean just sighs and goes with it. “Why did you text me that, Cas?”

Silence greets him, punctuated only by the sound of Cas breathing down the line. Dean can almost hear the cogs turning in his mind.

“Because I do love you, Dean. I really do.”

“And the middle of the night was the best time to tell me that? You could have called, you could have come round with the kids, we could have talked,” Dean bites his tongue, stopping himself from launching into a full-blown tirade of all the things Cas could and should have done differently. He’d be going for a while if he started. “Why can’t you talk to me, Cas? What’s gone wrong?”

And if that isn’t the world’s most loaded question.

“I feel so terrible, Dean. About everything. I’m just… I’m not in a good place. And instead of turning to you I ran from the best thing I had.”

Dean waits, breath frozen in his lungs.

“I should have talked to you about it all but - believe it or not - I was trying not to hurt you. I guess… I haven’t been dealing with things well lately, and I’ve let everything pile up. I don’t think I ever really dealt with Cole’s death as well as I should have.”

“There’s no right and wrong way to deal with a suicide, Cas.” Dean says gently. “But keeping it all to yourself has done more harm than good. We could have talked it out. I could have supported you. I still want to do that; I want to be there for you.”

“I know. But I - I need to tell you something, Dean.” And this sounds big. It sounds like Cas is gearing up for something, especially since he pauses drastically before continuing. “I’m… Listen, I, I’ve started, started seeing someone.”

“Oh. Right. I… Oh.”

Dean answers automatically before he blinks, uncertain if he’s just heard that right. Castiel is seeing someone? His throat closes up and for a second he forgets how to breathe as his chest grows tight with pain. Cas has moved on this quickly? How is that even possible? Unbidden, tears spring to his eyes and he chokes a little, moving the phone away from his ear so he isn’t overheard. When he presses it back, Cas is talking again, this time at high speed as though trying to get it all out as quickly as possible.

“His name’s Mick. He’s British. Kinda funny, actually. I think you’d like him. Amelia gave me his number and it’s actually going pretty well. He’s easy to talk to. I feel like he understands me.”

Dean doesn’t have a clue who Amelia is, and right now he doesn’t give a shit. Castiel is seeing someone. Cas is moving on, and why does this hurt so much?

“That’s a good thing, right Dean?” Cas sounds like a hopeful puppy now and that tone melts Dean’s heart in all the right ways. Which just makes it hurt all the more, and he clenches his fist around the phone in an attempt to fight off a wave of grief. “That I’m finding him easy to talk to? I mean, I knew this would be really hard, and I would probably never have considered it at all if it weren’t for Jimmy. He arranged it all - well, sprung it on me, more like. I’d already said I’d call him then Jimmy arranged this… this blind date thing, I guess you could call it,”

Castiel laughs, actually goddamn laughs, and Dean’s blood feels like acid in his veins. “And it sort
of went well. Better than I thought.” He trails off, his last words sounding wistful, and Dean has nothing to say to fill the silence. This is the last thing he thought he would hear when he called Cas, and the conversation had started so well. Now it feels like he’s being broken up with all over again. And to hear that Jimmy has been involved in setting Castiel up feels like salt in a jagged new wound. He trusted Jimmy, and it always felt like the older Novak twin was on his side. He realises now how sorely mistaken about a lot of things he truly was.

“I feel… I feel better. He’s helping me see things in a different light. In a way I couldn’t before.”

Dean has to take a few deep breaths before he respond; this is all too much to cope with. How can Cas just dump this on him with no premise, no preamble? He supposes the *I need to tell you something* was an introduction enough, but isn’t that Cas all over these days? Dropping bombshells on him out of the blue? Or maybe not so out of the blue. Maybe he’s just been walking around with his damn eyes closed, not really noticing as he bumps off the walls. He wracks his brain feverishly, trying to think if he knows this guy, Cas’ new man. The name Mick doesn’t ring any bells.

“Dean?” Castiel sounds quieter now, like he’s run out of steam. “Do you… Did I make the right choice here? With Mick? I thought it’s what you’d want.”

He thought Dean would want him to start dating again? This whole situation is just unbelievable and Dean isn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. He supposes, in some fucked up way, that he should want Castiel to move on and be happy, but hell, not this quickly! It hasn’t even been a month yet, Dean is still living in their house… No, just no.

“Sure, Cas. Happy for you, man. Thrilled.” The words almost choke him yet he forces them out. Then another, somehow more terrifying thought strikes him and he can’t hold it back. “Do the kids like him?”

Because he can handle Castiel moving on. It will hurt like a son of a bitch, but he can deal. But the idea of being replaced so quickly in the children’s lives? It feels like he’s about to start hyperventilating and he grips his cell phone tightly in both hands, so tightly he’s afraid he might shatter it.

“The kids?” Castiel sounds completely nonplussed. “No, they don’t know anything about him, Dean. I think they’re a bit too young to have this all explained to them, don’t you?”

The almost disapproving tone makes Dean bristle with indignation. He’s mere seconds away from lashing out at Cas for being so goddamn insensitive about all this but manages somehow to rein it in. If he can do that for long enough to end this call, he’ll consider it a win in the ‘personal growth’ field. Then he can just scream and throw shit in private. Cas’ shit. He feels like trashing the whole goddamn house right about now.

“Okay.” This conversation has completely robbed Dean of intelligent speech, and as he tries to sort through his spiralling thoughts with gritted teeth, he at least attempts to sound nonchalant as he continues. “When do you, uh, think you’ll introduce them? Just wondering, is all.”

His voice is definitely squeakier than normal and he berates himself for it; if Cas can just casually discuss a new relationship with him then it’s a sign he’s over their breakup, right? Dean probably should be too by now. Why is he so goddamn weak? He’s tempted to hang up, claim they got cut off, but instead he white-knuckles the phone and waits for an answer.

“Dean,” Castiel begins, very slowly as though explaining something to a petulant Billie who won’t take no for an answer. “I’m not sure it’s necessary for Mick to meet the children.” Then, sounding a little panicked as though the thought just occurred to him, he continues, “Unless you think he should.
Do you think he should? I hadn’t considered it.”

Dean stares at the phone in disbelief, scowling as though the device has personally offended him. This is going too damn far now. He’s expected to just be cool with Castiel so casually telling him about the new guy in his life and then he’s supposed to advise on how to introduce said New Guy to the children? Their children? Hell no.

“I don’t know, Cas, that isn’t for me to decide.” It comes out hurt and bitter and screw it, he doesn’t care. “Maybe take them along next time you visit and see what he thinks of them.” He will love them, how could he not? And they’ll probably love him. Cas, Mick, Billie, Lexie, one big fucking happy ever after. “Have one big happy family day together.”

He’s gearing up for a fight now, and whatever Cas says next is likely to set him off. Weeks of hurt and betrayal are boiling just beneath the surface and he sucks in a breath between his teeth, fingers clenching and eyes sore. Across the water, lightning strikes again.

“But,” Castiel sounds supremely confused now, and Dean can just picture his furrowed brow and bewildered head tilt. The image makes him want to cry. “Dean, why would I take the boys to my therapist’s office?”

A beat of silence passes between them, both as confused as each other, before understanding dawns on Dean and the ire and fury drains away so quickly he feels lightheaded, and he just can’t help it: a bubble of slightly hysterical laughter rises in him and then he’s close to tears as he makes an unattractive snorting sound down the phone. Cas isn’t dating someone, Cas is seeing someone in therapy. Damn him, of course he had to misunderstand that and make it all so goddamn awkward. The anger is still there, dialed down to a low simmer, but it’s drenched in relief. Cas isn’t seeing anyone, Cas is going to therapy.

The laughter dies in his throat as quickly as it arrived. Cas is going to therapy. This is… kind of huge, actually. Really huge and he can hear Castiel breathing heavily down the phone, clearly confused and no doubt a little crushed at being laughed at. Dean hastens to correct his mistake.

“Cas, I thought, when you said you were seeing someone I thought… I thought you meant you were seeing someone.”

“I - you - what ?” Cas sounds utterly poleaxed and Dean cringes internally at his error. Although, in his defence, Cas could have worded that better. “Dean! Of course not, I’d never - I don’t want - I want…” He hears Cas swallow down the phone line, his voice cracking on the last word. “I want to fix us, Dean. I could never want anyone else. I don’t know how to do it, how to get us back, if I can even do it, but I want to try. I want you, Dean. I want our family back.”

That stalls Dean completely. Castiel being so open and frank about wanting him back, that’s what he’s been craving since the day they split up. But now, now that he’s actually hearing the words, he should be feeling elated. Relieved. Excited, desperate to be back with Castiel and making it right. But instead, while there is a flicker of relief somewhere, he feels a rush of trepidation and anxiety. He feels spooked. It would be so easy just to say yes, to fall back into Cas’ arms and pretend all the hurt hadn’t happened. He could do it. Shove all his feelings down and carry on, but where would that get him ultimately? He would be the one hiding things and letting pain and resentment eat away at him and they’d end up back at square one.

He can’t do that to himself, to Castiel, or the children.

“I’m glad you’re going to therapy,” Dean says carefully. He doesn’t want to fuck this up or upset Cas, but at the same time he doesn’t want to lie at his own expense. “So yeah, we can just take it
from here I guess. See how things go.”

There’s a snuffle down the line, the sound of Cas biting back a sob. It isn’t what he hoped for, probably, but it’s all the confirmation he’s getting right now. Dean has a wall up around his heart and it’s going to take more than an apology to fix all this. Not that Cas has actually said he’s sorry, come to think of it...

“Jimmy’s having a thing. Next week. He's engaged to Amelia - Claire’s mom? From kindergarten?”

“Engaged? Shit, that's quick.” Dean leans back in his chair and pulls the blanket a little tighter around him, thankful for the diversion.

“Yeah. They've known each other for a while so he feels like it's right. I'm happy for them.” There’s a definite wistful twist to Cas’ voice and Dean gets it. He's happy for Jimmy too, but this news is bringing back a lot of memories. Memories of his own proposal and Castiel laughing and crying and hugging him, seeming so happy. It feels like an eternity ago. Was that all fake? It didn’t feel fake.

“Will you come, Dean? To their celebration? I… I’d like you to be there. So would the kids.”

And how the hell is he supposed to say no to that? To Cas and the kids? But simultaneously, he doesn’t want to make it too easy on Cas. Sue him if that’s childish, but he’s still deeply hurt.

“Why? Why do you want me to come? You really think us seeing each there for the first time at Jimmy’s engagement party is a good idea?”

“I never said it was a good idea, it was just an idea,” Cas grouches and Dean almost smiles at that. Almost. “I… I’d like to see you.”

“I’d like to see you, too. I guess I can swing by. Text me the details and I’ll see what I can do.”

They talk for a minute more about nothing much then, as Cas starts yawning hugely, Dean says goodbye with hesitation. He doesn’t want to say goodbye. He wants to hop into Baby, drive the half hour into town, and snuggle up with Cas and wait out the lightning storm until morning. But he both wants and needs the space to process all of this. They say goodnight and, like teenagers, both of them wait on the line for the other person to hang up first. Neither does, until Castiel sighs heavily and whispers down the line, “I love you, Dean.”

Then the phone goes dead and Dean is left staring at it as the first drops of rain land on the cracked screen.

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‘You’ve reached Dean Winchester, I can’t pick up right now but leave a message and I’ll call you back.’

‘Dean, it’s me. Um, Cas. I just, uh, wondered if you were still coming tonight. To Jimmy’s. It starts at six. I, um, hope you’re coming. The kids want to see you, and, uh, I do. Too. So I hope you can make it. Um. I’ll see you later. OK. Bye.’
The day of Jimmy’s party dawns hot and sticky, and Dean hates every second of this damn weather. He curses himself for the hundredth time for choosing California to bolt to - then instantly feels guilty for doing so. He would never have met Cas if he’d headed for somewhere cooler.

Work drags. Probably because he’s distracted thinking about tonight, and he loses himself in the familiarity of baking tray after tray of vanilla sugar cookies and cherry cupcakes. Gabriel has allowed him more and more time in the kitchen and his skills have flourished as a result. His apple and blackberry pie is now the talk of the small town, and he’s privately incredibly proud of himself. He’s making a mark on this place, just as it’s left a mark on him.

Gabriel wanders in later, humming, with a lollipop sticking out from between his lips and a thoughtful frown on his face as he rummages for something. Dean, bent double and ferreting in a cupboard for a baking tool, doesn’t notice Gabriel opening the cupboard above him. He straightens up just as Gabe’s hand comes down on his back to warn him and his head hits the corner of the cupboard with a sickening crack. He hears Gabriel let out a string of curse words as he staggers backwards, a hand to his head and his eyes swimming.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Dean! Are you alright?” Gabe’s face comes into view - no, wait, two Gabes come into view and Dean blinks at them. That’s weird. “Dean? You OK?”

“I’m fine,” He bats Gabe’s hand off his arm sluggishly, spots dancing in front of his eyes. Damn, that hurt. His head is throbbing painfully and the room sways around him. “I’m fine, totally fine. Totally fine, I’m fine.”

“Really?” Gabriel doesn’t sound convinced. His usual jovial tone is gone, replaced with something that sounds awfully like concern and doesn’t suit him at all. “Because you don’t exactly look fine, Deano. You look like you need to sit down. Here, let me -”

“No, I’m fine,” he repeats, swiping again at Gabe and blinking to try and clear his vision. Behind him, a woman’s voice asks what’s going on and as he turns to look at her the world sways and he feels like all his blood is rushing southwards. “Uh, Gabe…”

“Dean, I’m serious. You’ve gone deathly white, and -”

And that’s the last thing he remembers until Eve’s face, pale and worried, is looming over him in the break room and he’s groaning in pain before he’s even fully awake. She’s got an ice pack pressed to his head and he sits up, head swimming and nausea roiling in his stomach.

“Fuck. What happened?”

“You had a fight with a cupboard door. It won.”

“I’m fucking sueing,” he grumbles, taking the ice pack from her and checking it for blood. He can’t see any red streaks, and thanks his lucky stars. He presses it gingerly to the swollen lump on his head and grimaces. “This hurts like a bitch.”

“I bet it does. Gabe told me to tell you he’s sorry, and that he’s filled out an accident report. If you don’t feel up to working the rest of the day, you can head home.” She tilts her head like a sympathetic sparrow. “Poor you.”
“I’m fine…” He stands, sways, and promptly sits back down again - not out of choice. “Okay, maybe not so fine.”

“You shouldn’t drive home.” Somehow Eve manages to sound both prim and soothing. It’s balm to Dean’s aching head, having someone take a decision for him. “I can drive you.”

“It’s out of your way,” he protests weakly and she waves him off with a little laugh.

“It’s fine, Dean. I wouldn’t want to see you hurt any more than you already are. Or see anything happen to that precious car of yours.” She takes the ice pack from him and examines his head. “You don’t need stitches, but that might hurt for a day or so. Take it easy tonight.”

“I can’t,” he groans, dropping his face into his hands, head throbbing sickeningly. “I have a thing tonight. An engagement party. I can’t miss it.” Cas will be there. The kids will be there. I need to see them so much it hurts.

Can’t you skip it? I’m sure whoever it is will understand.” Eve stands up, very close to Dean, and the scent of her floral perfume fills his nostrils as her white dress swings.

“Nope. Can’t. Family thing.” Is he still allowed to say that? Well, tough shit because he just did. “I’ll be fine to drive later.”

Eve doesn’t say anything, but she turns to look at him and he peeks up at her through his fingers, feeling as though he’s being mother-henned. It looks like she’s mulling over what she’s going to say next.

“I could drive you there, Dean. I really don’t like the thought of you driving with a head injury. It would be nice to meet your family, too. Although…” She looks at him contemplatively, one finger at her bottom lip. “I thought you said you and Castiel had parted ways?”

“We have. Did. I don’t even know anymore. But I do know that I need to be there tonight, and I don’t want you going out of your way to drive me there. It’s cool. I’m fine.”

He makes the mistake then of standing up and grimacing as the world sways. He reaches for the nearest thing to steady himself - which just so happens to be a warm, pale hand. He blinks spots away before conceding that it might not be the best idea to drive anywhere, that maybe Eve is right. All his body wants him to do is curl up on the sofa, yet all his heart wants to do is to see Cas.

“You know, if that ride is still on offer it might not be such a bad idea. You can be my plus one,” he smiles ruefully at her then realises what he’s said. “As a friend! Obviously. Just a friend.”

“Of course, Dean,” Eve links arms with him and leans into him, smiling up sweetly. “I’d love to go with you. Just as friends.”

He can’t help thinking, as she walks back towards the kitchen, that he might have just made a huge mistake.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you think? Is Eve really bad news or is Dean being paranoid? And Cas has finally made a step in the right direction so where does that leave him and Dean?
“He isn’t going to come.” Castiel glares at himself pitifully in the mirror, fighting a losing battle with his tie as he mumbles at his own reflection. “I know he isn’t.”

“Cas, stop. You’re driving yourself crazy.” Jimmy nudges open the bedroom door, eyes widening at the sight in front of him. “Has a tornado come through here without me noticing?”

“Shut up,” Cas snaps, glaring daggers at his twin’s reflection in the mirror. “I couldn’t decide what to wear.”

Castiel’s bed and the floor beside it are piled high with clothes – most of them, Jimmy notices, are from his own closet – and his twin looks rattled and unsure as he stares at himself in the mirror. He’s wearing mud-brown pants with a pale blue shirt which hangs too big for him on his diminished frame, and the tie he’s fiddling with clashes horribly with the whole ensemble. Sighing, Jimmy finishes fastening his own shirt and steps warily into the room, eyeing the ground for trip hazards. He picks methodically through the heap of clothing, eventually pulling out a different pair of pants, a different shirt, and rifles around for a belt and tie to go with it.

“You can’t wear that. Here, get changed. And hurry up, the kids are waiting downstairs and the cab will be here soon.”

“What’s wrong with the way I look?” Castiel looks down at himself then back at the mirror, takes in his appearance and sighs, crestfallen. “I’m sorry, Jimmy. This is your day and I’m stealing your thunder.”

“You’re not. But if we’re late because you’re styling your hair then you’ll have Amelia to answer to. And believe me, she’ll have your balls for breakfast.” Jimmy reaches up and tweaks an errant strand of Cas’ hair as his brother shucks off the bland, baggy shirt and reaches for the one in Jimmy’s hand.

“Gross, Jim.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Just hurry up, Cas. And stop worrying, he’ll be there.”

Tugging on the shirt whilst simultaneously trying to hop into the pants, Castiel overbalances and Jimmy just manages to break his fall before he goes crashing headlong into the mirror. Righting his twin, Jimmy helps him with the buttons, noticing his shaking hands but refraining from commenting. Castiel has been working himself up about tonight all day – and probably all night as well if the repeated trips to the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom and the kids’ bedroom were anything to go by. He could hear Castiel padding about the house restlessly for most of the night, but hadn’t gone to speak to him. His twin would come and find him if he wanted to talk, and Jimmy knows that sometimes Cas prefers solitude.

Dean never responded to the voicemail Castiel left him, and that’s what has sent his twin into a spiral of doubt and anxiety. And now, with less than a half hour before they’re due to get to the venue, Castiel is acting like he’s on the way to the gallows for his own hanging. He’s quiet in the cab the entire way to the hotel, and even the children’s excitement doesn’t seem to ease his tension. He’s holding himself so stiffly that Jimmy mildly worries he’s going to sprain something.

Their engagement party is being held in a hotel just outside of town, set in sprawling, beautiful grounds and Jimmy has to rein in his own nerves as they walk in. He’s well aware that he and Amelia have had a whirlwind romance, but he’s never fallen in love with anyone so fast and so hard
before. This just feels right. His only wish now is that Castiel can have his own happiness back once more.

Cas sticks fairly close to Jimmy when they arrive, flitting to the bar to make sure Amelia had a drink and seems to be enjoying herself. Even though he keeps the kids close, his anxiety is palpable and Jimmy scans the small crowd for any sign of Dean. He’s sure the man will show, but Castiel’s worry is starting to rub off on him and he finds he can’t relax and enjoy his own engagement party just yet. He takes everything in with a shy smile plastered on his face, feeling a touch of overwhelmed nerves. This is all for him. All these people, here to celebrate with him and Amelia. With a rush of excitement, he looks around for her. The room is pretty big and half full already, with tables scattered around a small dance floor and a bar in the corner. The ceiling is high and the windows draped in long curtains. It’s a little ostentatious for Jimmy’s tastes but whatever Amelia wants, she can have.

He’s never been so in love before. Nor so happy.

“Uncle Jimmy?” Lexie tugs on his hand. “Can you open my snack?”

The boy holds up a piece of cheese in wax wrapping and Jimmy kneels down to do it for him. Above him, he hears Cas’ sharp intake of breath and when he stands again he follows his twin’s gaze to the door.

Dean has just walked in, a nervous, crooked smile on his lips as his eyes scan the crowd in search of people he knows. But the thing that catches Jimmy’s eye isn’t Dean himself. It’s the young woman with flowing dark hair in a pretty red dress, clinging to his arm and gazing up at him as though he hung the moon.

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“Daddy! Daddy!”

Dean can’t help the grin that spreads across his face as two little whirlwinds of energy collide with his legs and he leans down to wrap the children in a tight embrace. He buries his face in Lexie’s long curls and inhales the scent of his son deeply, feeling a deep ache of longing in his chest. He misses seeing them every day, misses their smiles and laughter, and misses watching them fall asleep. Lexie clings to his leg as he stands up, drawing circles on his thigh and clearly missing him back just as much.

“Lexie, Billie. Don’t run off like that, stay where I can see you. I… Oh. Hello, Dean.”

And there, in front of him, looking momentarily stunned to see him is Cas, and Dean’s heart skips several beats just looking at him. For a moment he forgets about the children, forgets about the room full of Jimmy’s friends, and forgets about the girl holding his arm. All he sees is Cas. And if he’s not mistaken, the smallest of smiles is tugging as Castiel’s lips. He has to stop himself from stepping forward and reaching for him.

But a second later the moment is broken when Castiel’s gaze shifts to Eve then drops to where she’s clinging to him, and when he meets Dean’s gaze again any glimmer of affection is gone.

“Eve, this is Cas. Cas, Eve.” Dean introduces them quickly, wary of the expression on Castiel’s face. It’s closed-off and cool, and there’s a glimmer of hurt hiding behind those blue eyes. Dean squints at him in confusion, but Cas blinks and drops his gaze before he can summon up anything to say.

Castiel looks fantastic. He’s in charcoal grey pants that hug his hips and thighs - and Dean is willing to bet make his ass look fantastic - and he’s wearing a deep turquoise shirt with the collar open and
the sleeves rolled up. The colour makes his eyes pop and Dean is willing to bet Jimmy had more than
a little to do with the whole ensemble. Before Cas can speak, Eve extends a delicate hand to him and
smiles demurely. She’s still clinging to Dean’s arm and he has the bizarre impulse to shake her off
like a bug.

“Castiel. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Dean’s told me all about you.”

“Really,” Cas’ voice is tight and he doesn’t move to shake her hand. “I’ve heard precisely nothing
about you.”

“Oh, we haven’t known each other long,” Eve leans conspicuously into Dean as she speaks, hanging
off his arm like a spider monkey. “But he speaks very highly of you, in spite of,” she waves a hand
airily. “Everything.”

Dean stiffens, shock reverberating through him. What the hell?

“I see.” Castiel’s voice is icy cold and if looks could kill, both Eve and Dean would be keeling over
on the spot.

“And your home is lovely.” Eve continues, the smile on her face not faltering. “All that space and so
close to the ocean. You must be very happy there.”

Dean frowns, trying to recall when Eve had ever been to the house, but the damage seems to be
done. Castiel’s face darkens and his eyes glitter with hurt before his expression clears to closed-off
neutrality which Dean finds a little more disturbing than the pain.

“Thank you.” His tone is cold, falsely gracious, and he makes an incremental move backwards.
“Excuse me, Dean. I need to go and find Jimmy.”

Then he’s gone, and Dean is left gaping at the empty air.

“Eve, how did you-“

“Let’s go and get a drink, Dean.” Eve smiles up at him, taking his arm and leaning close. Her floral
perfume is a little too thick and it irritates his sinuses with every breath as she drags him off in the
direction of the hotel bar, and Dean follows like a puppy led by a leash. His head is still pounding
from its incident with the door earlier, and that introduction couldn’t possibly have gone much worse.

“I think I’ll, uh, wait here.” He disentangles himself from her and steps off to the side, avoiding the
growing crowd of people milling around. He can see Cas out of the corner of his eye, kneeling down
and talking to one of the children, and his heart aches with the desire to go over to them.

“Alright. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere!” She flashes him a bright, flirty smile and is gone,
leaving Dean to gaze over at Cas in longing. He watches as the bright blue eyes he adore so much
flash up and follow Eve as she sashays through various people, her long hair shiny and sleek, smiling
up at everyone politely.

“Hey, Dean.” Jimmy materialises suddenly, as if from nowhere, wrapping an arm around his
shoulder in a half-hug, and Dean turns to him in relief. Watching Cas watch Eve is grating on his last
nerve.

“Jimmy! Congratulations, man. I’m thrilled for you guys, really.”

“Yeah?” Jimmy eyes him in concern. “I know it’s kinda sudden, and really bad timing I guess -“
“No. Not at all.” God, this forced cheerfulness is going to kill him, but his can’t bear Jimmy feeling bad about his own engagement for even one second. The guy deserves to be happy, for God’s sake. His entire life has been about his brother for years, it’s time he got his happy ending. “It’s great timing. I can’t wait to meet her, where is she?”

“Mingling somewhere.” Jimmy’s looks through the small crowd, smiling as he eyes the twins picking through the food on their paper plates. “Dean, can I just ask… Who is the girl you’re with?”


“Just a friend?” The raised eyebrow gives it all away and Dean gapes. The whole misunderstood conversation with Cas about his therapist resurfaces and he flushes a little.

“Hell yes, just a friend! You think I’d do that? To Cas, to the kids? Move on that damn quick? Jimmy, I’m not even thinking about dating anyone again, not even close. Cas and I, we’re…” He clams up all of a sudden, not wanting to put into words the thing that he felt between them on the phone the other night. If he voices it out loud it will sound stupid, he’s sure. He doesn’t want to let go yet of the possibility that he and Cas could be together again. “Anyway. No, just a friend, nothing to see here.”

“I see.” Jimmy’s expression is strange, impenetrable, and Dean squints at him as he tries to work it out. What does Jimmy know that he doesn’t?

“If you must know, I had a dumb accident at work today,” Dean grumbles, feeling sheepish and chastised and pink-cheeked. “And she didn’t think it was a good idea for me to drive on my own at night. She offered to come with. I didn’t think much of it, but now… Yeah. I get it. I should find Cas and explain,” He casts about, looking for Castiel but finding him nowhere.

“I saw him outside by the fountain.” Jimmy squeezes Dean’s arm reassuringly. “I think he’d like to speak to you. Go find him, I’ll watch the boys.”

But before Dean can get too far, he’s accosted immediately by Eve, returning from the bar with their drinks, and he can feel Castiel’s eyes on them before he sees it. So he knows that Cas sees it when Eve leans up to peck a kiss on his cheek - which he recoils from instantly, his eyes immediately searching out Castiel. He sees him turn abruptly and make for one of the emergency fire exits, pushing through it and vanish in and Dean has taken off after him before he even realises that he’s left Eve standing alone with their drinks. But it doesn’t matter; it barely registers. Cas is the important one.

“Cas? Cas!”

Dean crashes through the exit, sees Castiel halfway down a garden path leading into some shrubs, and has to jog to catch him up. He reaches for Castiel’s arm but it’s jerked roughly from his grip and Castiel turns to look at him, eyes bright with emotion.

“ Were you even going to tell me, Dean? Or is this some petty revenge plan because you thought I was seeing someone? You wanted to make me hurt in exactly the same way?”

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m not trying to hurt you. Whatever you think you saw…”

“I know what I saw!” Castiel’s blue eyes are blazing with pained anger. “I saw you and her - together! I thought we… Dean, I thought we could…”

“She’s my ride, Cas!” Dean bites out, infuriated at the entire situation. “I had a goddamn stupid
accident at work, I hit my head, and she offered to drive me here. As a friend. Nothing more. There’s nothing between us!”

“You had an accident?” Momentarily distracted, Castiel’s brows pull together in concern and he makes an aborted movement, as though he wanted to step forward and reach for Dean. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Blame Gabriel and his cupboard doors. I’m fine, Cas. I didn’t wanna miss tonight, didn’t wanna miss the chance to see you. And it made sense at the time for her to drive me.” He swallows, the wind going out of his sails as he suddenly sees it from Castiel’s point of view. “I shoulda just got a cab.”

“Maybe you should have.” Castiel’s gaze is level and he doesn’t look away. Dean had almost forgotten how piercing his stare can be. “You may not have feelings for her, Dean, but it sure seems like she has them for you. You might think she’s just a friend but she probably sees this as a date, and-”

“So? So what?” Dean moves then, stepping forward and gripping Castiel by his upper arms and holding him there so he can’t wriggle away — no matter how much the older man frowns and tries to do so. “I only have eyes for one person here, Cas, and it ain’t her. And yeah, you and I are all f***ed up right now and have some shit to deal with, but that doesn’t change the fact that I…” I love you. He’s suddenly overwhelmed with shyness and can’t voice the words he truly wants to. So he goes for the next best thing. “I want us back.”

“I…” Castiel falters, stops twisting in Dean’s arms. His eyes seem to glow in the evening light and he’s so close that Dean could just lean in and press their lips together. It would be so easy. “I do, too. I love you more than anything. I just…”

But before he can say anything else, a young couple come stumbling around the corner, laughing and joking, and the moment is broken. They step away from each other, both dropping their gazes awkwardly and Dean clears his throat to break the sudden tense silence.

“C’mon. Let’s go inside and release Jimmy from babysitting. It’s his party, after all.”

It comes naturally to Dean to put a hand on Cas’ lower back as they walk in together, and Cas doesn’t pull away. If anything, he leans in closer. But at the door, Cas twists to look at him and his expression is pained.

“If there is anything between you two… If you do have feelings for her… I can… It’s…”

"Don’t say it’s OK, Cas. Don’t. Because it ain’t happening, for starters, and it ain’t OK.”

He has to hold back the sudden urge to kiss Cas. While it would be so easy just to fall back into his arms he can’t let that happen. He’s built a wall around himself, he’s had to, and he can’t dismantle it that easily. He can’t expose himself and allow Castiel to hurt him again. But at the same time, seeing the man he loves hurting is tearing at his heart more than a little bit. He runs a hand down Cas’ arm and squeezes his hand then, returning Castiel’s wistful smile, leads them both back into the party.

Lexie immediately runs up to them and Cas lifts him up, swinging him around and holding him out so that Dean can kiss him on the forehead. Then he sits down on one of the chairs, watching the party and holding his son close to him, looking overwhelmed and like he wants to hide away or head home. Dean casts about for Eve but it’s a paltry glance. He sees a flash of red out of the corner of his eye but chooses to ignore it.
“Dance with me, Cas.” Taking a steadying breath, Dean extends a hand and Castiel eyes it as though it might bite him. “C’mon. You can’t sit here all night while we have all the fun.”

“I… Dean, I can’t.” Cas looks genuinely torn, like he wants to dance more than anything in the world but something is preventing him from saying yes. At that moment the song changes to a classic rock ballad and the smile that touches Dean’s lips is soft. He wiggles his fingers enticingly.

“Come on. One song. I won’t try to feel you up, I promise. Scout’s honour.”

“You were never in the Boy Scouts,” Cas stalls, but Dean’s had enough. He leans down and grips Castiel by the hand, jerking him forwards and out of his chair, pulling him onto the dance floor. The beat is slow, the song melodic and sensual, and Dean’s arms come naturally to rest on Castiel’s hips as they both blush awkwardly and look away. Cas’ hands come up to rest on Dean’s shoulders, though they somehow manage to leave a polite amount of space between their bodies in spite of the natural sway they fall into. Neither of them spot Jimmy over at the DJ station with a mischievous smile on his face.

“Are you having a good time now?” Dean asks, his mouth pressed near to Castiel’s ear and he’s sure he feels a shiver run through the other man. At their feet, the children are holding hands and moving to the music, attempting uncoordinated dance moves while the people around them coo and point at how adorable they are.

“Yes. Are you?”

“Better than I thought I would,” he replies truthfully, fingers instinctively digging into Cas’ hips a little more. “You look amazing.”

“Charmer. So do you.” Cas’ voice is low and gruff and it does things to Dean, and he presses their bodies a little closer together. “I’m sorry, Dean. When I thought Eve was your… I thought you…”

“I know, Cas. I get it. We weren’t exactly on great terms, Cas.”

“Still. I’ll always come when you call, Dean. No matter what. Whether we’re together or not…” Cas voice catches in his throat and he stops himself, ducking his head and tensing up. Emotion causes a shudder to course through him.

And Dean, for his sins, responds by pulling Cas just a little closer, holding him just a little tighter, and rubbing slow circles into the base of his spine. He leans in and nuzzles Cas’ cheek and the other man relaxes a little in his embrace.

“It’s OK, Cas,” he whispers, glad of the music as his natural instinct is to hold his lover and rock him in his arms until his fear abates. “It’s gonna be OK.”

“You don’t know that, Dean.” Comes the muffled, choked response.

“Yeah I do, sweetheart. I do.”

The song seems to last forever and Dean lets his eyes fall closed as the music washes over him, Castiel in his arms and his kids at his feet, and he could stay here forever and die a happy man.
Across the room, Eve’s expression has darkened and she slips away into the night without Dean even noticing.

Later in the evening, Castiel is sitting alone next to the children, who are lying asleep on a row of chairs all covered up by his and Jimmy’s jackets. Lexie is sucking his thumb, lying on his back with his head on his brother’s legs, and Billie has his face pillowed on folded arms. Cas is stroking Billie’s hair and looking tired, and Dean’s heart skips a beat at the sight of his family.

“Hey.” He nudges Cas on the shoulder and the other man startles, clearly deep in thought, and looks up with heavy eyes. “You OK?”

“Fine, Dean. Just ready to go, I need to get the boys to bed.”

“Well, let’s call a cab. I’m ready for home, too.” He steals a glance back over his shoulder at the party, still in full swing with Jimmy and Amelia dancing together and locked in a deep kiss. “I’m too old for such a late night.”

“It’s only ten o’clock, Dean.” But there’s humor in Cas’ tone and the soft expression on his face tells Dean that he isn’t the only one looking forward to climbing into bed. “But yes, that sounds fine. I’ll call and-”

“Could we talk first?” Dean blurts out, unable to contain himself. They should probably wait and talk back home, but right now home means two different places to both of them, and he very badly doesn’t want Cas to go back to Jimmy’s tonight.

“Sure?” Cas’ voice lilts up in a question and he glances at the boys. “Here? Or somewhere else?”

“Outside. More private.”

He’s sure Cas’ expression flickers to one of concern, but he nods and follows Dean outside with a quick nod to his brother to keep an eye on the sleeping children. Dean leads him down a path and through some low-hanging branches until they reach a fountain, and the both sit down on the edge of it, nervous tension almost crackling in the air. Castiel seems too shy or too scared to say a word; he’s eyeing Dean warily, looking like he could bolt at any second, and Dean sighs, scooting closer. He doesn’t want things to be this way anymore, doesn’t want to have to endure another second of either of them feeling like the rug has been pulled from under their feet. This freefalling shit is over.

“I love you, Cas.” Dean leans in, brushes Castiel’s hair back off his forehead with gentle fingers. “We can do this. We can get through whatever life throws at us. I know we can.”

“How do you know?” Cas counters, leaning into Dean’s touch just a little. His voice is low and laced with concern but his eyes shine with hope. “I’ve hurt you, I pushed you away when you should have been the one I turned to.”

“Yeah, you did, but I’m not gonna hold it against you forever. I miss you, Cas, so much. You and the kids are my life and if we’ve gotta work through some shit to get it right then that’s what we’re gonna do. But we’re gonna do it together, not apart. I need you just as much as you need me.”

“I’m not good for you, Dean. You deserve-”

“Don’t you tell me what I deserve.” It comes out firmly and Cas flinches. “I’ve had enough of you making decisions for the both of us without consulting me, Cas. It ends tonight. We do this together, and you gotta trust that I know what’s right for me. We gotta do this together, Cas, or we can’t do it at all. You gotta trust that I know what’s right for me. If you don’t want to get married then fine, we can talk about it. But don’t bottle shit up and think you know best for us all, because that’s how we
ended up in this mess in the first place.”

“What if I’m not enough for you?” Castiel has moved closer now, and it sounds less like a question and more like a plea for reassurance, which Dean counters with a smile and a nudge.

“What if you are?”

“God, Dean, how are you like this? How can you forgive me after what I’ve put you through?” Apparently, Castiel’s hands have suddenly become very interesting and Dean has to stop himself from huffing in irritation.

“I haven’t.” Blue eyes flash up at him in shock but Dean remains firm. “Not yet. This isn’t gonna happen overnight, Cas. You and I aren’t back to normal yet. But it can happen. I believe it, I just need you to as well.” He turns, takes both of Castiel’s hands in his own and waits until the other man looks back up at him. “Do you love me?”

“You know I do. More than anything or anyone in the world.” He pauses. “Apart from the kids.”

“Duh. Well, if you love me and I love you right back, that’s gotta count for something. Right?”

“Right.”

It’s almost dark now, the breeze cool and gentle on his skin, and Dean feels a weird sense of shyness wash over him, like he’s a teenager out on a date with his crush.

“How’s therapy going?” He asks conversationally, and Cas gives him a sharp look.

“Fine. Mick’s great. I’m seeing him again tomorrow. He suggested, um, a session with both of us. You and I. If you were, I mean, if that’s something you’d like to do. He thought it would help.” He drops his gaze, cheeks pinking up a bit, and Dean chuckles him under the chin with a curled finger to get his attention.

“Sounds good. I’ll try whatever he recommends if he thinks it will help. I’m not really a therapy kinda guy,” he rubs the back of his neck self-consciously. “But if it’s working for you and it will help save what we have then I’m all for it.”

“Are we good, Dean?” Cas asks him, and there’s hope sparkling in his crystalline eyes. Dean lifts a hand to his jaw, caressing his bottom lip with a calloused thumb and watches the light die a little in Castiel’s gaze as he waits for a response. For a moment, the only sounds are the trickling of the fountain and the low hum of music and voices from inside, but it’s just background noise. For all Dean cares, they could be the only two people on Earth.

“No, Cas. We’re not. Not quite yet.” He leans in, and they’re sharing a breath. Cas looks painfully confused, yet shy and optimistic, and it would be so easy to lean in and kiss him. So goddamn easy… “But we will be. We can be good again. I know we can.”

And fuck it, Cas smells too good and he looks too perfect, sitting there all doe-eyed and handsome under the hot summer starlight, and Dean’s missed him too much. He kisses him, and it’s goddamn heavenly. He cups one hand to the back of Castiel’s head to pull him in close, feels hands tightening on his biceps, and then they’re kissing deeply as though there’s no tomorrow. It’s familiar and warm, sweeter than he remembers, and his whole body is on fire with how much he’s missed this.

It’s like coming home.

When they break apart, Castiel’s eyes are shining and Dean leans their foreheads together, breathing
heavily and gripping Cas tight enough to hurt. But he doesn’t want to let him go. He wants this moment to last forever. Just him and Cas, together, as they were always supposed to be.
“Dean?”

“Yeah, Cas?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, anything.” He takes a sip from his beer bottle, wriggling slightly to get comfortable. Castiel’s weight on his chest is beginning to become a little too constricting.

“Do you pee in the shower?”

Dean snorts, gasps, chokes, and spits a mouthful of beer out into the sand. When he’s recovered, sniffing and coughing, grimacing at the aftermath of sensations that come with spraying beer out of your nose, he can't stop a bubble of laughter as he gapes down at Cas.

“What the hell? What kind of question is that?”

“I don't know.” Castiel shrugs, shifting in Dean’s arms. “I just feel like there's so much I don't know about you. I want to know everything.”

“And knowing whether or not I pee in the shower is crucial information when it comes to moving our relationship forward, is that it?”

“Absolutely.” Cas blinks up at him, completely stoic and serious. “I want to know everything there is to know about you, Dean. Everything I didn’t know before, I want to know it now. I want to get this right.”

“Cas, the success of our relationship is not going to be based on whether or not I pee while I’m showering.” Dean grins around another sip of beer. “And the answer is no. At least, not while you’re around.”

“Gross.” Cas elbows him. “I knew you did.”

“Then why ask?”

“I wanted to be sure,” Cas murmurs, all mirth gone from his voice. “I want to be sure of you.”

Dean leans forward, nuzzles his nose into Castiel’s dark hair and breathes in the scent of salt water and cinnamon, holding him just a little tighter. One thing he’s been sure of ever since the party is that Cas wants to make things right. Now he just needs Cas to be sure that it can be.

“Stay here tonight, Cas.” Dean drops a kiss into Castiel’s thick hair. “The kids are sleepy, it's getting late… And we've been so good.”

It's true, they have been good. It’s been a fortnight since Jimmy and Amelia’s engagement party, and in those two weeks Dean feels like he’s gotten to know Castiel in an entirely different way. It’s like they’re a new couple - two guys who just started dating - and Dean would be lying if he said he wasn’t in love with that. They missed out on all the first date experiences the first time around, since Dean basically crash-landed into Cas’ spare bedroom, but now it’s as though they’ve been given a second chance at dating again.

Castiel is still staying at Jimmy’s with the children and Dean is at the beach house, and they haven’t
talked yet about moving back in together, but somehow it’s still all good. They’re making it work, and they’re happily falling victim to all the nerves and butterflies in their stomachs that any couple get during the first few weeks of knowing each other. The gentle touches, hands on lower backs, catching each other’s eye and glancing away, sweet, stolen kisses on doorsteps, and linked hands as they walk from cars to restaurants. They aren’t how they used to be. They’re walking on eggshells and furtively watching each other for signs of discomfort, but it’s new in a refreshing kind of way. It’s as though the decaying parts of their relationship have been cleansed and debrided, leaving room for a new type of love to grow.

Dean is jolted from his introspection by Cas twisting in his arms to look up at him. They’re snuggled together under a blanket on the beach in front of the house with Cas’ back to Dean’s chest, watching the ocean. Inside, the children are sitting on the couch with coloring books and Castiel has long let go of the worry about them getting crayon on the fabric.

“I’m not sure,” Cas has worry in his blue eyes. “The kids…”

“The kids are fine. They’d love to sleep in their proper bedroom. And maybe you could sleep in ours…” Dean leans down and presses a kiss to Castiel’s lips. His eyes fall closed as Cas immediately deepens the kiss, his hand sliding up to cup the back of Dean’s neck to pull him closer. “And tomorrow is kinda important and I’m kinda freaking out about it, so…”

“Why are you freaking out?” Cas pulls away a little, gazing up into Dean’s eyes and rubbing his knuckles down his cheek. “I thought you wanted to go.”

“I do. I totally do, and I’m gonna be just fine. But… Cas, aren’t you nervous too?”

“I guess.” Cas shrugs. “But I’ve been seeing him for a while now. Almost a month. So I guess I know what to expect.”

Tomorrow they’re both going to couples therapy for the first time, and Dean can scarcely believe he’s agreed to it in the first place. Talking about his feelings to a stranger? No thanks. But if it'll help him and Cas get things back on track, he's willing to try anything.

“Just promise me one thing.” Dean tugs Cas back into his arms, kisses him on the temple and locks his arms around him tightly. “No surprises. Anything big that you want us to talk about, I wanna know first. Don’t drop any bombshells on me in therapy. Talk to me first, one-on-one. Just us.”

“I don’t have any surprises for you, Dean. I don’t think either of us could handle any more right now.” Cas finds Dean’s hand, brings it to his lips and kisses his fingers. “No bombshells. No surprises. Just… Just talking. Maybe Mick can help give us some guidance. Or some tips. I don’t even know what he can give us. But he thought it was a good idea, and I—”

“I think it’s a good idea, too, Cas,” Dean cuts in reassuringly. “It will be fine. But stay here tonight. Let’s wake up together.”

“Oh, Dean, I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s a good idea.” Cas bites his bottom lip, eyes all wide and worried, and Dean leans in to kiss the concern off his face. “I suppose, if we behave ourselves,” Dean kisses him again. “It would be nice to wake up with you again—”

Dean’s grin is so bright that Cas is sure that if the moon were out yet it would sink behind a cloud in humiliation.

Inside, Billie is snoring softly with his head pillowed on Lexie’s crossed legs with his thumb in his mouth. Lexie is turning the pages of his favorite book, not really reading the words, just staring at the pictures and tracing the lines with his hair tucked behind one ear and the rest tumbling into his face.
Dean sits down on the couch next to him, as gentle as he can so he doesn’t wake Billie, and brushes it back for him.

“Don’t you think it’s time we chopped all this off, huh buddy? Doesn’t it drive you crazy?”

“No.” Lexie shakes his head, curls so long they almost touch his shoulder blades. “I like it.”

“Well, if you like it then it stays. That’s all that matters.” Dean kisses him, allowing Lexie to wrap his arm around his shoulders as Cas lifts Billie up and cradles him close to his chest.

“Bath time for you. Bedtime for your brother.”

“That’s not fair!” Lexie attempts to pout but a smile wins. “I’m clean! Why doesn’t Billie have to have a bath?”

“Because he’s asleep and you’re awake.”

Dean blows a raspberry into Lexie’s neck and the boy shrieks with laughter, wriggling in Dean’s arms as he’s carried towards the bathroom and deposited on the fluffy rug while Dean runs the water and pours in some organic oatmeal bubble bath that Cas picked up at the market at the weekend, dumping probably too much in but smirking anyway, knowing how much Lexie likes to play with the bubbles. He’s kneeling by the tub, testing the temperature of the water, when he glances up to see Cas leaning against the doorframe, Billie asleep in his arms, watching him with an odd, crooked smile at his lips.

“What?” Dean glances to Lexie then back at Cas. “Do I have something on my face?”

“No. Just… I’ve missed this.” Cas shrugs one shoulder and Billie snuggles closer, wrapping his legs tightly around Cas’ waist like a koala bear. “Family stuff. You and the kids.” He drops his gaze to his toes. “I’ve missed you.”

“Me too, Cas.” Dean strips Lexie of his shorts and t-shirt quickly, lifting him and settling him in the tub and dabbing soapy bubbles onto the end of his nose. Watching his child play in the bath, having Cas standing so close with their other son in his arms and watching him with a fond smile, it brings a lump to his throat and to his horror he feels his eyes burn. He cannot get choked up in front of Lexie, the boy is already too perceptive for his own good and will know if he starts to cry. Plus, he has no reason for it, not right now. He has everything he wants, right here.

“Dean?” Cas is frowning at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He settles by the edge of the bathtub, handing Lexie his toy boat as the boy splashes about with one of his favorite toys, a My Little Pony with a glittery pink tail, now all wet and covered in soap. In Cas’ arms, Billie stirs and mumbles something in his sleep. Castiel’s eyes are soft and bright in the light of the hallway lamp, and it eases something inside of him enough that he elaborates. “I’m more than okay, Cas. I’m more than okay.”

Once the children are settled in bed, once he’s sat and watched them sleep for a while, and after he's showered and dried and tampered down his nerves, Dean makes his way to their bedroom and nudges the door open, weirdly freaked out about spending the night with Cas for the first time in almost a month. Something that should feel so familiar and so comfortable is, right now, seeming insurmountable and his mouth is dry and his palms clammy as he wipes them on his boxers.
Cas is in bed already, shirtless, settled in and waiting for him, and Dean hesitates before stripping off his t-shirt. Cas looks so good, lying there amid the white, fluffy sheets, and he’s suddenly overcome with nerves. He knows he’s put on some weight since they broke up, is softer around his middle from eating his feelings at the bakery and living off junk food and take-out because he’s been too miserable to cook, and he’s now concerned that Cas will notice and won’t like him the way he is now. The logical part of him knows that’s ridiculous, that Castiel wants him and loves him for more than just his body, but he can’t shake the nerves. He toys with the hem of his shirt, glancing down at his hands, and Castiel pushes himself up onto an elbow, frowning.

“Dean? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. You look great,” he pauses, mentally shakes himself, then pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it away, crawling onto the bed self-consciously and settling next to Cas.

“So do you.” Cas curls into him like a cat, wrapping an arm around Dean’s waist and pulling him close, sighing softly. “I’ve missed this so much. I haven’t been sleeping properly over at Jimmy’s.”

“No?” Dean runs his fingers through Castiel’s hair noticing, for the first time, noticing a couple of strands of grey hidden among the dark. “Why?”

Cas shrugs against Dean’s arm. “The bed in Jimmy’s guest room is too firm. The kids room is too far away so I can’t hear them very well in the night. Bad dreams.” He presses a little closer, and his voice drops to a whisper. “You weren’t there.”

“I get it.” Dean turns over, pushing Cas onto his back and covering his body with his own. “You weren’t here, either. Sleeping sucked without you.” He kisses the bolt of Castiel’s jaw. “Everything sucked without you.”

Then his lips find Cas’ and they're kissing deeply, Cas’ hands running up his back and holding him close as he spreads his legs and allows Dean to settle between them. Any thoughts of behaving go out the window, and they lose themselves in each other, falling asleep hours later as they give in to their post-orgasmic exhaustion, wrapped around each other with the sheets kicked off onto the floor as the hot summer night stretches on.

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Castiel’s therapist isn’t how Dean expected him to be at all. He was picturing an older man, someone kindly with glasses on a chain perhaps, wrapped up in cardigans and bow ties, hair greying at the edges with twinkling eyes. A calm, serene father figure. But Mick Davies isn’t like that at all. Dressed in a sharp navy suit with a white shirt worn open-collar, Mick walks out of his office with a smile on his face and Dean is pinned to his seat, paralysed with a sudden wave of jealousy and possessiveness as he sees how warmly he greets Cas. Mick isn’t old and fatherly, he's young and vibrant and attractive, and Dean's mind is already going into overdrive at the thought of Cas spending so much time shut in with this guy – but then Mick opens his mouth to say hello and Dean’s paranoia doubles. The guy is British to boot, and his accent is simultaneously soothing and enticing, and his cheeks flush with irrationally misplaced anger. Did Cas mention that he was British? He can’t remember; maybe Cas did or maybe he didn’t but that doesn’t matter. This isn’t what he was expecting, not at all. And now all he wants to do is bolt for the door, dragging Cas along by the scruff of his neck rather than spend the next hour shut up in a room with this guy.

“Dean. Pleasure to finally meet you. Castiel has told me so much about you that I feel as though I know you already.” Mick has his hand outstretched and Dean looks at it as though it might bite him.
He catches a whiff of the man’s cologne and it smells rich, expensive, and Dean resists the urge to shrink into himself.

This is not a competition, he thinks firmly, taking Mick’s hand and shaking it perhaps a little harder than he usually would. Cas and I are here together, to work on us. Mick is here to help. He is not a threat. He is not a threat.

“Dean?” Mick’s pleasant voice cuts into his internal monologue. The guy is staring at him, and now his smile holds a quizzical edge. “Is everything alright?”

Realising he’s still holding Mick’s hand in a death grip, Dean releases him and steps back - right into the edge of the glass coffee table. He stumbles, and only just manages to right himself before falling headlong into the water cooler. Pain lances up his leg from his shin and he clenches his jaw to keep from grunting out his discomfort. He refuses to show any sign of weakness in front of this polished, preened-to-perfection Brit. Cheeks flaming, he glares at Cas who is hiding a smile behind his hand, and grits out, “Can we just get on with this?”

Then he stalks past Mick into the office, throwing himself down on a leather couch that squeaks beneath him, and sits with his arms folded as the other two follow him silently in and the door closes behind them all. The office is clean and bright, decorated minimally with lots of wood panelling and a floor-to-ceiling window, and Dean hates it all on principal. He doesn’t want to be here. The sofa is uncomfortable beneath him, the water in the jug on the table looks too tepid, and the room is too warm. He wishes Mick would open a window. Cas settles next to him, close enough to reach out and touch but with a respectful gap between them that Dean wants to lean over and close. He feels exposed and out on a limb, and everything about this situation is setting his nerves on edge.

“So, Dean.” Mick settles himself in his chair, crossing one ankle over the other and uncapping his pen. He looks so polished so effortlessly that it makes Dean’s skin prickle. “Why are you here today?”

“Uh, because Cas wanted me to be.” He can feel Castiel’s eyes on him, can sense his anxiety, and he clenches his jaw tightly. He refuses to let this guy get under his skin.

“Is that the only reason?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I see,” Mick jots something down on his notepad and Dean glares stonily at him. “I was under the impression that you were coming here today to discuss the problems you and Castiel have been having, and to see if I can help you overcome them.”

“I don't have any problems with Cas. Me and Cas are fine.” Very deliberately, he reaches over and squeezes Castiel’s knee, watching as Mick’s gaze follows his hand. “Absolutely fine.”

“I see.” Mick taps his lower lip with his pen thoughtfully and Dean kind of wants to stab him with it. “I'm glad to hear that, especially after everything you've both struggled with.”

“Yeah, well, past is past and all that. We're good now. Aren't we?”

He turns to Cas very deliberately, raising his eyebrows and internally prompting the other man to agree. Instead, as Cas looks away and twists his fingers together, he feels a spark of irritation. Why can't Cas agree with him, then they can get this over with and head home - where there are no handsome Brits staring at them like they're under a microscope? He's feeling twitchy all over and it's a new feeling to him. He's not a jealous person, but his mind is bouncing back to the phone call with
Cas where he mistook his meeting with Mick as a date, and now all the old ugly feelings from that moment are rearing their heads.

“Are you sure you're feeling good about things, Dean? It's important for you to be honest, both with Castiel and with yourself, especially if you want things to work out in the future,” Mick prompts him

“Look, man, I get that you wanted me to come along today so that you could check us out together, make sure that everything is fine and dandy and that Cas isn't making some huge mistake getting back together with me.” Dean clenches his jaw to rein in his irritation. “But let's get one thing straight here: I ain't up for any chick-flick moments. I don't need to sit here and talk about my feelings. I'll jump through whatever hoops Cas wants to get this relationship back on track,” he's gesticulating with one hand now, while the other remains on Cas’ knee, squeezing firmly. “But beyond that, I'm a closed book. Got it?”

“I see,” says Mick again, and Dean could cheerfully throttle him at that moment. No two words have ever bugged him so much in his life. “You think this is jumping through hoops? That that's what you need to do? That you have to somehow prove yourself to get things back on track with Castiel?”

“No. Yes. I have no idea.” Dean leans back on the couch and folds his arms in frustration. “Ask Cas some stuff now. He's the reason we're all here anyway.”

“Perhaps we could all have a discussion,” Mick says, jotting something down on his notepad and recapping his pen. “Could we talk about your problem with placing your trust back in Castiel?”

“I do trust him,” Dean frowns. “Why would you say that?”

“Well,” Mick deliberates, twisting his pen between his thumb and forefinger. “I’d be surprised if you didn’t have any trust issues between you. Castiel has told me that things fell apart relatively quickly between you, and that’s bound to leave some residual tension behind.”

“'Relatively quickly’?” Dean parrots disbelievingly. “If you mean the shit hit the fan quicker than a bullet from a gun then yeah, you might be onto something there. I thought we were fine. We were fine,” he directs his words at Castiel, who is sitting silently and watching him closely. “You decided that we weren’t.”

“I didn't just decide that we weren't fine, Dean. It wasn't out of the blue.” Cas scratches the back of his neck looking uncomfortable. “It had been on my mind for a while.”

Dean has to take a breath and hold in a knee-jerk response. This is news to him, and he feels a flash of jealousy upon realising that Mick clearly knew that and he didn’t, but he doesn’t want to let on that he was out of that particular loop. They can talk about that later.

“Yet you didn't think about talking to me, or including me in your little freak out.”

“It wasn't a freak out. I was worried, Dean, about our future. I probably took it way too far, and-”

“You think?” Dean interjects heatedly, suddenly mad all over again and sitting forward to pin Cas with a glare. “You should have just talked to me. We could have sorted all that shit out, but instead you shut me out and made all the decisions for us. How the hell do you think that made me feel? Did you even think about that? Did it even cross your goddamn mind? Or were you just thinking of yourself?”

There's a heavy silence in the room following his outburst and Dean snaps his jaw closed, shocked at himself. He knew he was still angry at Cas, but thought it had all cooled off to a low simmer. He thought that he was dealing with things and he had it all under control. But in spite of his petulant
words to Mick not five minutes earlier, here he is spilling his guts out in some unfamiliar room with a therapist watching his every move. He falls back against the couch, arms crossed again, gazing resolutely at a random cloud in the sky outside of Mick’s window, regretting opening his mouth at all. This isn’t what he planned. This isn’t how today was supposed to go.

“Of course it crossed my mind, Dean,” Cas says quietly, sounding oddly choked up. “I was thinking of your future, too.”

“And you apparently thought my future would be better off without you and the kids in it, is that it?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, that's how it felt!” Firing up again, Dean sits upright and glares stonily at Cas once more. He's going to give himself whiplash at this rate. “What was your grand plan, anyway? Hope I’d just mosey on out of your life and pick up somewhere else?”

“No!”

“What about the kids, huh? You planned for their future too, right? Was I even in it? Or was I just someone to pass the time with while you got over your ex, the stray dog you took in off the street and turned into your goddamn pity project?”

“Dean-”

“I'm not Cole!” To Dean’s horror, tears of fury are sparking in his eyes and he blinks them back. “And I'm not his goddamn replacement! If you're just looking for someone to fill the gap he left behind, well, fuck you, Cas. I ain't that.”

“I know you're not,” Cas has shrunk in on himself, shoulders slumped and eyes dull with guilt and pain. “You're not his replacement. Or some project, some stray dog to me. Don't ever say that, don't even think it. I love you, I love what we have, and I-”

“And yet you threw it away like yesterday's news when shit got too hard.” Dean sits back again, palms raised in surrender. “I get it, Cas. Whatever. We're good when it's easy, but when it gets tough you bail. At least I know where I stand.”

“I’m not bailing again, Dean. Never. I’m here for the hard times as well as when things are good. I’ll do anything I can to get things back to the way they were, and to make you trust me again. Whatever it takes. I love you, and I want this to work.”

“Yeah? Well, you’ve got your work cut out for you then, Cas. That’s all I’m gonna say.”

And that actually is all he says for the rest of the session. Dean sits in stony silence, refusing all attempts to be drawn into the conversation as Mick and Cas talk about how the children have adjusted, how Castiel feels about Jimmy’s engagement, and when they make a plan for their next couples session (which, if Dean is honest with himself, he doesn’t know if he will be able to attend). Sure he said he would do anything for Cas, but this is pushing it. Any talking they need to do can be done in private, not with this smarmy Brit overseeing everything. They’ve managed to avoid the topic of their cancelled wedding, and it isn’t a thread Dean wants to tug on in the next session.

The drive home is silent and tense, and Dean drives with one hand on the wheel and the other arm resting on the open window. His jaw is clenched and the music is turned up so that he doesn’t have to talk to Cas. He’s angry at the both of them, and that anger doesn’t let up when they get home.

He only starts to feel better later on in the evening, when he’s lying on the sofa with Billie, reading to
him, and the knot in his chest slowly starts to unravel. Castiel is giving Lexie his medication, helping
him chase the tablets down with a glass of milk, and listening to his kid cough and splutter and cry
because he feels unwell is horrible to hear, and he feels a wave of guilt at giving Cas the cold
shoulder all afternoon. Dinner is a quiet affair, both of them lost in thought and the kids distracted by
each other, and by the time the children are in bed he’s mellowed out but still in no real mood to talk.
The session with Mick has dredged up plenty of old feelings and he’s feeling raw and sulky. It
doesn’t help things when Cas declares he’s going to bed early and disappears down the hallway at
ten minutes to nine, dragging his feet and sighing over-dramatically.

Dean gives it ten minutes. Maybe nine. Then he follows Cas, unwilling to let the sun go down with
an argument between them - not again. They’ve had enough drama to last a lifetime, they don’t need
to drag it all out any longer.

Standing at the door, leaning against the frame, Dean feels like shit. Castiel is sitting up in bed, the
sheets pooled around him, pretending to read, but Dean isn’t fooled. Cas’ blue eyes are blank and
unfocused and he’s staring into space. He jolts with surprise as Dean steps into the room, blinking
owlishly, and closes the book - which, Dean notes with interest, was upside down.

“Today sucked.” He sits down on the bed and traces a pattern onto the sheets where they’re rucked
up over Cas’ leg.

“Yeah. It did.” Castiel matches his tone, cool and calculating, but a slight tremor to his voice gives
him away. He feels like shit just as much as Dean does.

“I didn't think it'd go quite like that.”

“Me neither.”

“Didn't think I was still mad at you.”

“Really?” Cas lies down in bed, turning on his side to gaze up at Dean. The breeze from the open
window ghosts over Dean’s skin and he can't help but let his eyes travel over the curves of Castiel’s
body. “I thought you were.”

“Nah. Thought I was cool with it all.”

He meets Castiel’s eyes and feels a wave of guilt. Cas is gazing up at him, so open and honest, and
Dean feels like crap for how today went. For unleashing his anger at Cas in front of Mick after his
little speech about not wanting any surprises to come out during therapy. Then he was the one who
went and dropped a bombshell on Cas and left him reeling.

“’M sorry, Cas.”

“What?” Castiel pushes himself up onto an elbow and reaches for Dean. “What for?”

“Today. You wanted us to make progress and I feel like I fucked it all up.”

“Dean. You didn't. You were honest with me.” Cas tugs at him and Dean gives in, collapsing down
into Cas’ arms and allowing himself to be hugged tightly. “That's what matters. That's what's going
to help us fix everything. Being honest.”

“Yeah.” Lying with his head pillowed on Cas’ strong chest, Dean traces a pattern onto his stomach
with a finger, smirking as Cas tenses, ticklish. “Well, if I’m gonna be honest, then I got something I
wanna say.”
“Okay…” Trepidation laces the response, and Dean turns to meet ocean blue eyes as the last rays of sunshine begin to fade from the sky outside.

“Honestly? I love you. I'll always love you. And no matter how long it takes to get this right, I'm gonna be here. You and me? This is forever. And you were the one who told me, months ago, that forever starts right now. I want forever with you, Cas. Married, not married, whatever. You, me, Lexie, Billie. That's it. My family. And I'll fight for this as hard as I have to. You're mine, Cas. And I ain't letting you go again.”

Then they're kissing, deep and powerful, and he's holding Cas so close and gripping him so tight, that it feels like he will never let go.
Chapter 16

A crash of thunder from above draws Dean from his peaceful sleep so quickly that he's sitting bolt upright before he can even blink himself awake. The room lights up, bright white for just a split second, then the thunder cracks again and Dean swallows, willing his heartbeat to return to normal. He listens, but can't hear any rain, not yet. The air flowing in through the open bedroom window smells clean, fresh, and like this storm has been brewing for a while.

“Holy shit,” he breathes in deep through his nose. “Scared the crap outta me.”

He thinks he was having a nightmare before Mother Nature decided to rudely awaken him, but beyond a general haze of lingering nastiness, he can't remember what the hell it was about. More thunder rips through the sky and he looks down at Cas to see if it's woken him. Castiel either sleeps like the dead and takes forever to wake up, or he wakes at the sound of a pin dropping. There's no in-between.

“Storm,” Cas murmurs into his pillow, lying stretched out on his stomach and kicking the sheets away. It's unbelievably warm in the bedroom and Dean’s skin is tacky with drying sweat.

“Ya think?” Dean can't resist leaning down to brush Castiel’s hair off his forehead. “Either that or God moving some furniture around.”

Dean lies down again, snuggling until he's comfortable, wrapping an arm around Castiel’s waist and flinching as lightning splits the skies outside followed by a rolling rumble of thunder. The storm is getting closer, and he's surprised the children haven't run in yet. In fact, he decides to check on them and sits up and swings his legs down, padding out of the room while Castiel grumbles at him from the bed.

“Just checking the boys,” he says in a stage-whisper from halfway down the hall. A sudden, low-building rush fills the house and he glances up at the ceiling. That would be the rain.

He pushes open the kids’ bedroom door, and for a second his heart stutters as he sees Billie’s empty bed. He steps into the room, hand already reaching for the light switch, then with another burst of lightning he sees them. Both of them, curled up in Lexie’s bed under the covers, whispering to each other with their stuffed toys in between them, Billie covering Lexie’s ears whenever the thunder crashes. He stands and watches them, hand on the doorknob, knowing they don't realise he's there. He watches Lexie whisper something to Billie, watches Billie laugh, watches them hold each other through the thunder and he feels like the Grinch as his heart swells three sizes in his chest with all the love he feels for the boys.

Back in bed, Castiel snuggles up to him, all warm and sleepy and Dean is instantly too hot but wraps an arm around him anyway.

“The kids okay?”

“Yeah. Being super cute. Looking after each other.”

“That's nice,” Cas yawns hugely into Dean’s shoulder. “I'm glad they're okay.”

“Yeah.” Dean absently strokes the warm, golden skin of Castiel’s shoulder, running his fingertips down the bulge of his bicep. “I'm glad you're here. I don't mind storms…”

But honestly, they still kinda remind him of the day he left the train station and went wandering alone
in the woods, up a seemingly endless road. He remembers how hard the rain was coming down and how fresh the air smelled. He remembers not knowing if he was crying or if the droplets running down his cheeks were raindrops. He remembers his hand clutching the strap of his rucksack, legs shaking with fatigue, the trees looming high and menacing on either side of him as the road sloped onward and upward, twisting and turning as the rain became more and more intense. He doesn't remember collapsing. But he does remember looking up, lying on his back and gazing up at the clouds through a gap in the tree canopy. He remembers the rain coming down, him blinking it away, and seeing the hint of starlight through a small break in the clouds. Then nothing. Nothing, until Cas.

He tugs Cas a little closer possessively and kisses his hair, then his lips as Cas tilts his head up with a sleepy smile.

“You okay?” A yawn almost cuts Cas off, and lightning splits the sky outside.

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“‘Bout what?”

“You.” Dean seeks his mouth again, taking his time about it. “Just you.”

Then they're kissing and it's suddenly hot and deep, sweet and passionate, and his hand is sliding down the curve of Cas’ spine to push his boxers down before his fingers brush the curve of his ass and thumb draws circles on the warm skin. He's asking permission, permission that Cas gives willingly with a low hum of pleasure, shifting his hips and sliding his boxers down and off, tossing them away into the corner of the room. Dean’s follow a moment later, then Cas is lying on top of him, his strong thighs bracketing Dean’s hips and their engorged cocks sliding together so perfectly that Dean can’t stop a low, strangled gasp of pleasure from escaping his lips. He grips Cas’ ass tightly, hard enough to bruise, getting a handful of each cheek, and guides him into a slow grind as they trade sloppy kisses. Castiel’s hands are in Dean’s hair, and it's moody and intimate and there's no race to the finish line this time. The thunder crashes outside again, swallowing Castiel’s groan of ecstasy, and Dean’s fingers trail closer to his crack. With one hand he holds Cas’ asscheek, spreading him, and with the other he massages slow circles around his hole with his thumb. He breaks away from their steamy kisses to mouth at Cas’ jawline.

“Gonna let me make love to you, sweetheart? Remind you how much you’ve missed me?”

“Yeah,” Cas breathes into his open mouth. “Yeah, Dean. I am. Want you inside me.”

“Lock the door.”

Dean kisses him with ferocious intent, then pushes Cas away as he sits up to fumble in the bedside table drawer for the lube. Cas crosses the room in three strides, slides the latch closed, then is back on Dean before he can catch his breath. A few months ago, after the children went through a more-than-exasperating phase of running into their bedroom and interrupting them every time they took their clothes off, they decided to fit a lock on their bedroom door so they could at least attempt some privacy. It doesn’t always work. When Billie incessantly rattles the door calling for breakfast, or when Lexie cries that high-pitched, crocodile-tears screech of his whenever he wants attention, they have to give in and unlock it. But most of the time, they get at least an hour to themselves to explore each other's mouths and bodies.

Cas presses a kiss to Dean’s mouth, then with a devilish grin, pulls away and straddles Dean’s chest, facing away so that Dean is left with a face full of firm, tanned ass. His brain barely has a chance to catch up before he feels a warm, wet tongue circle the tip of his cock and he groans as low pleasure pulses through him. Then Cas’ mouth is wrapped around his length, sucking gently, and Dean has to
give himself a moment to focus before he grips Castiel’s hips, encouraging him to shuffle backwards until he can lean in and lick a hot, wet stripe up Cas’ crack. The moan he receives in response sends vibrations right down to the base of his dick and he fumbles to get a pillow under his head, propping him up to the right angle. Then he spreads Cas’ cheeks with his thumbs, and leans in to press a kiss to the tight ring of muscle. A shudder runs up Castiel’s spine and he takes Dean a little deeper, swallowing as the tip of his length hits the back of his throat. Moaning, Dean begins to slowly circle his tongue, rimming Cas slowly and deeply, as he's deep-throated so expertly his mind whites out. Pleasure coils up his spine and he loses himself in the taste of Cas’ skin, the scent of his sweat, the beautiful sounds of his moans as he chokes on Dean's thick length, and the way his throat massages his shaft just perfectly.

Soon, he's working a lube-slick finger in alongside his tongue, stretching Cas slowly, and he has no idea and no care for how much time has passed while they enjoy each other. His legs have fallen apart and Cas is massaging his balls, his warm mouth heavenly as he sucks and swallows, alternating now between deep-throating and licking his way up Dean’s shaft to suckle at the head and dip his tongue into the wet, dripping slit. Somehow Dean manages to concentrate on sliding two, then three lube-slick fingers into Cas, coating his inner walls and stretching him until his fingers slide in and out smoothly. Cas is still so tight, and he groans into the tan skin of his ass at the mere thought of sliding into that slick heat.

All too soon, Cas is lifting off him, giving one last kiss to the head of Dean’s dick, and is turning himself around and straddling Dean’s thighs. His pupils are dilated so much that there's barely a thin ring of blue encircling them, and his neglected cock is thick and hard, glistening at the tip, nestled between his thighs in a thatch of dark hair. Dean reaches for it, caressing it and giving him a few strokes and Cas groans low in his throat, reaching behind himself and taking Dean in hand. They both gasp as the head of Dean’s cock breaches the tight ring of muscle, and Dean knows Cas can’t be stretched enough for this to be comfortable. But he also knows Cas likes the burn when he bottoms, likes to feel it the day after. So he holds onto Cas’ hips, helping guide him down, and rubs circles into his thighs when he's fully seated, waiting for him to take a few calming breaths and blink away the tears of reaction.

“Love you, Cas,” Dean murmurs and receives a snort of laughter in response.

“Always so romantic,” Cas smiles, leaning down to kiss Dean who sits up on an elbow to allow his mouth to be captured, and their hands find each other's and intertwine.

“Shut up. You love me too.”

“Kinda. Oh.” Cas rocks his hips, his head tipping back to expose the column of his throat as he squeezes Dean’s fingers tightly and inhales deeply. “Damn, that's good. Dean, you feel so thick.”

“Kinda?!” Dean repeats, still stuck on that even as he spreads his legs, allowing Cas to settle properly on top of him with his thick thighs bracketing his pelvis. Then just when Cas is starting to move again, he thrusts up hard and watches as Castiel’s mouth drops open and he cries out in shocked ecstasy. “Serves you right.”

“Do that again.” Cas leans forward, pinning Dean’s hands either side of his head, and holding still as Dean thrusts up into him again. “Fuck, that's good. Jesus, you're huge.”

“So tight, Cas. Shoulda prepped more,” Dean manages through gritted teeth. It feels utterly incredible. Cas’ body is hot, tight, and perfect and he sets a slow, undulating rhythm which soon has them both panting.

“No… this is perfect… God, Dean!” Cas groans deeply as a particularly firm thrust grazes his
prostate, and between his thighs his cock pulses a thick drop of precome. “Fuck, fuck me, Dean. I want to feel you for days… Ah!”

“Like that?” Dean grits out, breathing deeply. He's close already, strung tight from seeing Castiel so overwhelmed by his pleasure. Their bodies are hot, tacky with sweat, and the storm continues to thrash outside as Castiel sets a hard, deep rhythm designed to push them both to climax as quickly as possible.

“Dean,” Cas breathes as he leans down to gasp into Dean’s open mouth. It isn't a kiss, just a brush of parted lips as they share a heated breath, and Dean grips his hands tightly, wanting to touch but loving how Cas has taken such control. “Love you. Need you. Need this…”

“Romantic,” Dean groans back as Cas grinds down onto him, whimpering as his orgasm nears. He can feel his balls drawing up, his thighs tightening, and Cas meets his gaze just as Dean comes hard. “Cas!”

“Dean,” Cas chokes out, arching his spine and throwing his head back, his climax hitting him violently and his cock jerks, untouched, pulsing thick come all over Dean’s stomach, right up to his neck. A few drops even land on his chin and Dean licks them off as he pants his way through his aftershocks as Castiel’s body tightens around him. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. Fuck.”

Cas looks down at him, finally unwinding their fingers, smiling, laughing softly before leaning down to share a deep kiss. He positions himself awkwardly on Dean’s chest and they lie together in the afterglow for a while, Dean stroking Castiel’s hair while strong arms wrap around his waist and hold him tight.

“Shower,” Cas murmurs far too soon, then they're stumbling down the hall together, whispering and laughing and kissing some more as they try to stay quiet enough not to disturb the kids. They stand under the spray together as the electricity in the house go out after a particularly powerful bolt of lightning, and Cas leaves him to go check on the children while he shampoos his hair and washes the drying remains of come from his soft, sensitive cock.

Afterwards, he pokes his head back into their bedroom and smirks at what he finds. Castiel is facedown on the bed, buck ass naked, already dead to the world and snoring softly. So much for the idea of getting up early and having a lazy morning together. He grabs a soft sweater and his most worn jeans from his top drawer and pulls them on, then leaves Cas to sleep some more.

Dean pads into the kitchen stretching, his muscles warm and lax from his shower and his orgasm. Damn, he missed sex. Sex with Cas, specifically. He feels all loose and dopy, endorphins doing their job and flooding him with relaxed happiness. The power is still out, so he fumbles for the fridge in the dark, pausing to watch forks of lightning strike the ocean outside. It's beautiful to behold. Wild and powerful and captivating, and he finds his thoughts drawn back to Cas, now lying in bed asleep, waiting for him.

Throwing himself down on the couch, he downs his juice in almost one swallow and frowns, shifting at something hard sticking him in the ass. It's Castiel’s camera, the new one Dean had bought him this week to replace the one Billie broke before they split up. He cringes guiltily, turning it over in his hands to make sure it hasn't come off badly from colliding with his ass. It looks fine, and he switches it on just to check. It brings up a photograph immediately, the blue glow from the screen the only light in the room, and a soft smile creeps onto Dean’s lips.

It's Lexie, asleep in bed, thumb in his mouth while his hand clutches tightly around both his stuffed
bunnies. His hair is in his face and his eyes are slightly open, but he's clearly in dreamland. He flicks to the next one, and as he expected it's a picture of Billie, also asleep, a little frown on his face as though he's dreaming about something very serious indeed. He clicks through a few more of the kids, cute pictures of them in their bedrooms sleeping, then one of himself appears on the screen and he cringes in embarrassment. He's stretched out on his back in bed, mouth slightly open, probably snoring, the sheets pooling around his waist. There's a softness at his belly and a five-o’clock shadow of scruff on his jaw, which he now reaches up to rub thoughtfully. These were taken recently. Maybe the night before their first therapy appointment a few days ago. Castiel has stayed at the house every day since, however, so it could have been any time. He’ll have to ask Cas about it, he thinks with a smirk. It's kind of cute that he's photographing them all asleep, when they're all relaxed and vulnerable. He's surprised he didn't wake up when the flash went off, but then the graininess of the pictures suggests one wasn't used. Feeling as though he's snooping, he decides not to scroll any further, and glances guiltily over his shoulder to check he's still alone. He is, the house is still, quiet, and dark.

He switches the camera off, throwing a last glance outside at the lashing rain. The storm has moved away now, is further off in the distance, and the thunder sounds more like a background rumble than the chaotic theatrics of earlier on. He wanders back down the corridor and falls into bed with Cas, snuggling up to him again and breathing in the freshly showered scent of him.

“Love you,” he whispers, and receives a sleepy murmur in response. A hand finds his and squeezes, and he's asleep again before he knows it.

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“Tell me about the wedding, Dean.”

“Huh?” Dean’s head snaps around and he stares at Mick in confused disbelief. “What wedding?”

He had been gazing out of the window at the street below, twirling a pen between his fingers, trying to tune out as Castiel talked about how great it's been staying at the house a few nights in the last week. He's feigning boredom, when really he's antsy as hell and just wants to get home. The kids are with Jimmy at the cafe, likely being fed secret cupcakes and cookies by Meg, and he just wants to pick them up and go play on the beach. He doesn't want to talk right now. Not to Mick, not with him present, not at all.

“Your wedding to Castiel,” Mick elaborates patiently. “Talk to me about that.”

“Did you fall down and hit your head?” Dean stares at him incredulously. “We didn't get married. We never got that far. Cas here made other plans for us.” He jerks his thumb in Castiel's direction and feels him glower back in response.

“I didn't 'make other plans'.”

Dean glances over at him and yep, Cas is making air quotes with his fingers. That's just embarrassing.

“You kinda did.”

“I didn't. I just… put ours on hold for a while.”

“On hold?” Dean arches an eyebrow. “So you do still want to get married at some point? When it suits you whenever you're over your freak out.”

“It wasn't a freak out, Dean!” Cas snaps in exasperation, sitting back and folding his arms. He looks
like a petulant five-year-old. He looks like Billie.

“Oh? Because last session you said it was. Right, Mick? So, which is it? Freak out or not freak out?”

“Actually, Castiel said he wasn't freaked out, as you put it. He was concerned for your future. I’d say those are important differences” Mick comments, and Dean rolls his eyes.

“Oh, come on. Whose side are you on?”

“I'm not on anyone's 'side', Dean. That isn't the purpose of these sessions.”

“Could have fooled me.”

He knows he's being just as childish and petulant as Cas, but he doesn't care. He came to this session as Cas asked him to, and he arrived with as much of an open mind as possible. Then he saw Mick and Castiel exchange a glance and a smile that looked warmer than it should and all his old jealousy from the last appointment flared up once more. He doesn’t like that this guy seems to know more about what’s going on inside Castiel’s head than he does.

“Do you still want to marry Dean, Castiel?” Mick asks, sending Dean a curious glance then deflecting the conversation away from him.

“I… I don’t know. Yes, of course.” Castiel is flustered, clearly, and Dean tries not to stare too closely at him. This is a question he’s been asking himself for weeks now, and he wants an honest answer. “One day.”

“So it was all too soon, is that what you're saying?” Mick crosses his legs at the ankles, appraising Castiel who fiddles with his fingers.

“No. Not at the time. We’ve been through this.”

“Yes, we have. But does Dean know everything you think about the issue?”

“Well. No,” Castiel admits and Dean stares at him incredulously.

“Oh, that’s just great. As long as everyone else knows, Cas, I guess I’ll just fall in line. Don’t worry about me. Not when you’ve got Mick to confide in.” He says the last part so savagely that silence falls in the office as Castiel and Mick both stare at him, startled.

“Do you have a problem with my relationship with Castiel, Dean?” Mick asks delicately, and Dean shoots him a glare loaded with such ire that Mick flinches almost imperceptibly. “Relationship, Dean thinks bitterly.

“No,” he says, shortly. “No problem.”

“Are you sure?” Mick leans forward. “Because I know that it can sometimes be difficult, as the partner of someone in therapy. You might feel as though Castiel discusses things with me that he doesn’t with you, and I understand that can be tricky to accept.”

He's not going to bite. He isn't going to rise to whatever bait Mick is dangling. He isn't.

“Dean doesn’t feel uncomfortable about that.” It’s Castiel who speaks up in confusion. “He knows this is a good thing. For the best.”

“I’m sensing that he doesn’t. And I think we need to have a discussion about why. I think it’s because-”
“Because I feel like this guy knows more about all the shit that went down between us than I do, and I was the one who was supposed to be your goddamn husband!” It explodes out of him in fury, and Castiel flinches but holds his gaze evenly, waiting for more. “I was supposed to be the one goddamn person you shared everything with, and not only did you take that away from me, you went to him instead!” Dean points at Mick without breaking his stare from Castiel’s. “And told him all the shit that you should’ve told me!”

“Dean-”

“Did you really start seeing him after we split, Cas? Or is that another lie you fed me just to keep me quiet?”

The words tumble out, words he’s never really considered before and doesn’t actually put any stock in, but Castiel is looking all contrite and apologetic and it’s irritating the hell out of him. He wants Cas to bite back. He doesn’t want this docile, cowed apologist for a partner. He wants the fiery Cas back, the one who once screamed at him during an argument and punched Sam five seconds after meeting him. This shy, nervous Castiel has been around for too long and it’s time for him to start fighting back.

“Did you? Or were you seeing him before we broke up? Did Mick here tell you to end it with me? Or did you come to that conclusion all by yourself?”

“How can you say that?” Cas stares at him, gobsmacked. “You know when I started seeing Mick for therapy. We talked about it!”

“I know what you told me. I don’t know what actually happened.” He shouldn’t be doing this. Accusing Castiel of lying to him when he knows in his heart that he hasn’t. But he wants a reaction, and dammit he’s going to get one.

“So you think I lied to you?” Castiel actually looks hurt, but there’s a low burning anger starting to spark in his eyes.

“Well, historically you’ve been pretty good at that, haven’t you?”

He sees the moment his words hit home, and has to stop himself from flinching. He didn’t mean that, not really. But he doesn’t have a chance to take it back.

“How long are you going to hold this against me for, Dean?” It’s Castiel’s turn now to erupt with anger and Dean falters for a moment, watching as his blue eyes almost spark with emotion. “I've said I'm sorry for what I put you through! And the kids, and I've explained why! I'm working on it! When will it be enough?”

“Sorry doesn't just erase all the bad shit, Cas!” Dean throws back. “It's just a word!”

“I'm doing more than just apologising! I'm in therapy, I'm staying back at the house, I'm trying to make you see that I want a future for us! When is that going to be enough, Dean? When can you forgive me for this? Because I can't do this forever! I won't!”

“You won’t?” Dean echoes incredulously. “I don't think you get to play that card, Cas. You ain't a victim in all of this.”

“And you are? Don't be ridiculous, Dean, you've never wanted to be a victim. You're angry at me still, and I get it. But what I need to know is how long this is going to go on for. Can you ever forgive me? Because if you can then, well, great. We can move on with our lives. But if you can't…”
Castiel trails off and Dean just stares at him for a moment, anxiety sinking like a stone in his gut. He knows what the end of that sentence is. If he can't forgive Castiel, then they won't ever be able to get back to where they were. No matter how hard they try, it'll never work because there will always be a wedge between them. A wedge put there by Cas, but kept there by Dean.

He knows he wants to remove it, but he doesn't know how. And he doesn't know how to get to a place where he’ll have the first clue.

“I want to forgive you, Cas.” His voice is low, muted now, all the anger bled out of it into the room between them. “I do. I just…”

There's a sharp inhale, and Castiel looks as though he's readying himself for a blow. And he can't have that. He scoots across the couch, closing the space between them, and takes Castiel’s hand in both of his. His left hand, which is markedly bare of the engagement ring Dean once gave him.

“I don't know how. And I don't think I'm gonna figure that out by myself. I need time, and I need you. I need us to keep trying. I need to know you want us.” He swallows, suddenly feeling very small and childish, but it's a safe space. He needs to get it out. “I need to know you want me.”

“Oh, Dean.” Cas closes the rest of the gap until their thighs press together. In that moment, Mick melts away and it's just the two of them in the room. All he can hear is the rain hammering on the window and the sound of his own blood pounding in his ears. “Of course I want you. I want you more than I can say, and I want us back the way we were, too. I love you. I need you. You're a part of me, the other half I never knew I was missing. I fucked up, and I'll spend the rest of my life regretting it.” He drops his gaze to their clasped hands. “But I can’t spend the rest of my life with you hating me for it.”

“I don't hate you, Cas. I hate what happened. I still do. But I don't hate you. I could never hate you.”

And it's true. As angry and as hurt as he's been over the last few weeks, as low as he's felt and as many times as he's silently cursed Cas into oblivion, he could never bring himself to feel hatred towards Castiel. He just loves him way too damn much. He doesn’t realise that a tear has escaped and is making its slow way down his cheek until Castiel’s thumb brushes it away.

“I miss you,” he confesses for the first time “The way you were. The Castiel I fell in love with. Is he still in there somewhere?” Dean asks quietly, and Castiel’s rueful smile accompanies a jerky nod.

“Yeah. At least I think so.”

“Good. I want him back.”

Castiel is silent for a long moment, staring at him, blue eyes bright and glittering in the light from the slowly sinking sun outside Mick’s window. He isn't smiling or frowning. He doesn't look worried or pissed or hurt or happy. In fact, he looks like he's seeing Dean for the first time after a long, long time apart. Then, as he reaches for Dean’s hand, he smiles softly.

“I want to move back in together. Me and the kids. I want us to be a family again. If you'll have us.”

Dean hasn't cried in quite a long time, but as he buries his face in Cas’ dark hair, a couple of tears definitely trickle from his tightly closed eyes.
“Daddy! Can we go and build a sand castle?”

“No, Lexie! I want to go swimming!”

“We always go swimming, Billie. And the water is cold. I want to build a castle with a moat and a drawbridge and—”

“You can’t build that!” Billie’s tone is scornful, adult in a way that makes Dean blink at him. “Daddy will have to help you and he doesn’t want to. He thinks that idea is stupid. He wants to go swimming with me.”

Lexie skitters to a halt, feet digging into the sand, and stares after his brother as Billie runs excitedly down the dune towards the beach. His bottom lip trembles and he looks down at his battered little Converse morosely. The boys had been so excited to pack their clothes and come home, and Dean doesn’t want to see that excitement extinguished. Coming up behind Lexie, he grabs the boy around the waist and heaves him up with some effort (which he blames on both of them getting older) up onto his shoulders, holding his feet so he doesn’t tip backwards.

“I’ll build that sand castle with you, buddy. I don’t really feel like swimming, but I’m sure Cas will go with Billie. Right, Cas?”

“Of course.” Castiel has his battered rucksack slung over one shoulder and a faraway smile at the corners of his mouth. He had packed at Jimmy’s that morning, tidied up the kids’ bedroom, leaving only a few toys and clothes for the next time they had a slumber party with their Uncle, and had broken the news to the boys that they were going home, this time for good.

“For always, Daddy?” Billie had asked him, bouncing on the spot. “All of us?”

‘All of us’ meant Dean, too, and Castiel had hugged his son close and kissed the top of his head, nodding that yes, they were all going home. Billie had yelped and whooped, stopping his celebrations long enough to tell his Uncle that as much as he loved staying with him, he missed the beach and his own bed and Jimmy had ruffled his hair with a fond smile. Castiel met his brother’s eyes with a wry grin - now that the three of them are heading back home, it will make space for Amelia and Claire to move in, which is what he knows Jimmy is hoping for. They can’t remain engaged and living separately forever, and he knows his brother has put his own love life on hold for him, for much too long now. Jimmy will, in his own way, be glad to see the back of them.

“Let me unpack our stuff then I’ll be right down,” Castiel assures Billie, and Dean takes the kids down to the beach, watching them play in the shallow water and splash each other, fussing around them with water and sunscreen for a while until he realises that Castiel has been gone for a long time. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he glances up to the beach house and there, leaning on the railings and shirtless under the summer skies, Castiel is just standing watching them all with a soft, happy
smile at his lips. He lifts a hand to wave and beckon Cas down, and when he joins them, Dean kisses him deeply. He tastes sweat and sunscreen, and the kids giggle and splash them until Castiel breaks free of Dean’s embrace and chases them down the beach until they squeal.

Life is good.

A week passes, then a second, and it’s almost as though they’ve never been apart. The color has returned to Castiel’s cheeks and he smiles more, laughs more, embraces Dean whenever he can and presses shy, needy little kisses to his jaw, his mouth, the back of his neck, whichever exposed part of skin he can reach at the time. The children play at the beach after school every day and the summer vacation draws closer. Lexie sleeps a lot, still can’t shake off his cough, and Castiel schedules more appointments with the doctor in the upcoming weeks. Apart from the worry about their little one, their lives have seamlessly blended back together and Dean is thankful every morning waking up to Castiel’s tanned skin against white sheets, summer breezes and arms full of sleepy children who just have to climb into bed with their parents.

Jimmy and Amelia book their wedding for late fall, and Castiel is asked to be Best Man. The children will be in the wedding party, walking Amelia down the aisle with Claire, and Dean is privately relieved that all he will have to do is smile and take photographs of them all. He still vehemently despises being the center of attention, something unlikely to ever change in the future. Sam and Jess visit for a weekend with Mary in tow, and Castiel is starry-eyed when he holds her, cooing at her and pressing endless kisses to her forehead.

“Does it make you want another?” Jess asks conversationally over dinner that night and Dean laughs, expecting Castiel to do the same. Instead, Cas just shrugs and looks sidelong at Dean with a strange, almost blissful smile.

“Our family is complete, I think,” he says slowly, and Dean nods in agreement, going still when Castiel continues. “But maybe, in the future, if Dean wants… yeah, maybe. We’ll see.”

Then there’s lots of laughing and clinking of glasses, and Dean just stares at his plate, a little blindsided. It’s not something he ever considered, adopting another child. Like Cas said, he sees their little family as perfect the way they are. Hell, two years ago he never even wanted kids of his own, never thought he would find anyone who he would love enough to want them with. But now Castiel has thrown a curveball his way and it’s something he stores away for later. Never say never, he supposes. And that night, when he questions Cas about it, Castiel shrugs and smiles from his position above him, legs splayed across Dean’s lap, sticky with sweat and other bodily fluids as his breath returns to his lungs.

“Never say never, Dean.” He collapses down to snuggle at Dean’s side, kicking the sheets of and sighing in sated rapture. “Who knows what the next few years will bring?”

And that’s the closest they come to talking about their relationship for a while. They don’t see Mick again, not together, though Dean knows Castiel visits once a week. Then, one night after the kids are fast asleep and Dean is stretched out, making his way through a glass of whiskey and stretching out arm muscles that ache from folding dough all day, Castiel approaches from behind and runs his hand through Dean’s hair.

Then he says, “Maybe we should talk about the wedding, Dean.”

Castiel flops down onto the couch next to him, one leg bent beneath him and Dean eyes him warily. The last conversation they’d had about the wedding ended with fireworks in Mick’s office, and without their therapist as a buffer Dean isn’t sure he wants to discuss it. He also doesn’t ever want to see Mick Davies again though, so unless he wants them to never speak about their broken off
engagement he’ll just have to steal his nerves and tackle the conversation head-on.

“Maybe,” he shrugs noncommittally. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I feel terrible about the whole thing. You know that. But I think I called everything off too soon, without thinking about it all and without talking to you properly.”

Dean can’t help but gape at him incredulously. “Are you kidding? You’re just realising this now?”

“No.” Castiel picks at a loose thread on his sweater. “I think I knew it the day we split up. But I was too proud - and too scared - to admit otherwise. I think if I’d kept my mouth shut, I would have gotten married for the wrong reasons, Dean.” Furtive blue eyes meet his and, as always, Dean is disarmed by the honesty in Castiel’s gaze.

“Well, that’s great. Feels like a giant hug, Cas.” Dean flares down into the glass in his hands, tipping the rest of his whisky down his throat and relishing the burn. “At least you’re being honest now though, huh? Glad you're not sparing my feelings.”

“You didn’t let me finish.”

Castiel takes Dean’s glass from him and presses closer, thighs touching, one hand wandering to link their fingers together. Dean stares down at their joined hands, afraid to meet Castiel’s eyes. Afraid of more heartache. But Castiel won’t allow him to hide. With his free hand he tilts Dean’s chin up, leans in to steal a kiss from his lips that is shy, nervous, almost shaky, and a breathy laugh is shared between them. Dean’s unsure whose mouth it came from.

“Go on, then.” He tucks a lock of hair behind Castiel’s ear - he needs a haircut - and gives him his most disarming smile to hide his own trepidation. Everything still feels new with them, uncertain, butterflies rearing up in his stomach to flutter against his diaphragm every time they bring up the topic of ‘us’. “Finish.”

“I regret the way it ended. The way I ended it. The things I said, the way I hurt you. I regret everything about it.” Castiel pauses, swallows, pauses again. “But I don't regret that it happened.”

“You… don't regret calling off our wedding?” Dean parrots, hurt coiling unpleasantly in his chest and the butterflies beat their wings faster. “Well. Uh. Cool. That's just... cool. Fine. Whatever.”

He tries to pull away but Castiel follows him, pressing so close that he has to sling one knee over Dean’s to get close enough to keep eye contact.

“I don't regret that it happened,” Castiel repeats, “because it showed me how strong we are. That we can fight for each other and overcome anything. And it showed me that I was wrong, that all I really want is you. All I'll ever want is you. However you'll have me. And,” he swallows, eyes flitting back and forth between Dean’s, apprehension bringing a sparkle to them. “If you were ever to ask me again, in this lifetime, there's no way on earth I would ever let it go to ruin again. Or if I were to ever ask you, I’d do anything I could to prove to you that I want it. I'd do anything to be your husband. I just wanted you to know that.”

He doesn't give Dean time to answer. He leans in and presses their lips together and Dean knows what he's doing. He's taking away the pressure of having to answer, of Dean having to formulate something to say in response to that declaration. Which is a goddamn relief because his brain is shrieking that he’ll never ask Castiel again, that he would be stupid to even consider it.

But his heart knows that one day, in the near or distant future, both their names will be hyphenated on the mailbox. No matter who asks first.
It’s very dark outside when Billie wakes up, and for a moment he just lies there on his back staring up at the ceiling. Uncle Jimmy had stuck some plastic stars on the ceiling above both their beds at his house and Daddy has done the same for them at home, and they’re glowing gently as he watches them, pale green. There’s a moon above his bed and a shooting star, too. Summer vacation has started so they were allowed to stay up a little longer tonight, reading and coloring until they both could barely keep their eyes open.

He yawns hugely, rubbing his eyes, and turns to curl up on his side around one of his bears, blinking owlishly and wondering why he’s awake when it’s still dark outside. They’ve been home for a week now, yet Billie sometimes still wakes up wondering whether he’s at home or at Uncle Jimmy’s.

The digital clock on the table between his bed and Lexie’s reads 11:04, and Billie knows that’s late. Really late. He’s normally asleep at this time, even if Daddy isn’t. Lexie sometimes lies awake for longer than he does, playing with his toys and talking to them, but Billie normally falls right asleep and wakes up the next morning. He strains his ears, unsure what’s woken him up, but all he can hear are the murmur of his parents’ voices downstairs, or perhaps the television. Then he hears something else and he turns to look across the room. His twin’s bed is illuminated by a shaft of moonlight and Billie blinks a few times, trying to focus and work out what the sound is.

“Lexie?”

Billie sits up, pushing the covers back, and turns to look at his brother. He can hear his twin breathing harshly and, every few seconds, coughing. It isn’t the same as his usual cough though, the one that is a little quieter and more subdued. This is different. He isn’t sure exactly how, but it’s different. It sounds… wet. Like when they try to hold their breath too long under water and get a bit of a mouthful by mistake.

“Lexie?” he asks again, and when all he receives is a low, distressed whine, Billie swings his legs around to the edge of his bed and climbs down with his stuffed grey elephant dangling from one hand, and makes his way across the room to his brother’s bed. The curtains are swaying gently in the breeze from the open window, and in the moonlight he can see his twin sitting up in bed, facing the door, all hunched over.

He climbs up onto Lexie’s bed, feeling his twin shift a little to make room for him. Lexie whines again, one hand up at his mouth, and Billie presses his elephant into his lap in an attempt at comfort.

“Lexie, what’s the matter? Did you have a bad dream?”

“No,” Lexie’s voice, usually soft and sweet, sounds thick, choked, and Billie frowns as he breaks into another coughing fit. Billie shifts around until he’s sitting cross-legged, then rubs Lexie’s back as he’s seen his parents do in the past, petting him gently in an attempt to calm him down. Lexie continues to cough, the noise wet and spluttering, and it sounds like he’s crying too. Billie reaches up with his free hand to wipe the tears off his brother’s face, first one cheek then the other.

“It’s okay, Lexie,” he whispers. “I’m going to go get daddy.”

“No.” The boy shakes his head, sniffling and struggling a little to take a breath. “Don’t go. Don’t leave me all by myself.” It sounds like it’s difficult for him to get the words out and Billie frowns in confusion.
“Okay. Okay, Lexie, it's okay. I can look after you.” He rubs small circles into Lexie’s back, pushing his hair back off his face as he’s seen Daddy do. “Do you want to sleep in my bed with me?”

Lexie nods forlornly, taking another wet, shuddering breath and turns to his twin, half-cuddling and half trying to get down from the bed. Billie wipes more tears away, wanting to cry himself but not certain why.

“Shh, it’s okay…”

Billie’s voice trails off as his hand brushes against his twin’s lips. They feel wet with something, sticky, and he frowns more deeply. That doesn’t feel right. He twists awkwardly, reaching behind himself to turn on the light and manages it on the third attempt. Then he turns to look at Lexie again, to help him clean up his tears and pat his back some more, but instead he can’t hold back a gasp of horror at the sight of his brother’s face now bathed in the soft glow of the lamp light.

Lexie’s small hand is slick with saliva and mucus from where he’s been coughing into it - and the sticky liquid is stained red with what Billie recognises instantly as blood. It’s on the sheets, too, and as Billie’s fear-filled gaze lifts to his brother’s face he lets out a cry of fright. Lexie’s lips are coated in the same bloody substance, and it’s slicked down his chin, his skin ashen, and his blue eyes dazed and glassy as he leans over heavily onto Billie, starting once again to cough and retch uncontrollably.

“Lexie? Lexie! Daddy! Daddy! Daddy, help!”

Billie’s voice rises to a frightened howl as he clings to his brother, starting to sob uncontrollably as Lexie coughs hard and slick, filmy blood splatters the trembling hand Billie is holding up to his twin’s mouth.

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“Daddy! Daddy, help!”

Dean is awake in an instant, nameless fear sharp in his stomach, half falling off the couch as Castiel sits up next to him, wide-eyed and hair standing up on end. They’d fallen asleep curled up together, Dean on his back and Cas pressed into his side, but now as Dean tumbles to the floor, any sense of calm and relaxation he felt from Cas being in his arms again is shattered. He hits his elbow on the coffee table, hard, and their wine glasses tip over, blood-red Merlot spreading slowly across the glass to drip down onto the cream carpets. Sorry Jimmy, he thinks wildly, irrationally, hauling himself to his feet and hurrying after Cas who has already pelted halfway down the hall, I didn’t mean to waste your gift.

If anyone ever asked Dean, he would have said he’s good in a crisis. He’s proven that already when he hauled Lexie from the ocean and gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while the boy lay limp and dying beneath his hands. But now, as he reaches the door of the twins’ bedroom, he’s shocked into silence and immobility by the sight before him. As is Cas, for a fraction of a millisecond before surging into the room towards the kids.

Lexie is half-sitting up in bed, slumped against Billie with his eyes closed, while his twin shakes him and calls his name, sobbing desperately. There’s blood on Lexie’s hands, on Billie’s hands, all over the sheets and coating Lexie’s lips and chin. And Dean has never felt fear like this, the sudden, paralyzing terror that something fatal has happened to Lexie. That fear mellows just a little when the boy stirs and coughs harshly, splattering Billie’s hand with more blood just as Castiel reaches the bedside and is tending to his kids in an instant. He has one arm loosely around Billie’s shoulders and
cradles Lexie’s head with the other, fear and panic evident in every line of his body.

Dean’s paralysis only ends when a small ball of pent-up, frightened panic hits his legs and he scoops Billie up into his arms as the boy breaks into fresh tears, clearly scared and knowing something is severely wrong. Dean tries his best to calm him, petting his hair and rocking him, but his heart stutters violently when Castiel stands and turns to face him, cradling Lexie in his arms and looking paler than Dean’s ever seen him. Small hands covered in blood are gripping Castiel’s sweater and Dean can’t take his eyes off them.

“Dean. Call 911.” Castiel’s blue eyes are clearer than ever, shining in the lamplight, and Dean can do nothing but gaze back at him mutely, frozen in place. “Dean! Call for help!”

His hands shake as he dials, and he barely remembers speaking to the paramedics. He must though, because they turn up after what seems like hours and all he can do is stand and hold Billie, both of them still frozen in shock and fear, as Lexie is carried downstairs and loaded into the ambulance.

Seeing Lexie’s little body strapped to the stretcher freezes him to his core. There’s blood on Castiel’s hands, on his neck, all down his sweater, and the combination of it all has Dean breathing hard through his nose to stop the rising nausea. An awful chill has swept through his entire body, crept down to his bones, and he shivers as he stands on the steps in his sweatpants in spite of the California heat.

“I’ll meet you there, Cas,” he manages, and receives barely a nod in return before the ambulance doors slam closed and the red and blue lights cast the street into vivid technicolour.

Against his neck, Billie starts to sob wildly and Dean has to bite his tongue hard enough to draw blood to stop himself from joining in.
Chapter 18

Jimmy, it's Dean. Lexie's in the hospital, you gotta come down as soon as you can. They think it's pneumonia, and some sort of residual infection on top of that, or maybe triggered by it. They're not really sure yet. He's on... Cas, what have they put him on? Broad spectrum antibiotics and fluids and some sort of steroids. I dunno what else. Just... it's bad, Jimmy. Call me. Cas needs you. Please.

... ... 

Cas, it's me. Dean just called... I'll be there as soon as I can. Amelia and I were in Portland. Our plane gets in at three thirty. Just hang on. He's a fighter, he's gonna be okay. Amelia sends her love. Just... tell him to hold on, Cas. We're boarding now, I'll see you soon. Love you guys.

... ... 

Dean, hi, it's Sam. I hoped to catch you before going into court but you're probably back at the hospital. Jess and I can come out if you need us to, her sister can watch Mary. Keep it together, Dean. Lexie's a tough little kid. I'll try you again in a few hours.

... ... 

Hey, Cas. Thought you'd like to know that Billie is asleep. Took a while, but he's out now. Dean and I talked and I don't think he should come to the hospital today, it's upsetting him too much. He cried for hours tonight. I'll take him out with Claire and Amelia tomorrow, the library and the aquarium. We'll come by around dinner time, but if anything changes just call. Try and get some sleep. Tell Dean I say hi, give Lexie a kiss from me.

... ... 

Jimmy? Where the hell are you? I... Lexie, he's... Fuck. They've had to put him on a ventilator, he struggled to breathe earlier, then... Jesus. Fuck, Jimmy, just get here, okay? Don't bring Billie. I don't want him to see his brother like this. Cas is a wreck. Just... fuck.

... ... 

Day three. The hospital gets cold at night. Or perhaps he does, left alone with nothing but his thoughts and the repetitive hisses and quiet beeps of the machines keeping his son alive. He's curled up in the same chair he's been in for hours, ignoring the protests of his hips and thighs at the sustained position. Dean brought him a sweater earlier to stop him shivering and he's not even sure if that was today or yesterday. Everything is blending into one blurry, unending tunnel of fear and worry, highlighted only by Lexie's dropping heartbeat or climbing temperature, or the spasms of his little fingers as his hand is clasped tightly in much larger ones. He's not awake, nowhere near consciousness, yet Castiel can't seem to stop murmuring words of comfort to him and reading to him from his favorite books. It's more to comfort himself, he's sure, and he feels selfish doing it, but he
also feels like he's clinging to his sanity by a thread and reading JM Barrie’s *Peter Pan* to his sedated child feels like it's the only thing stopping him from spiralling into oblivion.

He hasn't slept in days, save for a fitful hour here and there in the empty room across the hall when the nurses wouldn't take no for an answer. He's keeping himself going on caffeine and sugar, sipping from cups of coffee long gone cold and nibbling at stale pastries Dean brings him from the cafeteria downstairs. He doesn't know how he would cope with this without Dean, or if they'd still been fighting. He wouldn't have coped at all.

“Hey.” Dean wraps an arm around him from behind, leaning down to press a kiss to the bolt of Castiel’s jaw. “Any change?”

“No.” His own voice is croaky from lack of use and he licks his dry lips. “What time is it?”

“Late. I couldn’t sleep back at the house alone, and couldn’t stand thinking of you here by yourself.”

“I'm not by myself.” Castiel watches Lexie’s chest rise and fall.

“You know what I mean.” Dean draws a chair up close and Castiel rests his head on his shoulder, eyes never leaving his stricken child. “He’ll pull through, Cas. I know it.”

“Yeah.” Castiel is exhausted, can't handle another moment of false positivity and empty hope. All any of them can do now is wait. “Dean, can I tell you something?” His voice sounds hollow and dead to his own ears and Dean nods, kissing his forehead. “I was going to ask you this a while ago, then everything went to hell. Then we moved back in and I was going to ask you, but then this happened. And now, I'm scared that if I don't ask you then Lexie might…” He can't even say the words. His voice catches and he takes a moment to breathe before continuing, pressing close to Dean’s warmth, seeking comfort that only the younger man can provide. “I wanted to ask if you'd consider adopting the boys. I know we aren't getting married anymore, but that doesn't matter. They shouldn't have to miss out because of our problems. We’re a family, and I want it all done right.”

This isn't how he wanted to do it. He wanted it to be sweet and romantic, Dean shocked and ecstatic, saying yes at once and laughing with joy. Instead, it's cold and everything around them is grey and lifeless, and this might be the last chance he gets to ask before anything else rocks their little family, fractures their lives any further.

“Jimmy knows. The day you proposed, I got all this information and I asked him about it. He keeps pestering me, wanting us to talk about it. He was so excited for us. So was I.” Castiel blinks sadly at the small body on the bed. “I was so happy. It was all going to be so perfect. And now…”

Dean holds him close with an arm tightly around his shoulders. He can't speak, can't find the words to tell Castiel that yes, of course, how could he ever say no? But reality keeps him sharply grounded and reminds him that he may never get the chance to adopt Lexie as his own. That fate might have dealt the Novak's their hand already and that none of them will know the cards until it's too late.

“I wanted us to be perfect,” Cas whispers against his neck. “We were supposed to be perfect.”

The monitor beeps regularly and they lapse into a silence which lasts long into the night.

***

“Castiel?”
Day six. Or maybe day seven. Hell, it could be day fifty-two for all he knows, but the unfamiliar, soft voice at the door makes him blink his way back to wakefulness and he sits up with a low grunt of pain at his stuff muscles. Framed in the doorway, backlit by the harsh hospital lighting, is a petite woman in a white dress, holding a box in her hands, and Castiel has to squint for a moment to gather his thoughts and remember who she is.

“Eve. Hi. Sorry, I'm a little…” he gestures vaguely, rubbing a hand over his face. “It's been a long few days.”

“I can only imagine.” She moves into the room, almost silent in her sandals, and places the box down on the table beside Castiel’s chair. “Dean says you haven't been eating. I thought something from the bakery might help. Gabriel made them this morning, strawberry tarts and lemon muffins. You need to keep up your strength.”

She touches his shoulder gently and the soft lilt of her words makes tears spring inexplicably to his eyes. The kindness of the gesture chokes him momentarily and he has to take a few deep breaths before he can string together his thanks. He doesn’t know why she’s here but is too worn out to question it or ask her to leave.

“And coffee.” She seems to conjure a travel mug from nowhere and sets it down beside the box. “The hospital coffee is terrible. You must be sick of it by now.”

He nods, exhaustion making him near mute and his eyes burn with grit. He has no idea how long it’s been since he’s last slept, but his stomach suddenly aches with hunger and he draws the box to him, flipping it open and studying the sweet treats without much interest. He should eat. He'll pass out if he doesn’t. Gabriel’s baking is always fantastic so these will be too, but his enthusiasm for anything at all is noticeably absent at the moment.

Eve has approached Lexie and is stroking the back of his hand as it lies pale and motionless on the bed. The ventilator hisses with each rise and fall of his rib cage and Castiel doesn't have the heart to tell her to back off. She looks concerned and perhaps she can watch over Lexie for a moment while he eats and drinks. He doesn't dare take his eyes off his son for more than a few seconds when he's the only one in the room, terrified of something changing while he's having a drink or closing his eyes for the briefest of naps.

“Castiel, you eat. I'll watch him.”

It's as though she's read his mind and he nods gratefully as she sits down on the edge of the bed, close enough to touch but far enough away not to jostle Lexie’s small frame. She looks angelic, her hair shining in the fluorescent lights and her white dress floating around her like robes. She tucks one tanned foot up beneath her, slipped free of its sandal, and Castiel’s eyes follow the long line of her legs then up, over the curve of her breasts. She looks motherly, leaning over his kid and smiling warmlyly at him, and Castiel wonders for a moment whether the boys need more of a female presence in their lives. After all this is over, perhaps they can spend more time with Amelia or with Jess. After Lexie is better and discharged from the hospital. After…

His breath catches on a sudden sob and he covers his mouth, squeezing his eyes closed against a wave of distress. Eve is at his side in an instant, an arm warmly around his shoulders and in spite of himself he leans into her, trying to control his shaking. She smells of sugar and honey, and he can't help the tears that seep through his lashes to dampen the fabric of her dress. It shouldn't feel this easy to melt into her arms, considering what he once thought of her and Dean, of how sharp and instantaneous his jealousy had been. But she has a magnetic aura about her and Castiel takes comfort wherever he can get it these days. Dean has gone home with Billie, to give him a bath and drop him at Jimmy’s to play with Claire before Amelia puts them both to bed, and he won't be back for a
while.

So Eve comforts him. She distracts him with little stories about Dean at work, funny things that she remembers him doing that Castiel hasn't heard about, and she sits and reads *The Wizard of Oz* to Lexie while Cas drinks his coffee and excuses himself to the bathroom for five minutes. When he comes back, he stands and watches Eve read to his child for a while from the safety of the doorway, and Lexie doesn't look quite as pale as he did an hour previously.

• • •

Day thirteen. Dean sits on a rock at the top of the sand dunes alone, the house lit up like a ship on the ocean a short distance away. It's sunset and he both craves and fears the solitude. Too much time alone with his thoughts is dangerous, yet he can't face anyone, not even Cas.

He doesn't know how this is going to end and he dreads finding out. Lexie isn't getting any better. The antibiotics don't seem to be working as well as Dr. Bradbury had hoped and, unbidden, his mind throws him back to the moment Lexie had begun to struggle for breath, lips turning blue and eyes glazing over as something akin to a death rattle trembled from his chest. He'd had to drag Cas from the room, one arm across his shoulders and the other around his waist, while the doctors intubated Lexie to help him breathe and Dr. Bradbury’s face was grave when she came to find them afterwards. Castiel was vicious in his fear, throwing cutting accusations at her for not treating Lexie sooner, not giving him better drugs, not doing something. He had broken down then, and sobbed into Dean’s shoulder helplessly and he could do nothing but blink away his own tears and hold Cas, panic and terror warring within him as the future loomed up, threatening them with being a family of only three. Castiel had thrown up in the bathrooms shortly after, hadn't allowed Dean to touch him for hours until he collapsed against him with a mournful cry of deep pain, and they had curled together in chairs at Lexie’s bedside and watched the machines work to keep him alive.

Jimmy had arrived, Billie wriggling in his arms and desperate to see his brother, and had been badly frightened by all the wires and tubes and had run off down the corridor. Dean had found him crouched under a nurses station, arms around his knees, lip bitten through and bloody and his cheeks wet with tears. They'd gone to the gift shop and Dean had explained everything as well as he could, then Billie had walked bravely back into the room, allowed Jimmy to lift him up onto the bed, and he had placed a stuffed lion into the crook of Lexie’s limp arm.

“He's brave, just like you are,” Billie had said to the lion with firm sincerity. “Maybe you can lend him some of your braveness for a while, because I think he needs it right now. He’ll give it back when he's better.”

Dean had swallowed a lump in his throat and hadn't dared meet the blue eyes of Cas or Jimmy. He needs to be strong. Needs to hold his family together.

He thinks of all the things he wanted to do with Lexie. Of all the things the kid was so excited to experience. He'd been asked at kindergarten before summer vacation what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he had told Jo Harvelle he wanted to be a baker like his dad. Or, he had said after a moment or two, maybe a doctor. He wanted to help people and make them better when they don't feel well, like his parents do for him. Dean throws a small rock down towards the sand now, the weight of that memory like a stone in his stomach. He thought they had so much time. They should have time. This isn't fair.

If Lexie lives through this, Dean is going to do whatever he can to make sure he becomes a doctor, if that's what he wants. He’ll work double shifts, triple shifts if he has to, to save for medical school.
And whatever Billie wants, too. Whatever the boys desire, he’ll get it for them. Lexie just needs to pull through.

Adopting the twins is something he never truly considered. He thought, once in a while, that it would be cool for them to have his last name, too. He thought it might happen after the wedding but nothing ever transpired. Then Castiel mentioned a third child and he had wondered again then. Part of him is irrationally angry with Cas for not asking him sooner, not giving them their chance to sign the papers and smile and then take photographs of the boys with grins on their freckled faces and the sun glinting off their dark hair. But a deeper part of him knows nothing but sorrow, doesn't dare to cling to any shred of hope that he’ll still be able to scrawl his signature, to take those pictures. Hope is a dangerous thing, especially for Dean Winchester. It's been shattered so many times before. He wonders briefly if this is some sort of punishment from God. If he's been allowed his own happiness for a while and now his own child is being taken from him as penance for the life he once took. One child for another. He chokes a little at the thought. If that's true, he's brought this on Castiel just by loving him. He's brought his darkness into his life as he knew he always would.

With some monumental effort, he shoves that train of thought to the back of his mind. He can't do this. Can't descend into guilt and self-hatred. This isn't about him right now, it's about Lexie. And Castiel. And Billie, who right now might be facing life alone, without his other half. How would they ever break the news to Billie if Lexie were to…

“No,” he gasps, vision blurred against a wall of tears. He won't cry. He won't allow himself the self-indulgence. He has to be strong, for the kids and for Cas. Cas is so close to breaking, and Dean needs to be his rock if he does. Cas without his twins doesn't bear thinking about. Billie without Lexie is something he can't imagine and doesn't try to. It's all wrong, all of this. It isn't fair. Lexie is a light in all of their lives, soft in contrast to his brother’s fierceness, intelligent while Billie is creative. They're sun and moon to each other, ying and yang. One won't ever make sense anymore with the other gone.

Dean looks down across the beach as the last light of the sun turns everything it touches to a soft golden glow. He sees a memory of Lexie, dark curls ruffled by the wind, running across the sand with a huge grin on his face and freckles scattered beneath his eyes. He sees himself, tanned and lean, sweeping the boy up and holding him high in the air, little hands clutching at him for stability, swinging him round, both of them laughing. He sees their two sets of footprints dwindle to one. He sees them rubbing noses, Lexie’s legs wrapping around his waist and being carried on his hip when he's too tired after a day at the beach to walk by himself. He knows the boy will smell like he always does, sunblock and sea water, the essence of home. He sees Lexie tipping backwards to hang upside down, hands and hair almost touching the ground as Dean holds him by the hips, both of them laughing, smiling, content just to be together. He sees himself lift Lexie back up, kiss his forehead, turn away to carry him towards the house and for a moment Lexie’s blue eyes meet his own from across the sand, across his own shoulder, thumb in his mouth. He looks peaceful, relaxed, and holds Dean’s gaze as though he’s trying to tell him something. Trying to reassure him somehow that it will all be alright, one way or another. Lexie’s small footprints are being washed away now by the lazy lap of the ocean wave to leave only Dean’s larger ones behind as the visions of them both walk away across the beach, fading slowly, and Dean’s breath catches on an agonised sob.

This is how Dean will remember him, always. No matter what happens, this is how he will always see his boy in his mind’s eye. Tanned and playful, beautifully happy and smiling at everyone around him. Untouched by the pain and hardship that befalls anyone faced with growing up, forever young and immortalised in the innocence of childhood. Blue eyes dancing, sparkling in the golden sun, settling on Dean’s shoulder as they walk home together, father and son, safe and protected, hidden from the world in each other's arms.
Chapter 19

The hospital corridors are long, grey, sterile, and cold. The hair on Dean’s arms stands up as he walks, and it’s only partly due to the air conditioning being set too low. The glare of the overhead lights makes him squint and he keeps his gaze to the floor. The people milling past him - faceless doctors and nurses in their green scrubs and white coats - don’t stop him or attempt to talk with him. The expression on his face must say it all. He can feel his misery in every part of his body: lines of tension in his shoulders, the way the muscles draw and drag with each breath, the tightness around his chest that threatens to suffocate him, and the pull of his brows that seems permanent these days.

Monitors beep, papers rustle, doctors call to each other, and telephones ring. But Dean hears it all as though he’s underwater, miles away, lost in his own bubble and unable to break out of it. Unwilling to even try. Mind set on one thing and one thing only, one room, one bed, one little boy. One man who made the one phone call to him that made his legs give out beneath him back there on the beach.

He doesn’t know where he abandoned the Impala. In the hospital parking lot or on the side of the street - it hardly matters, anyway. Perhaps he walked here. He doesn’t remember. Someone shoves him out of the way and they both stumble, Dean catching himself on the wall. And when he reaches for the person, a woman with a long ponytail tied low at the nape of her neck, to ensure she’s alright her arm is cold beneath his hand as she pulls away without looking at him. He tries to apologise but no sound leaves his lips.

Does she know something he doesn’t? The thought enters his mind along with an intense wave of terror so powerful that he staggers into the wall and clutches a hand to his diaphragm. It isn’t far to Lexie’s room now, just at the end of the corridor. Just a few more steps.

There’s a crowd of people around Lexie’s bed and he can’t see the boy properly. He recognises the back of Jimmy’s head, Dr. Bradbury’s bouncing curls, Eve’s long hair hanging in a sheet down her back, Sam standing a head and shoulders above everyone else, Jess with a hand covering her mouth. And, of course, Cas. Cas leaning over the bed, his face in shadow, his voice low as he murmurs something to his son. Dean pauses in the doorway, discomfited and confused as to why they’re all there before him, why they all know before he does. Then Sam and Eve step apart and Dean has a full view of the bed and a weak, horrified cry leaves his lips.

Lexie lies in the middle of the bed, on top of the sheets, no wires or tubes in sight. His dark lashes lie still on pallid cheeks and his chest is too still. But the most shocking thing for Dean is that he looks like he’s just been dragged from the ocean: his pajamas and slippers are soaking wet, dripping, droplets gathering on his lips which hold a bluish-grey tint and he knows without needing to be told. He knows, and it hits him in the chest like a bolt of lightning.

Lexie is dead.

“It’s your fault!” The cry comes from Castiel, his voice choked and breaking on the last word. “You
didn’t save him! You could have saved him, and you didn’t!” His voice rises to an anguished howl, one Dean cringes instinctively away from. “He drowned, Dean! It’s all your fault!”

Six pairs of eyes all turn to him and Dean’s breath feels frozen in his lungs. He can’t tear his eyes away from Lexie’s tiny body, soaking wet with his hair plastered to his forehead, eyes closed, water pooling in the drenched sheets.

“No…” he hears himself say. “No, I didn’t. This isn’t right. He was getting better…”

But it’s no use. Castiel, wild with grief, grabs at the nearest thing to him - a vase of fake flowers on the bedside table - and launches them at Dean with hate and fury in his eyes, tears on his cheeks and a wild scream of hatred leaving his lips. Dean braces himself for the impact…

But before the vase hits him, he’s sitting up in bed, blinking wildly, hands fisted in the sheets and gasping, pantaing with the exertion of the dream and his cheeks wet with his own tears. It takes him a moment to clear his vision and realise where he is. The walls of Lexie’s hospital room slowly fade and his own bedroom comes into focus. Their bedroom, their home by the ocean, and he collapses back into the sheets with a sigh of bone-deep relief. The room is dark, the window open and a breeze sending the flimsy curtain billowing out into the room. He reaches for Cas but finds his side of the bed empty and cold, the sheets pulled up neatly then dragged down into a tangle on his side. He wipes sweat from his brow and untangles himself from the sheets, sliding out of bed and padding down the hallway to the children’s room.

As he has done the past two nights, he braces himself before pushing the door open, almost afraid of what he might see. The room is dark, the curtains drawn almost closed, but the shaft of moonlight plays across Lexie’s bed and Dean lets out his breath in a hiss, gripping the door frame for support as his knees go weak with relief. The boy is lying on his side, dark curls spilling over the pillow and his thumb securely in his mouth, sleeping soundly. Dean approaches the bed quietly, checking on Billie at the same time and finding him on his back and hissing gently with each exhale, as deep in dreamland as his brother. Kneeling beside Lexie’s bed, Dean reaches out and tentatively runs his fingers through the boy’s hair, desperate to check he’s real and not a figment of his distressed imagination. The boy is still pale, painfully so, thinner than the last time he had slept in this bed for more than a couple of nights, but wonderfully, beautifully alive. Dean leans down to press a kiss to his forehead and lingers there for a moment, inhaling the smell of the milk and honey bubble bath they had used tonight and the intimate scent of his son beneath that. Lexie stirs, presses a little closer, but doesn’t wake.

Time passes and Dean just sits by the bedside, stroking Lexie’s hair and watching the children sleep. The moon moves slowly across the sky, flanked by twinkling stars, but Dean only has eyes for his kids. He can hear movement in the kitchen but doesn’t move, doesn’t venture down the hallway. He rests his chin on Lexie’s mattress and listens to him breathe, slightly harsh and raspy, his throat still hurting him from so long on the ventilator. The boy stirs and Dean hushes him with sort kisses and gently rubs to his back.

“Dean?” Castiel appears at the door, pale and tired but eyes bright and lively - he’s been awake for a while. He’s wrapped in a thick cardigan, barefoot, his pajama pants a little too long for him, and is holding a steaming mug in both hands. “I thought you were asleep. Did I wake you?”

“No.” Dean bites his lip, debating whether or not to tell Cas the real reason he’s awake but he pauses a little too long and Castiel sighs sympathetically.

“The nightmare? Again?”

“Yeah.” Dean glances back down at Lexie, resuming combing his hair with his fingers. “Third night
“It’ll get easier.” Castiel ventures in and sits down on the edge of Billie’s bed, watching his son as he stirs and turns over in his sleep. He reaches for Dean, rubbing the back of his neck, and Dean leans into his touch. “He’s only been home for two days. It’ll start to feel real soon.”

“Yeah? Does it feel real to you yet?”

Dean can’t take his eyes off Lexie’s face. He can barely believe that his son is here, at home in his own bed, when less than a fortnight ago he came so close to death that Dr. Bradbury recommended they both say their goodbyes. That night had been awful, the worst of his life, and he remembers Castiel sobbing and screaming and throwing anything he could get his hands on, can remember Jimmy pinning his twin’s arms to his sides and holding him tightly, letting him sob on his shoulder as Dean and Billie watched, clinging to each other, Dean numb with shock and Billie’s cheeks wet with tears. He blinks away the vision and the tears that accompany it to find Castiel on the floor beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and pulling him close. Dean goes, burying his face in Cas’ neck and breathing him in.

“No. Not yet. I can’t sleep, either. Every time I close my eyes I just see him lying there,” Castiel admits, resting his chin on Dean’s head. Dean pushes his hands under the warm woolen cardigan, up under Cas’ t-shirt to feel the heat of his skin. “I see you crying. I see Billie, frightened of us both. I see things that aren’t real, too, Dean. But it’s normal after an experience like this.”


“Huh?” Dean pulls away sharply and sits up. “No. Don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure you don’t.” Castiel sits back against Billie’s bed, stretching his legs out in front of him and rescuing his mug from the bedside table, a smirk at his lips. “It wasn’t obvious at all.”

“What wasn’t obvious?” In spite of his - admittedly weak - protests, Dean can feel his cheeks flaming. “I don’t care that you still see Mick.”

“I hope not.” Castiel sips his tea, peppermint by the smell of it. “He’s good for me, Dean. And there’s nothing between us. He’s married, a woman called Toni. Not that it would matter anyway, because I’m not interested in him.” He pokes at Dean’s thigh with one bare foot. “I’m interested in you.”

“Daddy, stop being loud.” A small, sleepy drawl comes from Billie’s side of the room and Castiel covers his mouth - and his smile - with his hand.

“Sorry, baby. We’ll go talk in our room.”

“Kay.” Billie yawns hugely and turns over in bed, not really awake, tugging his stuffed elephant closer and going back to sleep with a speed that Dean truly envies.

Dean gives Lexie one last kiss on the forehead, pulls the covers up over Billie, and follows Cas back into their room where they sit down together on the edge of the bed and remain in silence for a while. Eventually, Cas reaches over and takes his hand, smoothing a thumb over the back of it.

“He’s okay, Dean.”

“I know. Well. I will know. I’ll get there.”
He leans into Castiel until they’re both propped against the headboard, his head tucked under Cas’ arm, his hand tucked once again beneath the worn t-shirt. He needs the comfort these days, feeling Castiel’s skin beneath his fingers, confirming that he isn’t dreaming. The day after Dr. Bradbury had warned them that Lexie might not survive the night, he had been curled in a hospital chair at his bedside, dried salty tracks on his cheeks when the nurse checking his son’s vitals had frowned, consulted a chart, and immediately paged Dr. Bradbury. Dean had been up and out of his chair in an instant, demanding through numb lips to know what was happening, Castiel almost incoherent with fear at his side, and moments later they were given the best news they’d heard in weeks.

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“His white count is up,” Dr. Bradbury had said, her eyes wide and a tentative smile touching his lips. “And his temperature is down half a degree. It’s… unbelievable progress, but progress nonetheless. We’ll continue to monitor him every hour.”

Dean had begged her to tell them that Lexie would live but the paediatrician had been cautious, warning them not to be too optimistic. When she had left, Castiel had leaned into Dean and jerked his head towards the hospital bed where Lexie lay with his blue eyes closed, chest rising and falling as commanded by the ventilator. Next to him, curled at his side, Billie lies watching him sleep and holding his hand. He hadn’t taken his eyes off his brother for a second, not even when Dr. Bradbury was examining him, and had only clung closer every time anyone tried to move him. With Lexie on the brink of death, nobody had the heart to drag him away.

“Do you think he’s helping?” Castiel had murmured, wrapping an arm around Dean’s waist and swiping a hand over his mouth. He hasn’t slept in close to thirty-six hours and sways where he stands. “Billie? Do you think…”

“I don’t know, Cas.” Dean had hugged him, rested his cheek against Castiel’s temple, and watched the two boys on the bed together. “I guess we might never know. But whatever it is, it’s a miracle.”

Now, lying in bed surrounded by the warmth and familiarity of their own home, Castiel runs fingers through Dean’s hair, leaning over to check the time on his phone.

“It’s nearly six. Wanna get up? I’ll make us an early breakfast. The kids can sleep in.”

“Yeah. Okay. I won’t sleep anymore now anyway.” Dean sits up and runs a hand across his face. “You can take first shower.”

“Alright.” Castiel stands, draws Dean to his feet with both hands and presses a kiss to his mouth. “Unless…”

“Unless what?”

“You could join me. Uses less water if we shower together. Save the planet and all.”

Dean leans in, kisses Cas on the mouth and smiles into him. “Not the length of time we take in the shower. I’m not sure I’m up to it, Cas. Blame stress or something.”

“Well, either way,” Castiel wraps an arm around his waist and pulls him close. “I wanna shower with you. Even if that’s all we do. Please?”

Dean can’t say no to that note in Castiel’s voice. He follows him to the bathroom, drawn by the hand, and stares at the door of the kids’ bedroom as they pass. So much has changed in such a short time and he’s still reeling from it. From losing Cas and getting him back, from almost losing Lexie then getting him back… it’s a lot to contend with, and he feels permanently exhausted. Coming home from the hospital three days ago had been a blessing and a curse. Lexie was safe, was well
enough to go home with medication and strict instructions for rest, and Castiel had carried him from the car all bundled in blankets, both of them smiling their small, tight smiles. They had eaten dinner together then Lexie had curled up with Dean on the couch and fallen asleep in his arms. Where he should be. So in that sense, having him home was everything Dean had wished and prayed for, and more.

But having Lexie home is also terrifying in its own way. Just the four of them now, back home, a half hour from anywhere. A coast road that becomes dangerous in a rainstorm. No doctor on hand in case anything happened. Nobody checking his breathing or his temperature. He and Cas being fully responsible for both the boys again, and while Cas seems to have fallen back into their routine with relative ease - only the odd shaky moment or teary few minutes while he looks at his kids and thinks of what he might have lost - Dean feels like he’s treading water. The nightmares are vivid, always the same, always of Lexie dying in that hospital bed and it being his fault. Sometimes it’s that Lexie has drowned, been dragged from the ocean exactly as he had been so many months ago. Sometimes it’s that he just stops breathing. Or that he bleeds out, rivers of blood running from his eyes, nose, mouth and ears. Those nightmares are the worst, and Dean last night had to shake Lexie awake in a fit of panic just to check the little boy was alright. Lexie had blinked up at him, reached for him, nuzzled into his chest and sighed in contentment, and Dean had stayed with him for the rest of the night.

“Dean?” Castiel’s warm voice pulls him back to the present and he finds himself in the bathroom, steam slowly winding its way up through the air, and Castiel is sliding his hands under his t-shirt and pushing it up. “It’s okay. Stay with me, stay here.”

“I am.” He allows himself to be kissed, allows his shirt to be removed and tossed away. Gentle hands brush up and down his back as Castiel kisses him, slow and deep but with no real heat behind it. It’s intimate and gentle and exactly what Dean needs to feel grounded right now.

They don’t have sex in the shower. Castiel draws him in by the hand once they’re both nude and they kiss, touch, press their bodies against each other, but neither of them feels the pulse of arousal to take things to the next level. Perhaps it’s the residual shock of almost losing Lexie, but all Dean wants is to be close to Cas right now and the feeling seems more than mutual. Castiel washes Dean’s hair, massaging shampoo into his scalp and kissing his cheeks and jaw as he does so, and Dean keeps him close with hands grasping at his hips. He pins Cas to the wall and kisses him deeply, gripping his biceps almost hard enough to bruise, thankful that the rush of water from the shower head conceals some of his tears. But Cas is never one to be fooled and he brushes a thumb over Dean’s cheek, worry creasing his brow.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Dean drops his head to Castiel’s shoulder and breathes him in. The steam is cocooning them both, hiding them away from the outside world. He feels safe, as though he never wants to leave this shower ever. “Are you?”

“No. But I will be.”

“You’re taking this all better than I am.”

Castiel strokes his back. The water runs a few degrees cooler. “No, Dean. I’m just hiding it better. It was awful for me, too. I’ve almost lost him twice, now. I can’t go through that again.”

“And you won’t have to,” Dean says with a ferocity that surprises himself. “I’ll make sure of that. He’s getting better, and in a few weeks he’ll be his old self again. Then I’ll do whatever it takes to keep him safe.”
“I know you will.” Cas touches his lips and smiles softly. “I feel like we’ve been through our fair share of trouble and drama, Dean. I feel like we’re on the home stretch, now.”

“Don’t jinx us.” Dean pulls Cas from the shower and they dry each other with fluffy towels, then venture down the hallway to the kitchen where Cas makes them both tea and slides a plate of pastries across the counter to Dean. They’re both still a little damp, warm from the shower with wet hair dripping down the napes of their necks and bare-chested. He picks up a croissant and bites into it, sighing in pleasure as the flavor explodes over his tongue.

“Eve dropped those by last night,” Cas says, sliding onto the stool next to Dean and taking one for himself. “She knew we wouldn’t have much food yet. I haven’t been to the store.”

“I can go today. You guys are becoming close, huh?”

“Yeah. Weird, since I first thought she was your new girlfriend. But she was so supportive when Lexie was in hospital. To both of us.” Cas shrugs. “I feel like she could be a good friend.”

“Yeah,” Dean’s arm comes around Castiel’s waist. He can hear the kids stirring in their bedroom as the sun streams into the kitchen in warm, glowing shafts. “Me too.”
Thank you for all the love and comments, and for your patience with this fic. I've had some exciting personal news so it's taking up a bit of my time, so I appreciate you all waiting on these updates ♥

“I’m not sure that this is a good idea, Dean.”

Castiel’s voice is muffled from the inside of his closet and Dean smiles and rolls his eyes simultaneously as he stares at his own reflection in the mirror. This is only the tenth time he’s heard Cas say that.

In the last hour.

“It’s fine, Cas. You know it will be fine. We’re not going to the Antarctic, we’re going for dinner. The boys will be just fine without us.”

“What if they’re not?” Castiel emerges from his closet with a shirt in each hand, hair standing up on end and his blue eyes bright and anxious. “What if something happens?”

“Nothing is going to happen. They’re fine. It’s only a couple of hours.”

“But you don’t know that.” Castiel drops the shirts on the bed and collapses down on top of them, dropping his head into his hands. “I’m being ridiculous, aren’t I? I’m turning into one of those nightmarish overprotective parents who can’t be away from his kids for more than five minutes without a meltdown.”

“Hey. Being a little overprotective is natural, especially after what we’ve all been through. But you can’t let it control your life. Remember what Mick said?” The name is a sour taste on his tongue but Dean pushes past it. “Baby steps. Leave the kids with people you trust. Check in once or twice but apart from that try not to worry. No news is good news.”

“I know. But what if Jimmy…”

“What if Jimmy what?” A dark-haired figure appears at the door with a small child trailing behind him. Jimmy’s smile is calm and relaxed and Billie is holding his hand, tugging incessantly and trying to pull him back towards the kitchen. “I know how to take care of your kids, Cas. Frankly, they’ll be pleased to have you out of their hair for the night.” Dean snuffles a laugh which he manages to conceal behind his hand - but Cas hears and sends him a withering look. “Go. Enjoy. Don’t even think about us, we’ll be fine. Won’t we?”

He scoops Billie up with one hand under his bottom and Billie grins at him.

“Hell yes!” Billie exclaims and both Jimmy and Cas’ faces jolt in shock, before they both turn slowly to face Dean with matching expressions of curious disbelief. Dean can do nothing but shrug guiltily.

“Um… Sorry?” he offers, and Jimmy smirks, heading back down the hall with Billie in his arms and leaving them both to get ready for their first date in what feels like years. Dean has a table booked at
a steakhouse in town, and is trying to choke down his own nerves in a bid to reassure Cas. Which isn’t going as well or as easily as he hoped.

Dinner definitely doesn’t start off the way Dean had wanted it to. They squabbled about who would drive there, and Cas took an age saying goodbye to the kids while Dean sat in the Impala with the engine idling. Then they couldn’t find a parking spot and Cas sniped at him that if he hadn’t booked such a late table then it wouldn’t be so busy. They walked into each other as they entered the restaurant. Cas tried to take Dean’s coat but Dean shook him off and accidentally elbowed him in the chest in doing so. By the time they’re settled at their table and the waiter has taken their drinks order, Castiel has lapsed into tense silence and Dean can’t think of a single thing to say to start a conversation. Their lives have been so tumultuous and so focused on their breakup, reunion, then Lexie’s illness that it seems as though they’ve both forgotten how to have a normal conversation that doesn’t revolve around any of those things.

The silence stretches on, becoming more and more loaded, and the chatter of couples and families around them seems more pronounced, so loud it’s almost deafening. Dean stares at his water glass. Castiel looks out of the window. Dean peruses the menu for the third time. Castiel checks his cell phone. The waiter returns with their drinks (soda for Dean and sparkling water for Cas) and they order in quiet, clipped tones. Two steaks, cooked differently, french fries and vegetables to share plus assorted condiments. The very same meal they had shared the last time they went out for dinner which was… God, Dean can’t even remember when it was. Weeks ago, months ago, a lifetime ago? He swallows, scrubs a hand over his face at the same time as Castiel sighs deeply.

“This is going well, huh?” he says and Cas smiles ruefully.

“Yes. Best date ever.” There’s a caustic, tight tone to his voice and his smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Is this what our life is going to be like from now on? Are we only going to enjoy ourselves when we’re around the kids?” Castiel adjusts his knife and fork obsessively, dropping his gaze. “Are they the only things holding us together?”

“Jesus, Cas, no. Don’t even think that.” Moving glasses and cutlery out of the way, Dean reaches across and takes Castiel’s hand in his. “We just need some time to be us again. It’s been a rough few months.”

“Understatement of the year,” Castiel agrees, really smiling at him this time. “And I guess you’re right. I just feel guilty for leaving the kids with Jimmy.”

“I know you do. But they love spending time with him, and Jimmy’s more than happy to do it. He wanted us to have a night to ourselves. Lexie’s better, we’re back together… ” He smiles, happy that Cas does too. “Life is good.”

“Yeah, it is. We’ve been so lucky. And now we have the whole summer to ourselves before the boys have to go back to school. It’s going to be great.”

And it is going to be great. Lexie managed to go back to school for the last few days before summer break and Castiel plans to homeschool him over the next month so that he catches up on everything he missed. He’s almost back to his normal self, full of life and energy again, and the three weeks since he came home from hospital have flown by in a haze of happiness and relief.

“You know what?” Dean grabs the drinks menu and peruses it. “Let’s get some wine. We have a lot to celebrate, yet we’re sitting here with water and soda like goddamn pensioners.”

“Dean, we shouldn’t.” But Castiel is smiling in spite of himself. “We need to get back for the kids.”
“We don’t.” Dean signals the waiter and orders a bottle of something French with an outrageous price tag. “Jimmy will stay as long as we need him to. In fact...” He pauses to fish his cell phone out and tap out a quick text message. A moment later it pings with a reply. “Sorted. He’s going to sleep in the guest room. So we can stay out as late as we like.” His grin is triumphant and infectious - Castiel is smiling too and looks more alive than he has in weeks. “No curfew, Cas. Whatever are we gonna do with ourselves?”

What started off as one of the worst dates in Dean’s memory turns into the best night of his life. After only ten minutes of guilt-stricken protesting, Castiel eventually relaxes enough to share a bottle of wine with Dean and eat his meal without constantly checking his phone or his watch. Dean teases him gently and they both laugh. Cas orders another bottle of wine and at the end of the meal the waiter brings them each a shot of tequila on the house which Castiel almost refuses to touch.

“It’s like floor cleaner!” he gasps after Dean cajoled him into drinking it, laughing through his reactionary tears as he takes the wedge of lime Dean holds out to him.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never gotten drunk on tequila slammers. I refuse to believe that.”

“Never!” Castiel tosses the lime aside and leans back in his chair, eyes bright with laughter and alcohol and a genuine smile on his face. “I lived a very mundane life before I met you, Dean. Jimmy and I were never allowed to drink under our parents’ roof and I was too studious at college. Then I got married, had kids, and my social life became ancient history.” He sighs mournfully. “Now I’m just some middle-aged guy obsessed with my kids and my boyfriend and I’ll never get drunk on tequila slammers.”

He looks so sad about it that Dean can’t help but laugh and Castiel fixes him with a baleful look that soon dissolves into affection.

“I’m so glad my misery is amusing to you.”

“Nah, you’re hardly ancient, Cas. C’mon.” He signals the waiter once more and pays their cheque. “I know just the place we can go to remedy this hideous missed opportunity.”

Outside, the air is warm and they both forgo their jackets, wrapped instead in the warmth of alcohol and each other as Dean links their arms together and drags Cas down the street in the opposite direction of the car. Cas goes willingly, with only one slightly stricken glance back towards the street where the Impala waits for them.

“How will we get home? You’ve had too much to drive.”

“This town does have cabs, you know. Stop worrying so much.” Dean wraps an arm around Castiel’s waist and pulls him closer, kissing his temple and inhaling the scent of his cologne. “I think there’s a bar downtown with our name on.”

It’s a dive bar, somewhere Castiel has probably never set foot in before, but by the light in his eyes it’s an experience he enjoys immensely. They drink beer and tequila, Dean kicks Cas’ ass at pool, and they sit in a corner booth and kiss until the owner comes over to tell them it’s kicking-out time and unless they want to pay a night’s worth of rent then they’d better get going.

When they finally stagger home sometime in the early hours of the morning, it takes Dean a lot longer than it should to unlock the door and Castiel doesn’t help one bit. Instead, he presses himself against Dean’s back and laughs into his ear, kissing the nape of his neck and reaching around him to rattle the doorhandle loudly.
“What’s takin’ so long? C’mon, Dean, I want to go to sleep.”

“If you’d just get off me for one second…” But Dean doesn’t mean it. He doesn’t want Cas to get off him, he wants him closer. He wants him stripped bare and lying in their bed, wants the rest of the night to themselves. He tries to force the key into the lock again but then stumbles forward as the door is abruptly pulled open and he’s staring into sleepy blue eyes. “Hey. Cas? No, wait, you’re not Cas. Jimmy, hi! How are you?”

Castiel laughs behind him, hiding his face in Dean’s neck, and somehow they manage to stumble in and collapse together on the couch, both struggling out of their jackets as Jimmy closes the door and regards them with his arms folded.

“How drunk are you two? You smell like a brewery.”

“Not at all!” Castiel declares. He manages to keep his poker face for at least ten seconds before a grin shatters it and he falls back into the couch with a sigh. “Only a little. Did we wake you up?”

“Yes, you woke me up. And keep it down, you’ll wake the kids if you carry on like this. Do you have any idea what time it is?” Jimmy’s tone is scolding but his eyes and smile are warm. “It looks like you had a good time, anyway. Where have you been?”

“On a bender.” Cas says, then descends into snuffled laughter at his own poor joke. “We had the best time.” Castiel turns and snuggles shamelessly into Dean’s side. “Best date ever.”

“Yeah, best date ever.” Dean echoes. “Turns out your brother has a thing for tequila slammers, Jimmy. Gonna have to watch him in future.”

“Tequila slammers?” Jimmy goggles at Cas. “What are you, twenty-one?”

“Aw, come on, Jimmy, don’t be a killjoy.” Dean leans back, taking Cas with him until his head meets the arm of the sofa. He runs a hand through Cas’ hair, tousling it even more. “I couldn’t let him die a tequila virgin, could I?”

In spite of himself, Jimmy laughs and shakes his head. “I’m pretty sure you could, but hey, who am I to judge? Just don’t come crying to me about your hangover tomorrow, little brother. I’m meeting Amelia for breakfast so you’ll have some parenting to do.”

“Whatever.” Castiel cuddles closer, wrapping his arms around Dean’s torso and closing his eyes. “I’ll be fine. Just need to sleep.”

“Not here, you don’t. C’mon. Bedtime.”

Somehow, Dean manages to get them both to their feet. The room is swaying and he feels a little nauseous but he’s distracted immediately by a warm, cuddly Cas clinging to him and kissing his neck. He turns and offers his mouth and soon the kiss deepens, sloppy and wet as Cas presses up against him. Jimmy, thankfully, has vanished back to bed and they manage to make it down the corridor as quietly as possible, laughing like two teenagers creeping back to their parents’ house after curfew.

As Castiel collapses on the bed and fights his way out of his t-shirt, Dean stands and watches him. He could get used to this version of Cas. All defences down, cuddly and affectionate, the dark shadow of worry that lingers constantly behind his eyes blissfully absent. Not that he wants Cas to become a raging alcoholic, but maybe letting off some steam now and again will be good for him. Good for both of them.
“You’re staring.”

Castiel stretches out on the bed, muscles moving beneath his tanned skin as his arms come above his head to rest on their pillows. His feet are still on the floor and the position creates a beautiful long arch of his body, one Dean cannot for the life of him look away from. Cas has a line of dark hair leading down from his abs to beneath the waistband of his jeans and Dean moves forward, mesmerised by it, and tugs the button of Castiel’s jeans free. The zipper comes next and he can feel the hard line of the older man’s cock against his fingers as he drags it down. Helping Cas get his jeans off takes mere seconds then he’s stripping out of his own clothes and tossing them away in any direction, not caring where they land.

“Damn right I’m staring.” Climbing onto the bed, Dean straddles Cas’ hips and leans down to capture his mouth. “You’ve got a lot I wanna stare at.”

“You’re drunk,” Castiel smiles up at him, reaching up to brush a hand through his hair. “I like us like this.”

“What, drunk?” Dean kisses his jaw, settling between Cas’ thighs.

“Happy. Not worried. Yeah, drunk.” Cas arches his neck giving Dean better access and Dean takes the opportunity to suck a dark red mark onto his collarbone, one he knows Cas will bear for days. He can feel the heat of Cas’ cock through his underwear and shifts his hips until his own lines up and then grinds down, drawing a low moan out of Cas.

“Fuck. Shit, Dean. I’ve missed this, missed you, missed us…” Cas rambles, pressing his face into Dean’s neck and lifting his hips so his boxer briefs can be stripped off and tossed aside. Dean does the same with his own, then they’re naked together, high on lust and love and alcohol, the only two people in the world right now.

It’s slow and sensuous, with Cas grasping tightly at Dean’s arms and hips and shoulders, moaning low in his throat as Dean rocks his hips, pressing Cas into the mattress and pushing them both closer to orgasm. Their kisses are hot and desperate, and they both come with low cries within seconds of each other.

Someone’s t-shirt is used to clean up the mess, to wipe the sweat from both of them where it’s pooled in hip flexors and clavicles and between shoulder blades, then Cas curls into Dean with a deep sigh of contentment and one arm over his waist as they kiss in the afterglow.

“Best date ever?” Dean whispers into Cas’ mouth. The older man is half-asleep already, soft and pliant at his side, but manages a smile and a nod with his blue eyes closed.

“Best date ever.”

Dean sleeps soundly, nightmare-free for the first time in weeks.

•••

The next morning is, for lack of a better word, painful. Dean wakes to the sound of Castiel throwing up in the bathroom and Lexie crawling into his recently vacated space in bed. His own head pounds in time with his heartbeat and his mouth feels dry and mealy and it takes him a couple of tries to unstick his tongue to wish his kid good morning. And by the way Lexie wrinkles his nose and turns his back, Dean knows his breath must reek. The sound of the door opening makes his head throb and he’s thankful they thought to draw the blinds closed before they went out last night.

“I never want to look at a tequila slammer ever again.” Castiel collapses back into bed, sweaty and
pale, and moves Lexie out of the way so he can stretch out and cover his eyes with his forearm. He grimaces at his own words. “In fact, scratch that. I never want to hear the word tequila again for the rest of my life.”

“Daddy, what’s tequila?” Lexie asks, sitting up and moving closer to Dean, which he can’t really blame him for. Castiel is in desperate need of a shower and the mingled smell of stale alcohol, sweat, and bile is making Dean’s stomach churn.

“It’s a vile drink which you should avoid at all costs, Lexie,” Cas groans, still hiding his eyes. “It’s a grown-up drink.”

“Like juice?”

“No. Nothing like juice. Can we stop talking about it?” The three of them manage to doze for an hour longer before Lexie gets restless and heads back to his own bedroom to wake his brother. Dean turns and throws an arm over Cas’ waist, ignoring the groan of protest. “I’m starving, Dean. But I can’t move.”

“Well, Jimmy did warn us. What time is it?” Dean casts about and sighs in defeat. “Shit. It’s almost ten. We need to get the boys up and get breakfast for them. C’mon.”

“No. Can’t.” Castiel turns over, turning his back on Dean, and pulls a pillow over his head. “Close the door on your way out.”

Laughing in spite of himself, Dean manages to tug on some sweatpants, and after a tentative sniff of his own armpit, decides the shower is his first stop. The kids won’t mind waiting another five minutes. As he passes their bedroom door he sees them playing with their train set on the floor, so engrossed they don’t even hear him as he knocks and says good morning.

The shower is hot and refreshing and he stands under the spray for longer than he intended, rinsing the residue of his hangover away. Even though he feels like he got run over by a freight train, he wouldn’t trade last night for anything. Castiel was relaxed and fun and anxiety-free and the sex that they’d had back at home was definitely something he wants to repeat. Luckily he doesn’t feel quite as ill as Castiel, because after a strong cup of coffee and two glasses of water he feels almost back to his normal self and sets about making breakfast. When he slips back into their bedroom to leave some water and Advil for Cas - and to open their bedroom windows, Jesus Christ - he finds Castiel is asleep again, sweat-drenched beneath the sheets and Dean pulls them back so he doesn’t overheat. A hungover Cas isn’t something he’s dealt with before, but it ain’t a pretty sight. It is kind of amusing in a really mean way, though.

“Did we wake you up last night, guys?” Dean asks as he pours them both orange juice and settles them in their seats. Jimmy’s farewell and ‘good luck with Cas’ note is pinned to the refrigerator and he’d written the time he’d left at - nine thirty. So the kids hadn’t been awake and without supervision for very long, at least. Not long enough to get up to mischief, anyway.

“No,” Billie says at the same time as Lexie nods his head vigorously.

“You were loud. And laughing a lot. Were you telling jokes?”

Dean smirks into his tea. He remembers laughing, remembers Cas smiling into his neck while they made love, remembers them grinning at each other in the afterglow. He only hopes that isn’t what Lexie overheard.

“Yes, Lexie. We told a lot of jokes. You’ll learn them when you’re older.”
Castiel eventually emerges from the bedroom at close to three in the afternoon, casting a baleful look at Dean who just smirks and raises his coffee cup to show off about how fresh he feels. After a shower so long that Dean almost had to go check on him, Cas emerges and finally looks a little like his old self. He’s in a ragged t-shirt and soft, worn jeans, and his damp hair curls at the nape of his neck as he deposits himself at the breakfast bar and downs two glasses of orange juice in quick succession. Then coffee and cereal, then he lies down on the couch for an hour before getting up to attempt to help Dean chop vegetables for dinner.

In spite of their hangovers, Dean is still riding high on his euphoria from last night, especially when Cas is still all snuggles and warmth and takes every opportunity that he can to hug or kiss Dean, to take his hand, or just stand close to him while they prepare dinner. So Dean decides that it’s time to talk about something he’s been wanting to mention for a day or two now.

“We, uh, were going to talk about maybe going to the courthouse next week.” Embarrassed to be the one bringing it up, Dean rubs the back of his neck and feels his cheeks heat. “To talk about the whole, you know. Adoption thing.”

He still can’t believe this is happening. That the boys are going to become his in every way. It’s going to be official, legal, and he’ll be their dad. It warms his heart so much he’s unable to speak for a moment.

“Are we gonna change their names?” he finally manages and Cas nods, eyes full of light and affection.

“Of course. What do you think of Winchester-Novak? It flows better than the other way around.”

“It’s… great, Cas. Yeah. Perfect.” Dean ducks his head and hears Cas push his chair out to come around the table and embrace him with one arm, the other still clinging steadfastly to his coffee.

“Thanks. For this.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Dean. It’s the right thing to do and it’s what we all want. I also, um, wanted to ask you something.” Cas pulls away and sits down at the chair beside Dean, facing him with both hands holding his mug. His cheeks are oddly flushed and Dean frowns curiously.

“I hope it’s something good because I don’t think I can take any more surprises.” He’s going for lighthearted to try and judge the depth of Cas’ question but the neutral expression on Castiel’s face gives nothing away. Cas seems to be questioning himself, gathering his nerve, then he sets his mug aside and links one hand with Dean’s.

“What if I change my name, too?” He asks and Dean blinks at him in confusion.

“Change yours? What to? I like ‘Castiel’,” he says, then realises how stupid he just sounds as the true meaning of Cas’ words sink in. “Wait. Like… the same as the kids? You’d be Winchester-Novak too?”

“Yes.” Castiel lifts his chin, almost defiant in his certainty. “I know it’s not a marriage, and I know that’s not quite what you wanted, but I thought… I just wondered…”

“It kinda feels…” Dean searches for the word then finds it, a smile breaking across his face. “Right. It fits.”

“Yeah. It totally does.” Cas’ smile is shy, questioning. “But you still want a wedding, don’t you?”

“Nah, not really. I never wanted a huge shebang, Cas. Doves and swans and confetti and all that shit. All I ever wanted was you.” Dean squeezes his hand tightly. “All I ever needed was you.”
“Me too, Dean. And I’m sorry it took so long to get here.” Cas says, and Dean leans in and kisses him. “So, what do you think?”

“I think Castiel Winchester-Novak sounds so good that I’m wondering why we didn’t do it sooner. I’ll call the courthouse and find out what paperwork we need to do.”

Dean, elated beyond belief and still unable to believe this is happening, swipes his phone and immediately starts Googling as Cas stands up and calls the boys in from the deck.

“And Cas?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. Winchester or not, this is forever. You’re kinda stuck with me.”

The smile that breaks across Castiel’s face is brighter than the dawn. “And you’re stuck with me, too, Dean. We’re a family now, and nothing is ever going to change that.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been a long, long time coming and if you follow me on Twitter then you know why - but there's a short explanation at the end of this.

I miss these boys already ♥ Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Lexie Winchester-Novak was four, he had no idea what he wanted to be when he grew up. When asked, he said he wanted to be a Disney princess because then he would have animals as friends for his whole life. He never understood why the grown-ups would laugh and ruffle his hair.

When he was five, he said he wanted to be a firefighter. He’d watched a cartoon with a firefighter in and he thought the uniform looked really cool and that everyone seemed to smile all the time, and it looked like a lot of fun. Then Daddy told him that it could be dangerous and he could get hurt, and he wasn’t so sure about that any more.

And now, Lexie is six and he knows what he really wants to be when he grows up. He wants to be a doctor. He wants to be a doctor who wears a white coat and carries a clipboard, who walks around the halls of the hospitals and helps people get better. He wants to help people. Because the doctors in white coats with their clipboards helped him, and he can’t think of anything else he wants to do than to do exactly what they did for him. Daddy frowned, told him he would have to read an awful lot of books and it would mean a lot of years spent in college. He had just smiled, cuddled up close (they were talking at bedtime after reading from a book both he and Billie love called Now We Are Six) and said how he doesn’t care how many books he has to read. He’ll read every book in the world if he has to. He just wants to be a doctor.

That wasn’t too long ago, and he’s told his teacher at school too, Ms Harvelle, and she had smiled at him and told him what a wonderful idea it was and how she would be very proud of him if he did it one day.

So that’s exactly what he’s going to do.

Now, Lexie is lying on his stomach, drawing shapes into the wet sand. Behind him, the waves creep up the beach rhythmically, soaking him totally before pulling back, and the sand beneath him shifts and moves, dragging him an inch closer to the ocean every time. He wriggles, pulling himself back to where he was, starting his drawing over. It's a pyramid. They’ve been studying ancient Egyptians at school and Lexie has found it fascinating. It’s all he talks about at home. Daddy bought him a book on Queen Cleopatra and he sits with Dean and reads it every night before going to sleep.

The sun is warm on his back, his hair is curling at the ends from the salty water, and the stick slips in his damp fingers. A shadow falls over him and he twists, squinting up at the person above him.

“What are you doing?” Comes his twin’s voice. The sun is shining down into Lexie’s eyes and he shields them with a hand, seeing Billie’s silhouette. He has an ice pop in one hand, his fingers red and sticky, and the other is on his hip just the way Castiel does when he’s annoyed about something.
“You’re all wet, Lexie,” Billie says, scrutinising his brother’s clothing. “Daddy is going to be so mad with you.”

“He won’t.” Lexie goes back to sketching in the sand. “He’s busy at the party. He won’t even see.”

“He will. And he’ll be so mad. He asked me to come get you.”

Billie takes a step back, smiling gleefully as Lexie sits up and looks down at himself. He has wet sand all over him, sticking in clumps, and it’s gotten into the fold of every item he wears. The white shirt, once neatly pressed and tidy, is now damp and stained from the beach, and his navy blue shorts have fared similarly. His shoes have gone somewhere and he’s in bare feet, the sand warm and squishy between his toes and itching where it’s crept up under his nails.

He stands up, reaches for Billie’s hand, and they walk together across the beach towards the grown-ups, standing in clusters near the house, talking and laughing together. Lexie can see his Uncle Sam and Auntie Jess smiling together at something, Gabriel and Meg from Dean’s work crowding over the barbecue, Eve with her long hair swept into a low ponytail, and a few kids from their class at school who Lexie doesn’t know very well anymore. So much time spent off school and then being taught at home has made him shy and reserved in class, and the friends he had all seem to have fallen away. But he has Billie, and that’s all that matters.

Billie pushes his way through the crowd of legs, clad in dresses and shorts, holding Lexie by the hand until he finds Dean. It takes a minute for Dean to notice them and when he does his face splits into a smile - then drops as he takes in the state of Lexie.

“Holy sh- I mean, Lexie! What have you been doing? Cas is gonna kill you, c’mere.” He hoists Lexie up onto a hip, brushing long strands of dark hair back from his face and kissing him on the forehead. “We should go find you some clean clothes.”

He shifts the kid onto his hip, glancing about for Cas and finding him a safe distance away chatting to Jimmy and Eve. The party began an hour or two ago, after they had signed all the paperwork and delivered it back to City Hall. Billie, Lexie, and Cas all now had the hyphenated surname Winchester-Novak, and so did Dean. And it was enough. More than enough, if Dean is truthful with himself. It’s something he never thought he would ever be able to share with Cas, and now that he can, he’s never been so ecstatic.

Cas had held his hand as they’d exited City Hall, the kids running ahead of them, and Dean had squeezed his fingers so tightly he was sure it must have hurt. As he watched Billie bend down to give Lexie a piggyback, a thought struck him and he tugged Cas to a stop.

“The kids knew, didn’t they? That you wanted me to adopt them?” He had pinned Castiel with a mock-severe look and had received a guilty smile and a laugh in return. “Damn. Sneaky little… Lexie told me they had a secret, way back when, but I never guessed what it was. Not for lack of trying, though. How the hell did they manage to keep it from me?”

Back at the house, he hadn’t known what was in store. He’d unlocked the door and frozen in shock when multiple voices cried out ‘Surprise!’ and suddenly he was swept up in multiple hugs and slaps on the back from everyone he loves. Castiel had been radiant with happiness and the look on his face matched the look on Jimmy’s. They’d planned this as a surprise for Dean, and it had been perfect. The whole day has been more than he ever could have asked for.

Now, it’s late afternoon. The sun is sinking towards the ocean, drenching everything in a pink glow, and the party is in full swing. Gabriel and Meg had arrived laden with treats and Jimmy had fussed about getting cakes and pastries and doughnuts arranged in the perfect formation of ‘Cas and Dean’,
then looked particularly proud of himself when everyone praised his efforts. There’s a wheelbarrow on the beach full of ice cubes (mostly melted now) and beer bottles and a barbecue is smoking merrily, having done its job and fed most of the guests with burgers and hot dogs. Dean’s linen pants and white v-neck have been exchanged for denim cut-offs and a band tee, and Castiel has rolled up his pants and lost his jacket somewhere. They’d both dressed up for the occasion in linen suits, thinking that they deserved to make this one hell of a special day. Plus the heat of the summer demanded something cooler than denim and plaid.

He walks back up to the house with Lexie’s chin resting on his shoulder and turns to survey the crowd from the decking. All his favorite people in the world have gathered in his home to celebrate his adoption of the boys and he and Cas deciding to share their surnames. Even Bobby is here, pinned in a corner by Gabriel who is talking with animated hand gestures, and Dean chuckles to himself at the old man’s raised eyebrows. He’s pretty sure Bobby has never encountered someone so vibrant and, well, crazy as Gabriel in his life. His gaze rises to take in the wider scenery. Baby sits outside the house, the late afternoon sun glinting off her bodywork, and he has a sudden urge to be behind the wheel, driving down quiet roads just him and the car. Then Lexie shifts in his arms and he squeezes the kid tightly. Maybe just him, the car, and Lexie. And Castiel, and Billie… maybe just all of them, squashed into Baby with the windows down, classic rock on the radio and the warm summer breeze trailing through their hair. Yes. Damn perfect. Maybe that’s how they can spend tomorrow, their first full day as a proper family.

The house is blissfully cool and Dean toes off his shoes just to feel the wood beneath his bare feet. He carries Lexie through to his bedroom and picks out another outfit for him, helping the kid when the buttons become a little too tricky for him.

“Did you have fun today?” he asks, and Lexie pushes his hair out of his face and nods, smiling at him.

“Yuh. It was nice. And the party is good.”

“Not too much for you?”

Lexie shakes his head. “No. I like all the people here, it’s nice.”

“You’re not too tired?”

“No, daddy. I’m fine.” Lexie does look tired, his eyes are a little bloodshot and he’s blinking a lot, but he also looks radiantly happy and Dean is tempted to put him to bed but it doesn’t seem fair. For one night, Lexie can stay up and enjoy the party since it’s for him and Billie as much as Dean. Dean kisses him on the forehead, hoists him up onto his hip again, and they make their way out of the bedroom.

“Dean?” A woman’s voice floats from the kitchen. It’s Eve, fanning herself with a magazine and looking in the refrigerator for something. “And Lexie, hi! How are you doing?”

Lexie presses himself into Dean’s body, legs gripping tightly like a koala bear, and smiles with his finger in his mouth.

“Oh, you’re not shy, I know you’re not. We have lots of fun together, don’t we?” Eve asks, her smile saccharin-sweet and Lexie nods enthusiastically but still doesn’t say anything. “Good, I thought we did. We’re good friends, aren’t we, Lexie?”

“Yes.” The little boy nods, his cheek meeting Dean’s shoulder, and Eve coos at him for a minute longer.
“You guys look so cute. Here,” she reaches for Castiel’s camera, hidden on a kitchen shelf, and loops the strap around around her neck. “Let me take a photograph.”

“No, c’mon!” Dean protests, but there’s a smile on his face. He readjusts Lexie in his arms and hoists him up onto his shoulders. The boy laughs joyfully and links their hands together as the camera snaps photo after photo of them.

“Beautiful.” Finally, Eve lowers the camera and smiles at them both. “Such a gorgeous family. You’re all so lucky to have found each other.”

“Yeah, we really are.” Dean allows Lexie to slide to the floor and he runs off towards the doors, calling for his brother - no doubt to boast that he had his photo taken with Dean and Billie didn’t. “Cas is great. I guess I don’t need to tell you that, I mean, you know him pretty well now.”

“I do.” Eve slides onto a barstool, her dress shifting to bare one long, pale leg which she crosses over the other. “He’s very kind. He’s told me a little about how you guys met.”

“Oh, he has?” Dean colors a little, wondering exactly what Castiel has divulged. He’s become very close with Eve very quickly, and the pair of them take the kids to book club or to the swimming pool together when Dean is working a shift and can’t make it. He has to admit, it’s nice for Cas to have someone he can bond with other than himself, the boys, and Jimmy. He’s been isolated for so long now that he deserves strong, meaningful friendships. And even though they got off to a rocky start, he seems to have found that in Eve.

“Yes. He said he took care of you while you were sick, nursed you back to health.” She reaches over the countertop and covers Dean’s hand with her own. “He’s so good. Such a caring soul. He deserves the world.”

“He really does.”

Dean looks outside onto the decking, searching for Castiel, then further down onto the beach. He finally sees him, standing a little apart from everyone else, holding a drink and just watching the party. He’s half in shadow from the setting sun but he’s smiling, Dean can tell. He’s struck suddenly with a deep, intense need for Cas, for him to be right there next to him, smelling of cinnamon and seawater, always just a little bit scruffy yet the most beautiful guy Dean has ever laid eyes on.

It must show on his face because Eve leans in, her eyes starry. “You two are so in love. If I didn’t like you both so much it would make me sick.”

“Makes me sick sometimes,” Dean says ruefully, moving away towards the refrigerator for another beer. “I’m not the romantic type.”

“Oh, please!” Eve scoffs at him, joining him to reach over and snag the perspiring bottle from his hand and opening it for herself. “You’re the walking definition of romance. Anyone who sees how you look at him would say exactly the same thing. Castiel is a lucky, lucky man.”

They head together out onto the beach where Jimmy accosts him immediately, dragging him over to Amelia and Claire, who is regaling Billie with what sounds like a tall tale about their summer plans, and Eve drifts off into the crowd, forgotten.

The party goes on and on, late into the night. The boys stay up, just this once, fighting their exhaustion in favor of laughing and playing and walking around hand-in-hand while people coo over how adorable they are. Lexie steals a sip of Dean’s beer and coughs, chokes, and pulls a horrified face while everyone laughs and Dean scoops him up, grinning and telling him, “It serves you right,”
as he pushes through the crowd in search of his little family, finding them near the water. Billie is playing in the sand and Cas is talking animatedly with his dark hair ruffled in the breeze from the ocean. For a minute, Dean just watches him talk, captivated, before realising how creepy he’s probably being and approaching the small group.

“Hey,” he runs a hand up Cas’ back and kisses him on the cheek. “Missed you.”

Then he blushes. He didn’t mean to say that, not in front of Sam and Bobby, but it just slipped out. Sam looks like he’s about to say something hilariously not funny and Bobby raises an eyebrow, then Cas nudges him with an elbow and grins and it’s all alright again.

“Me too. Where are the kids?”

“With Eve. She’s building sand castles with them, not in the wet sand which is where Lexie was playing.” Dean rolls his eyes. “I swear, that kid goes through more outfits a day than I have hot meals.”

“I wonder who he gets that from?” Castiel leans into Dean who slings an arm around his shoulders and they both turn to watch the sunset. The boys are running around in the surf, splashing each other and laughing, but it’s clear their energy is flagging. The guests are starting to disappear, bidding Cas and Dean goodnight with warm hugs and handshakes, and Cas is looking tired himself, but the happy kind of tired: glittery eyed and pink-cheeked, smiling at every moment.

“Your camera may be full of even more photos of me now.” Dean pokes Castiel in the ribs. “But at least I’m awake in these ones.”

Castiel laughs, only half-listening and winding an arm around Dean’s waist as Jimmy recants some story or other about his kids from school, and Dean listens in silence, content to stay on the fringes of the conversation and watch them all, everyone he loves, getting on so well.

Soon enough, everyone has left and Dean is helping the boys into their pajamas as Cas says goodbye to Jimmy and gathers up glasses and bottles from the decking, stacking them beside the recycling bin. It’s now a cloudless night and Dean gazes out at the stars as he pulls the quilt up over Billie and settles Lexie who is almost asleep already. His legs are heavy and his eyes closed, and Dean has to lift him into bed, arrange him somewhat comfortably, and cover him up. He leaves the night light on and walks back into the living room. Cas is silhouetted by the glass doors, staring out at the beach, and Dean embraces him from behind, chin on his shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Cas leans his head against Dean’s. “Are the boys okay?”

“Fine. Asleep before their heads hit the pillows.” Dean tugs at his hand. “Come sit down.”

They collapse on the couch together, intertwined, and Cas leans over to turn off the lamp so that the room is bathed in moonlight. The doors are open and a warm breeze caresses their skin. Cas fidgets until he’s pressed up against Dean’s side and their fingers are intertwined.

“I love you,” he says and Dean kisses his temple in response. “We’re officially a family now.”

“Hell yeah, we are.” They snuggle together for a while, watching the ocean outside. “D’you remember how we met?”

“Of course,” Castiel laughs quietly. “I think it’s ingrained into my memory forever. I thought you were roadkill. A deer or giant squirrel or something.”
“Oh, that’s romantic.” Dean feigns indignation, a hand clasped dramatically to his chest - what little he can reach of it with Cas lying almost on top of him. “I was just a dead squirrel to you.”

“Not for that long.” Cas smiles up at him, kissing him on the mouth until he softens and kisses back. “I figured out you were alive pretty quick.”

“Oh, the shining moment of every love story.” Dean kisses Cas on the forehead, pulling him close. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Neither would I. You transformed our lives, Dean. I really mean that.” Castiel’s head burrows into the crook of his armpit and together they look out at the stars. “I’ve never been so happy. We’re a real family now.”

“Hell yeah, we are. Maybe a weird little family, but still a family at heart.” Dean thinks of Jimmy, of Jess, of little Mary, of Bobby, of Amelia, of Gabriel and Meg, of the boys and him and Cas and he doesn’t feel his eyes pricking with tears. Well, maybe a little. “A wise man once told me, ‘family don’t end in blood.’ But it doesn't start there either. Family cares about you, not what you can do for them. Family is there, for the good, bad, all of it. They got your back, even when it hurts. That's family. We’ve had our fair share of troubles, right? I think it’s time we had our happiness.”

“In the words of Dean Winchester, from here on known as squirrel,” Cas twists to look at him, a fond smile on his face and his eyes shining. “Hell yeah.”

Down the hall, Lexie has woken from a deep, restful sleep and padded across his room to crawl into bed with Billie, while out in the living room Cas and Dean drift off together on the couch. They’re illuminated only by the light of the moon suspended over the ocean, and Dean’s arm goes pleasantly numb under the weight of the man he loves more than anything he’s ever known. His life isn’t what he thought it would ever turn out to be. It’s not even close because he never thought he would ever strike so lucky, but now that he has, he can’t imagine ever wanting anything else.

Not a single damn thing.

Fin.

For now...

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap, folks! But I have the next part of this series in the works, so we'll see our boys again very soon. I want to say a huge thank you to my beta, Tricia, for all her help with this and I couldn't have done it without her.

Personal life stuff and TW miscarriage: if you follow me on Twitter, you may already know why this chapter took so long to post. But long story short, I had a traumatic miscarriage at 10 weeks pregnant less than a month ago and I'm still not recovered emotionally. I had planned to post this chapter on the day of my 12-week scan and announce the good news to you all, but obviously that didn't come to pass so I found it a bit hard to get this all completed and to let go of the twins. To everyone who has offered support, thank you. It means more than you'll ever know.

Merry Christmas to you, if you celebrate, and happy holidays. Here's to 2019 ♥
I’m on Twitter if you want to come and talk to me. Please do, I love hearing from you all.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!