Summary

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“Not selling, Deano. Buying. Or at least, renting for the duration of a limited season run,” Gabriel said, as Dean’s frown deepened. “Have you ever dreamed of being a Hollywood superstar?”
Dean laughed outright at that and shook his head, turning around to pick up his coffee again. “Man, no way in hell. You got the wrong guy.”

Spoiler alert: He did not have the wrong guy.

Notes

Okay... this one's kinda hard to explain, but I'll give it the old college try. This fic started back in March, when Lizbob made me watch a Netflix show called Nailed It. I'd seen about five minutes of the show when I sent her this message: "How could I fanfic my way through this baking show? or maybe I should just... write fanfic of this…" And about 4k words of chatting and plotting later, I started writing what (to my eternal shock) is essentially a Canon AU 13.23 coda fic... *tears hair and rends garments*
When I began writing, I fully intended this to be my entry into the DCBB this year, but when 13.23 aired, I knew I had to post this as soon as it was done. There's no way I could've sat on this until October/November. And it's clearly done, because here I am posting it. :P

There's further notes at the end, which are FAR more spoilery than these. In the meantime, if you question my tagging this as "Canon Divergent," just remember that Gabriel is a major character in this fic. That's your spoiler of the day. Now enjoy the cakes.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It was just a normal Thursday at Winchester Pastry. Dean and Charlie had each met with a different couple planning their wedding for the same date, at two completely different venues on opposite sides of town, and were currently sitting in Dean’s cramped office working out the logistics to make sure they’d be able to deliver on both orders. Dean hung up the phone after informing the last bride that she’d have the cake of her dreams on her wedding day and sighed, turning to Charlie, who was still busy entering all the order and delivery information into the computer.

“Okay, we’re officially fully booked for June. There’s no humanly possible way to squeeze anything else in, unless we hire another pastry chef.”

Charlie snorted, done with her data entry, and shut the laptop. “Yeah, like you could find someone else who’s up to your standards. I’m still convinced the only reason you put up with me is because I’m willing to keep the schedule and manage the website.”

Dean shrugged. “Someone’s gotta be the grownup around here.”

“You mean the queen,” Charlie replied, sitting up regally in the squeaky office chair in her icing-splattered chef’s coat.

Dean reached over and brushed powdered sugar off her cheek. “Whatever you say, your majesty.”

“Huh.” Charlie stood up and headed back into the kitchen. “I have two dozen more royal eclairs to fill and frost. Unless there’s any more official court business?”

Dean touched his hand to his brow and gave her a flourishing little bow from his chair as she got back to work. He’d already finished filling the day’s orders and was debating whether to get a head start on tomorrow’s or go slum it out by the counter as the last few customers of the day swung through the shop. He stood up, stretching the stiffness out of his spine, and decided to put off making a decision until he had a cup of coffee.

He made his way through the kitchen, where Charlie was absorbed in her tasks as Donna put the finishing touches on a three-tiered animal themed cake for a charity function at the zoo. He stopped for a moment to admire her work as she attached a tiny fondant monkey to an elaborately crafted candy tree atop the cake.

“I’ve never seen a cake with monkeys on it that didn’t look like it was destined for a six-year-old’s birthday party.”

Donna raised an eyebrow but didn’t bother looking up from her careful work. “Are you suggesting that sophisticated adults can’t appreciate a good monkey cake?”

Dean grinned. “Nah, I’m suggesting that that’s a fucking sophisticated looking monkey cake.”

“Maybe I shoulda put little black ties on all the critters.” She stood up straight and slowly spun the cake on its turntable, revealing dozens of life-like animals peeking out from painstakingly detailed greenery around each of the tiers. “Nah, they’re gussied up enough in their natural glory.”

Dean nodded in agreement. “I’m gonna get some coffee and then start in on the batter for tomorrow’s orders. You need anything?”

“I’m good,” Donna replied, as Charlie shook her head.
Dean pushed through the double doors separating the large kitchen from the cozy shop front. Garth was steaming milk for a customer’s latte while Kevin attended to the customer in question. At least, that’s what Dean assumed was going on, since there was only one customer in the shop. The man was currently absorbed in an advanced state of indecision while hunched over the pastry display case.

They may have had a small coffee and tea menu and a rotating assortment of individual serving-size sweet treats, but Winchester Pastry was primarily about cake. The three cafe tables in the cozy nook at the front of the shop were more for meeting with clients placing specialty orders than for customers who lingered in the shop over a cup of coffee. That was just how Dean liked it. Customers came in, picked out what they wanted, and then left. It was the story of his life, but at least he’d made a name for himself doing what he loved.

Dean nodded over at Garth, gave an exasperated Kevin a sympathetic smile, and walked out around the counter to stand by the big glass display case next to Mr. Indecision. The man barely noticed Dean, he was so absorbed in reading all the tags, so Dean cleared his throat.

“Trust me, don’t matter what you pick, it’s all good,” Dean assured the man when he stood up and blinked at him.

The man looked Dean over, noticed Dean’s name embroidered on his white coat, and grinned. “That’s the problem, Deano. It all looks good.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “And of course you’d have an interest in convincing me to buy one of everything, right?”

Dean held up his hands in surrender. “I wouldn’t complain if you cleaned us out, but then I’d be here all night filling up the case again.”

The man gave Dean a mischievous little smirk. “And I suppose a man who looks like you has better things to do with his time after hours than toiling away in a kitchen.”

Dean snorted, but couldn’t help admiring the guy’s sass. “If only. But seriously, what are you looking for-- pastry-wise,” Dean clarified, making it clear he wasn’t about to engage in a flirt-off with a random customer. “At least let me help you make the most informed decision.”

Kevin stood behind the display case, an empty pastry box in hand, patiently waiting for someone to tell him what to fill it with. The customer continued to size Dean up for a minute, then finally made a decision about Dean, if not about his dessert options.

“I like you,” the man said. “You actually care. You care about what you’ve made here, and you don’t just want me to like what you made, you want me to find something I’d like. Because there’s an important difference between the two things, Deano.”

Dean just stood there blinking for a few seconds, working his way through what the strange little man was going on about. “Well, if you’re gonna shove that many calories in your face, might as well enjoy the experience to its fullest, right?”

The man returned Dean’s bemused look for a moment and then burst out laughing before extending a hand. “The name’s Gabriel, and if you’ve got something that’s the perfect blend of a fluffy cloud of a cake with the richest and creamiest ganache, I might have a business proposition for you.”

“If you’re looking for something that specific, we do custom orders,” Dean replied. “Or if you like your ganache with a touch of raspberry you could try one of the mousse cups.”

Gabriel peered into the case at a tray of chocolate drenched pieces of heaven, and then back at
Dean. “Okay, I’ll try one of those, and maybe one of the lemon bars, and...” He was distracted from making his final selection when Charlie came out of the kitchen with a tray of fresh eclairs. “And one of those.”

“Sorry,” Dean replied. “The eclairs are spoken for.”

“I’ve got an extra in the back I made for myself,” Charlie replied, turning from carefully packing the pastries into a box. “You can have it.”

“Aw, kiddo, I couldn’t do that.”

“Sure you can,” She replied with a grin. “It’s not like I can’t make more.”

“Okay, then. If you insist, I accept.”

Charlie gave him a nod and zipped back into the kitchen, returning a few seconds later with a carefully wrapped eclair.

“Will that be all for you, sir?” Kevin asked, looking hopeful that he’d finally be able to seal up the box.

“That cup of coffee, and a couple of your business cards,” Gabriel replied. “And I think that’ll be it for now.”

Dean walked back around the counter to the cash register and rang up the order, pouring himself a cup of coffee while he was there. He stated the total and Gabriel gave him a confused frown.

“I think you’re a little short there, Deano.”

“Yeah, well I’m not gonna charge you for Charlie’s leftovers.”

Charlie rolled her eyes at him, grabbed the now empty tray and headed back into the kitchen. “It wasn’t leftovers, Dean. Just... the angel’s share.”

“It ain’t whiskey, Charles. It’s an eclair.” He was ready to continue his lecture, but Charlie winked at him and disappeared through the swinging doors. “Whatever. If Charlie’s feeling generous enough to give away her private stock, who am I to stand in her way?”

“So you’re not the big boss man?” Gabriel asked, handing over a twenty.

“He’s the boss man, all right,” Garth finally chimed in. “His name’s on all the boxes, anyway. But Dean doesn’t let that go to his head.”

Dean made to hand over Gabriel’s change, but the man was already absorbed in opening his box of treats. He went straight for the chocolate covered mousse cup with a small decoration made of a raspberry cradled in a nest of delicately shaped chocolate leaves. Gabriel held it up, inspecting it carefully.

“That’s a lot of work to put into something that’ll be gone in two bites,” he said, eyeing Dean just as critically.

Dean shrugged. “It’s nothing really. Years of practice, and it’s just sorta second nature, you know? Plus I hope it takes more than two bites to eat that, or you’re gonna choke.”

Gabriel’s critical study morphed into a look of pure innuendo as he raised the cake to his mouth and took a slow, sensual bite, trying to fit as much of the pastry into his mouth as he could. And
then practically choked. Dean raised an I-told-you-so eyebrow while Gabriel struggled around the mouthful of rich chocolate and creamy mousse.

“You gotta savor it, dude,” Dean said, while Gabriel did his best to do just that.

Gabriel nodded eagerly. “It’s exactly what I asked for, and it’s as delicious as I hoped it would be.”

“And more than two bites,” Dean confirmed. “It was a valiant effort, though”

“Yeah, you got me there,” Gabriel replied, taking a sip of his coffee to wash it down.

Charlie’s eclair customer walked through the door, and Gabriel moved out of the way, covertly settling into one of the chairs by the front window with his box of treats while Dean rang up the customer. A few pleasantries were exchanged, but the woman was out the door with her eclairs within five minutes. During that time Gabriel had carefully sampled his other treats, finding each of them as delicious and beautiful as the last. He sighed and closed the lid on his empty box, drained the rest of his coffee, and then approached the counter again. Dean still stood quietly sipping his own coffee while Garth and Kevin finished up their tasks for the day.

“So,” Gabriel said, startling Dean out of his thoughts. “The big boss man just gets to stand around drinking coffee while the worker bees do all the heavy lifting?”

“The boss man’s been here since six am,” Garth replied without breaking his stride. “I think this is the first time he’s stopped moving all day.”

Gabriel just nodded like Garth hadn’t told him anything he hadn’t expected to hear. “Good, good. I think I can work with this.”

“What’s that?” Dean asked, setting his cup down.

“I confess that I might’ve come in here with ulterior motives. My cousin is in program development over at Webflix, and I’ve been pitching him this concept for a new kind of baking show. He agreed to back my proposal, but only if I had an expert pastry chef willing to play co-host. You’re definitely camera-ready,” Gabriel said, waving a hand at Dean’s befuddled face. “But I had to make sure you had the right… temperament for this particular idea to fly.”

“What the hell you tryin’ to sell me?” Dean asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“Not selling, Deano. Buying. Or at least, renting for the duration of a limited season run,” Gabriel said, as Dean’s frown deepened. “Have you ever dreamed of being a Hollywood superstar?”

Dean laughed outright at that and shook his head, turning around to pick up his coffee again. “Man, no way in hell. You got the wrong guy.”

Gabriel didn’t give up so easily. “No, Dean, I’m serious. You’ve got the looks for it, but for this project, it’s you I want to sell, not just your pretty face.”

Dean was glad his back was turned. He was used to people commenting on his looks, but that’s also why he preferred to work in the kitchen. That way people appreciated what he could do with a cake, instead of his appearance. He worked hard to build his business on the reputation of his product alone, and that’s the way he wanted it. But Gabriel persisted.

“You care, Dean. You care about people, care that they’re happy, care that they feel cared for. And that’s exactly what I need for this show to work. Some holier-than-thou entitled asshole just ain’t gonna cut it for this show,” Gabriel said, edging toward pleading. “All I’m asking is for a
week of your time, for which you’ll be more than fairly compensated.”

Dean nearly snorted coffee out his nose and rounded on Gabriel. “A week? Dude, I’m booked solid for the next three months. I’m lucky I get one day off a week at this point.”

Gabriel frowned at that, but nodded. “I guess I should’ve expected that, but what if the schedule was entirely up to you? One day of filming a week, even, if we could make this work?”

Dean shook his head. “I don’t even know what you want me to do here.”

“It’s simple, and if you just play along, I think you might even enjoy it.”

“Yeah, I heard that line before,” Dean replied. “Usually when I’m being asked to do something unenjoyable.”

Gabriel looked to Garth and Kevin for moral support only to find them both staring back and forth between Dean and Gabriel as if they were just waiting to see which of them spontaneously combusted first so they’d know where to point the fire extinguisher. Dean just kept staring, and eventually Gabriel sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“Look, Dean, all I’m asking is for you to think about it.”

“You haven’t really given me anything to think about. You want me to bake on tv, and that ain’t happening.”

Gabriel blinked slowly and the shook his head. “No, no. I don’t want you to bake a thing. I want you to be the expert judge.”

Dean was taken aback at that, and Gabriel knew he had him on the hook.

“Dean, I want to invite three completely inexperienced contestants on the show, give them a recipe and a time limit, and see if they can replicate a professionally made pastry. Then we’re gonna judge them on how well they did.”

“What, so you can humiliate three poor suckers on national tv? That sounds like a shitty thing to do, Gabe.”

“Exactly!” Gabriel replied. “I don’t want to do that. Not at all! Which is why you are the perfect person for the job.”

Dean still looked confused, and Gabriel sighed.

“Look, the point is all these do-it-yourselfers out there think they can just follow a few tips on the internet and do just as well as a professionally trained baker, and then they feel like shit about themselves when they fail. But this is a skill honed over years, and nobody just shows up on day one with the ability to make a wedding cake or even a single frosting flower. And that’s the whole point.”

“So you want me to stand around being nice to people just for trying their best when they inevitably fail?”

“Bingo,” Gabriel replied, jabbing a finger in Dean’s direction with an elated grin. “Plus, part of the challenge will need a professional explanation, and the contestants will be allowed to pick your brain a bit. For the most part you’ll just be on hand to deliver expert commentary and moral support. And I think you’re the perfect man for the job.”
Dean studied Gabriel carefully, then glanced over to see if Kevin or Garth had anything to say. Kevin just shrugged his shoulders looking bewildered, but Garth was smiling encouragingly at him.

“You are just about the most patient and understanding boss I ever had,” Garth said.

Dean rolled his eyes.

“You called them contestants,” Dean said. “Do I gotta judge them and pick a winner? Or a loser?”

“Judging will be done by committee, and the winner will get a cash prize. We haven’t worked out all the details, but I’m gonna ask for ten grand per episode.”

Dean’s eyes bugged out a little bit at the figure. “Ten grand? For baking a terrible cake?”

“Seems a worthy goal for looking a little foolish on television for half an hour,” Gabe countered.

Dean nodded slowly, his shoulders relaxing a bit more. “Well, if you send over the proposal with all the details, I’ll look it over.” Gabriel’s smile turned a bit smug, so Dean tacked on, “But I’m not promising anything.”

“Not asking you to,” Gabriel replied, turning toward the door. “Not yet, at least. My people will be in touch with your people.”

Dean snorted as Gabriel left the shop with a cheerful jingle of the door bell.

“I have no idea what that was about,” Dean said, turning back to Garth and Kevin, “but I think it’s best to assume it was a collective hallucination.”

They both agreed, and Dean went back to the kitchen. He’d at least come to the executive decision that tomorrow’s projects could wait for tomorrow, and he was going home to eat something that wasn’t frosted and kick back on the sofa with a beer and a movie. Or maybe he’d catch up on whatever the Cooking Network had going lately. He couldn’t deny that Gabriel’s unique idea had piqued his curiosity. Most of the cooking competition shows he’d seen were either cutthroat professionals who’d sabotage each other at the drop of a poofy chef’s hat, or else designed to make the contestants look dumb. Compared to that, Gabriel’s idea sounded like a breath of fresh air.

He found Donna putting the finishing touches on her cake and preparing it for delivery, and bent her ear while she worked. Dean laid out everything he knew about Gabriel and his pitch, which was admittedly very little, but Donna the human ray of sunshine thought it sounded like a great idea, and her opinion alone was enough for Dean to at least consider taking it seriously.

“Oh yeah, get a surgeon or an electrician or a schoolteacher, people who are supposed to be patient and careful and good at following instructions, and prove that baking a cake is just as much of a learned skill as rewiring a house or fixing a busted spleen. It’s just a different skill than the one they learned.”

Dean grinned at Donna’s cheerful outlook. “Yeah, if nothing else I guess we’d have something to show customers who complain about paying what we charge for a wedding cake.”

Donna grinned back at him. “You betcha.”
The Pitch

Over the next few weeks Dean mostly forgot about the strange proposal from the even stranger little man. He’d spent the odd idle moment while putting finishing touches on custom cake orders daydreaming about someone with zero baking experience attempting to recreate the complex icing art that he’d spent more than a decade perfecting. The notion had amused him briefly, but after a few days he was entirely back to business as usual, swamped with the first rush of early spring weddings.

It was a rainy Thursday in late April, and Dean, Donna, and Charlie were all rushing to assemble the first of nine cakes that had to be delivered to various venues around the city by Saturday morning. Dean had just put the last swirling details on what would eventually be the pieces of a stunning delicate white chocolate gazebo when Garth poked his head into the kitchen to get his attention.

“Boss man, there’s a couple of visitors out here for you if you’ve got a minute.”

Dean had already pulled out another piece of waxed paper to draw a flock of white doves with the leftover chocolate and didn’t even bother turning away from his work. “Kinda busy for chit-chat right now, Garth. They can make an appointment.”

Garth let the door swing mostly shut. Dean had already tuned him out in favor of humming along to the music playing softly in the kitchen when Garth pushed it open again.

“I think you’re at least gonna want to tell them that yourself.”

Dean finished off the swooping wing of a bird and sighed. He stood up straight and stretched his aching back, set down the piping bag and grumbled to Donna and Charlie. “If that chocolate hardens before I get back I’m gonna be pissed.”

“I got it Dean,” Charlie said, layering a smooth fondant sheet over a tower of orange infused angel food cake. “Three dozen flying doves coming right up. You go handle your business.”

He shot her a disgruntled grimace, but nodded his thanks as he pushed through the doors into the shop.

“Deano!” Gabriel said the moment Dean showed his face. “Good to see you, pal! How’s the baking biz?”

Dean froze for a second as the memory of Gabriel’s previous visit flooded back to him. “Huh, I was starting to think I imagined you.”

Gabriel grinned at that. “A lot of people have that impression after meeting me. I try not to take it personally.”

“So what brings you back here? You need a sugar fix or do you have another reality show pitch to deliver?”

“I’d never turn down a sugar fix, but we’re actually here on business,” Gabriel said, pulling another man into view from behind the tall pastry case. “Dean, this is my cousin, Castiel Novak. Cassie, this is Dean Winchester, the master of confections, the sultan of sweets, the--”

“Yes, Gabriel,” the man-- Castiel-- interrupted. “You mentioned he’s the purveyor of pastry
pulchritude and the Rodin of fondant. I apologize for my cousin, Dean. He’s infamous for his… hyperbolic perspicacity.”

“Castiel?” Dean said, taking in the man, from his hair that looked like he’d just blown in from a hurricane instead of a gentle spring shower to his rumpled overcoat and the squinty glare he gave his cousin. “You must be the tv guy.”

Castiel turned his glare on Dean, and it almost immediately softened into a look of cautious surprise before settling into a rigid mask of professionalism. “Tv guy? I suppose that’s accurate, if crude. I’m a producer with Webflix.”

Dean cringed at the feeling that he was being judged, and harshly. Castiel looked simultaneously uncomfortable to have been dragged out by his cousin, and like he was attempting to x-ray Dean with his eyes. Dean cleared his throat and tore his gaze away from Castiel’s.

“So, Gabe, I thought your people were gonna contact my people? I figured you’d scrapped the whole idea by now.”

“No no no, my fine floured friend, I was busy jumping through the hoops of television production bureaucracy, dotting t’s and crossing eyes so we could bring you back a proposal that’s practically camera ready. We just need a little powder on the nose and little toussle of that perfect coif,” Gabriel said, reaching up to fluff Dean’s hair as Dean flinched away, “and we’re ready to roll on this puppy.”

Dean skeptically watched Gabriel rock back on his heels with a knowing smirk on his face, and then took another look at Castiel. It was like night and day, Gabriel’s bubbling enthusiasm to Castiel’s borderline grouchiness at having to deal with any of this nonsense. It didn’t help that the man was still staring Dean down as if he was waiting for confirmation that Dean was just as unprofessionally obnoxious as Gabriel. Dean was not about to give the man the satisfaction. He could be just as professional as Mr. Castiel Suit and Tie producer man.

“If I agree to work with you, what will you need from me? We’re completely booked for the next four months, so I don’t know what kinda timeline you’re looking at here, but my bakery has to come first.”

For the first time since he’d met him, Castiel nearly cracked a smile at that. Dean stood in awe as that tiny change shifted his entire bearing from stern and stony to, if not warm and open, at least human. Dean found himself staring back, slightly overwhelmed by the fact he hadn’t noticed just how attractive Castiel was now that he wasn’t frowning, and how fucking blue his eyes were. He lost track of what they were supposed to be talking about, and apparently so did Castiel because both of them startled when Gabriel cleared his throat.

“Yes, well,” Castiel started, pulling a folder from inside his raincoat. “I have the full proposal here. We have some leeway with production, and can accommodate your needs and your schedule to a certain extent if you decide to move forward with the project. We can work out those details at your earliest convenience.”

Dean took the thick packet of papers and casually flipped through them without really absorbing any of it. There was one thing he knew for sure, and it was that he didn’t have time to read all that fine print and negotiate his way through a bunch of legal mumbo jumbo when he had his own deadlines to make. Dean sighed and set the paperwork on the back counter.

“I’ll be honest here,” he said, splitting his attention between Castiel’s polite business face and Gabriel’s excitable chipmunk impersonation. “I’m probably not gonna get to go through it until at
least Saturday afternoon. And I’m probably gonna wanna run it all by my lawyer before I agree to sign anything anyway.”

Gabriel was poised to interrupt, but Dean quieted him with a raised hand paired with one raised eyebrow. The stunned look on Castiel’s face let Dean know just how incredible a feat he’d just executed, and Dean wished he’d had more time to analyze that bit of information.

“I can’t give you a definitive answer until I do. But, uh… is there some way to reach you-- either of you-- if I have any questions?”

Without hesitation, Castiel reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. “You can reach me any time, even over the weekend. My personal cell number is on the back.”

“That’s very forward of you, Cassie,” Gabriel said as Dean took the card. “I’m impressed.”

Castiel ignored his cousin even as his cheeks pinked up a bit, but maintained his composure. “I assumed you’d find it less stressful to receive straightforward answers in a timely fashion rather than needlessly engage in Gabriel’s verbal sparring games.”

Dean smiled at him and slipped the card inside the folder. “I appreciate that, Castiel. But, uh… since you both bothered coming out in this weather just to hand over some paperwork, you should at least stick around and have a snack.” Dean gave Kevin a glance and waved a hand toward Gabriel and Castiel. “Get ‘em both an order of whatever they want and a cup of coffee, on the house.”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose--” Castiel started, while Gabriel announced he’d take a salted caramel cupcake. Castiel turned to glare at Gabriel, but Dean laughed.

“It’s not an imposition, Castiel. Consider it a show of good faith and a sample of what you’re getting yourself into if this whole deal works out,” Dean replied, tapping the folder with his fingertips. “Plus, maybe the rain will let up by the time you’re done eating.”

Castiel gave Dean a grateful little smile and nodded. “Thank you, Dean. I appreciate that.”

Dean stood flustered for a moment, but then heard a clattering from the kitchen-- Donna and Charlie pulling the next batch of cakes out of the oven-- and was rudely reminded that he needed to get back to work. Just when Castiel was really starting to get interesting, too.

“Yeah, well, I really should--” Dean hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the kitchen doors.

“Yes, I’ll look forward to hearing from you as soon as you’re ready,” Castiel replied.

Dean just nodded and hoped his face wasn’t turning as pink as it felt as he escaped to the safety of the kitchen. He didn’t even stick around long enough to hear what Castiel ordered for himself. The heat of the oven and the aroma of chocolate mocha cake was enough to snap him back to attention.

“I finished your doves,” Charlie said as they worked to pull all fifteen layers of cake from the oven. “So, what was your impromptu meeting about? Do you have a groupie, or did you make a friend?”

Dean grunted in as faux-surly a fashion as he could muster at her teasing and focused on testing each cake to make sure it was done. “It was that weirdo with the tv show idea. He brought his cousin by with a stack of paperwork for me to read over.”

“You shouldn’t call him a weirdo, Dean,” Donna said, opening the walk-in cooler and pushing the cart with her finished cake inside to chill, and then pulling out the next cake on her decorating
“At least he’s not full of stuff. He came back with paperwork. That sounds pretty serious.”

“Serious is not a word I’d use to describe Gabriel,” Dean replied, shaking his head. “You didn’t meet the guy.”

“Wait, Gabriel?” Charlie asked. “Gabriel who I gave my eclair to?”

Dean shrugged. “I guess? I never seen the guy before he came into the shop last month.”

“You’ve never seen Gabriel Novak?” Charlie asked with disbelieving shock.

Dean frowned at that. “You know, I don’t think he ever mentioned his last name. But his cousin’s last name is Novak.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” Donna said, turning a wide-eyed look on Charlie and then grinning at Dean. “That guy’s a hoot!”

“Should I know who he is?” Dean asked.

“He’s had a couple of pseudo-reality shows,” Charlie replied. “I know you’re not really into that sort of thing, but if you’re even thinking about taking that gig, you should definitely check them out. I would’ve mentioned it when he was in before if I’d thought you’d slithered that far under your rock.”

“Pseudo-reality? What the hell does that even mean?”

“Well, the one show is like one long stand up comedy routine about his own life, but dramatized,” Charlie supplied. “Like he was the object of his own wildlife documentary.”

“And his life is pretty wild,” Donna added with a grin. “Or at least the fictionalized version is.”

Charlie nodded enthusiastically. “But the show he’s most known for is called Just Desserts.”

“So he’s already got a baking show?” Dean asked, feeling irrationally stung by this information.

“Nope,” Donna replied. “He plays a trickster god who goes around and doles out fitting punishments to people who sincerely deserve them.”

Dean made a face at that disturbing bit of information. “Wow. And I wanna work with a dick like that why again?”

Charlie laid a hand on Dean’s arm. “It’s comedy gold, Dean. And it’s fictional. It’s not like he’s kneecapping random citizens on the street. He writes all the stories himself, and trust me, the characters he writes deserve what they get. He knows how to deliver a really powerful message about being a better person in highly creative ways. It’s cathartic.” She offered him a weak smile and a shrug. “Well, it’s probably not all that cathartic if you identify with the jackasses getting their comeuppance, but for normal people it’s feel-good tv.”

Dean regarded her skeptically, but he knew if Charlie and Donna both approved, the guy was probably at least worth looking into. But just like the paperwork, a bingewatch would have to wait.

They closed up shop with Friday’s deliveries all packed up and ready to go. Dean preferred to take an early night off knowing they’d all be putting in overtime on Friday to finish up the weekend deliveries, and by seven he’d ordered a pizza and was comfortably crashed out on his couch with a
beer, scrolling through Webflix until he discovered Gabriel’s shows.

He queued them up but was still reluctant to hit play yet. It felt wrong somehow to veg out in front of the television when he still had a bunch of potentially jargon-riddled legal documents to read over, even if he could kind of justify it as research. If nothing else it might give him a little bit of insight into what he was considering getting himself into if he agreed to work with the guy. From the little he knew about Gabriel, he definitely seemed like the sort of person you needed to prepare yourself for in advance. Research later, homework first. Sam would be so proud of him.

Dean set the tv remote down with a sigh and opened up the folder on the coffee table in front of him, leaning forward to page through the documents more closely. Right on top of the pile was Castiel’s business card. It looked so formal, the bold, glowing Webflix W staining half the card in hues of blue. He flipped the card over to see Castiel’s handwritten personal number on the back and felt a shiver of warmth run through him. As stoic as the dude had seemed when he’d walked into the shop, he’d still been ready to hand out his number to some stranger based on Gabriel’s word alone. For some inexplicable reason, that thought was reassuring. He brushed aside the feeling as he set Castiel’s card on the table and set to muddling his way through the documents.

The first few pages worth of legal bullshit went all fuzzy on him the way legal bullshit typically did, but he knew he had Sam on hand to point out any red flags and let him know if it was safe to proceed. He set it all aside for the time being and dove right into the detailed premise of the show. The more he read, the more intrigued he became. Compared to the glossy verbal sales pitch Gabriel had laid on him, the proposal was clever, concise, original, and dammit… it was a fantastic idea.

He flipped to the last few pages, detailing the compensation the contestants would receive, and if the papers were accurate, Gabriel had been true to his word. The winning contestant would get ten grand, and even the other two participants would get a grand a piece for sacrificing their dignity on national television. It seemed like a fair trade. By that point, Dean had been ready to sign on just to watch this spectacle go down for free, but the last page outlined his own compensation for his time and expert input. He read over the figures and then sat back to take a fortifying swig of beer, and then read them over again. He got up, went to the kitchen for another beer, and then dialed Sam’s number as he shuffled back to the couch trying to shake off the haze.

“Hey, Dean,” Sam said. “What’s up?”

“You busy tonight?” Dean asked, surprising himself with his own eagerness to make this wacky project work.

“I just left the office. Did you have something in mind?”

“I got pizza and beer for you in exchange for some legal advice.”

Sam paused for a moment. “You’re not in some kind of trouble, are you?”

“What? No, Sam. No trouble. I just had the weirdest offer, and I’m trusting you to let me know if it’s all above board or not.”

“So you think it could get you into trouble?”

Dean sighed and ran a hand down his face, then glared at his phone for a second. “Sam, just come by and eat some pizza and drink a beer. I just need to pick that huge brain of yours for half an hour, okay?”
“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Pizza’s getting cold,” Dean said, and hung up.

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“Gabriel Novak?” Sam said as soon as he’d picked up the documents after listening to Dean explain the show’s premise. “That guy’s a trip. And he just showed up at the bakery one day with this?”

Dean nodded. “I had no idea who he was, and he lays out this wild idea. I thought it was some sort of prank at first, but then he shows back up today with a buttoned down network exec and this.” Dean gestured with his beer toward the pile of papers on his brother’s lap.

Sam was already completely absorbed in dissecting the legal mumbo jumbo, so Dean got up to get them another round. He set Sam’s drink down on the coffee table and then sat back to wait for his expert opinion. He knew when Sam got to the page with Dean’s compensation proposal, because Sam’s eyebrows made a dramatic leap toward his hairline. Dean couldn’t help but smirk.

“Forty grand?”

Dean nodded at his brother’s shocked expression. “Five up front for my expert consultation and development input, then five for each episode, and another five as a bonus if the network picks up an option to consider a second season, regardless of if I sign on for round two or not.”

Sam’s eyebrows finally retreated to their standard default location, but the wiggles on his forehead alerted Dean to the fact that he still had some underlying concerns.

“So, lay it on me. Why do I need to turn down forty grand to stand around and watch people fuck up a bunch of cakes?”

Sam shuffled through the papers, putting them back in order. He set them back on the table and picked up his beer, taking a long draught before giving Dean a considering look.

“My only issue with that contract is the complete lack of a timeline to get it done. They could theoretically string you along for years on that one five grand consultation fee.”

Dean frowned at that. “So, what, like they pay me a retainer, and even if the show never gets made they can what? Call me up and ask for baking advice? Not sure that’s a big issue.”

Sam smirked at him. “You actually enjoyed chatting with Gabriel, then?”

Dean shook his head, but then shrugged. “He’s all right, I guess. I don’t think he’s gonna spend the next ten years pestering me for cake decorating tips. He’s more the type to show up at the bakery, buy out half the case, and then talk my ear off for an hour. I’ll find a way to deal.”

Sam regarded him thoughtfully for a moment and then nodded. “Okay, then. But you might want to hammer down a solid schedule, and put a clause in specifying an expiration date on the contract.”

“Yeah, I gotta call Castiel to work out the rest of the details,” Dean said, pointing at his business card. “I’d told Gabe the bakery would come first, that we’re booked solid for the next few months, so they left it open-ended until they hear back from me.”

“Gabe, is it? You’re already that friendly with him?” Sam asked, his words laced with innuendo.
“What? No! Come on, Sam. I barely know the guy!”

Sam shrugged. “Since when has that ever stopped you?”

“Shut up.” Dean pointed an accusing finger at his brother. “This is serious business here. If I do this, who knows how many people are gonna see it. I am not gonna fuck it up with weird personal shit, okay?” Dean scoffed. “I mean, really. Gabriel, of all people.”

Sam just shrugged, picking up Castiel’s business card and noticing the hand-written number on the back. “So what about his cousin? He seems to have taken an interest in you, anyway. You already calling him Cas?”

“Dude,” Dean replied, trying not to choke on his beer. “I met the guy for five whole fucking minutes, and…” he trailed off, grasping for some sort of reasonable deflection and only feeling increasingly flustered as he recalled the entirety of their encounter in excruciating detail. He finally had to close his eyes and take a few deep breaths, and then opened his eyes to Sam smiling knowingly at him.

“Cas it is, then,” Sam said, and Dean tossed a pillow at his head.

By the time Sam left ten minutes later, Dean had psyched himself up to give Cas… Castiel… a call.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Castiel? It’s Dean. Winchester. From the bakery.” Dean squeezed his eyes shut and winced at how idiotic he sounded already.

“Dean,” Castiel replied, accompanied by what sounded like a chair being shoved across a wood floor and a loud thumping noise. “Hello, I, uh, didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“Oh, is this a bad time? I can call back later. Or I guess you could call me back when you’re free.” Great, now he sounded like a teenage girl. Dean took a deep breath and was about to apologize, and probably compound his idiocy again, when he heard what sounded like Cas hurrying around and opening up a laptop.

“No, no, it’s fine. I was just finishing dinner, and if you’re calling to discuss the contract I want to be prepared to answer any of your concerns. I’m at my desk now.”

Dean held in a laugh. It sounded like Cas was just as flustered as he was, and he felt the tension drain out of him. This was definitely easier than handling this in person, having to look at Cas’s unmoving, intimidating features, and those eyes he could probably drown in despite himself.

“Yeah, okay. That’s good.”

“So you’ve had a chance to read through the entire proposal?” Cas asked, and Dean heard the clacking of a computer keyboard through the phone.

“Yeah, I did. Had my brother swing by and look it over too.” Dean replied. After a second’s consideration he added, “He’s a lawyer.”

“That’s prudent of you,” Cas said. “Did your brother have any specific issues with the contract?”

“Just the timeline. Said I should ask for a definite expiration clause.”
“We wanted to hear back from you regarding both your interest and your scheduling availability before we put a concrete timeline into the contract. If you’d like to move forward with the proposal, we can add that language as soon as we know your preferences.”

Dean walked into the kitchen where he had his laptop already open to the bakery’s schedule, and sent out yet another silent thanks that Charlie had put everything in the cloud. “The contract said you’d like me there for two days of consultation and prep, and then one day to film each episode.”

“Yes, a total of eight days,” Castiel confirmed. “If the consulting fee doesn’t meet your needs, I might be able to secure additional funding, depending on if you feel that two days of consultation might not be sufficient.”

Dean shook his head and stopped Cas from rambling on. “Cas, no, that’s more than generous already. The money’s fine. I’m just not sure what kind of consulting you need me to do.”

Castiel’s chair creaked as he sat back, and he didn’t reply immediately. Dean was beginning to get concerned when he finally spoke. “Gabriel wanted your input on the design of the set. I’m authorized to send you the sketches we have, but we’ve held up construction pending your advice. You would understand better than us both how a commercial kitchen operates, as well as what the needs of each of the contestants would be during the challenges.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know shit about television sets, or how they work,” Dean added, biting his own tongue at the casual curse.

Castiel laughed. “Then it sounds like we each have something the other lacks. Hence the consulting.” His voice became warmer after that. “We want you to feel just as comfortable on set as you do in your own kitchen, Dean. Gabriel and I will make sure your needs are met, and that it still works for television.”

“Okay, I figure we could work out most of that over the phone. I don’t think you really need me down there getting in the way of your construction crew. And I definitely don’t think it’ll take two days.”

Castiel hummed. “Gabriel also requested your assistance, or at least your final approval, over each of the six guest judges, since you will be required to work closely with them during the challenges.”

Dean shrugged at that. He didn’t really think he’d have a problem working with anyone Gabriel would choose, considering his apparent standards for having picked Dean himself. “Sure, just send me a list.”

“And for the individual daily challenges, we wanted your final approval over each of the projects, how long prep for each dessert should take, perhaps professional baking tips we could give the contestants to nudge them in the right direction. We want the series to be unscripted, but still retain a loose structure.”

“Gotcha,” Dean said. “So like an outline of the process of baking and decorating.”

“Essentially, yes. That would be perfect.”

Dean heaved a sigh at that. He was really, actually gonna do this. “Okay, then. I guess you got yourself a professional baker. When do we start?”

They talked for another half an hour before Cas emailed over the studio’s design sketches and a list of guest professionals. Dean pointed out where the major appliances at each workstation would be
most efficiently installed, and made a few changes to the layout of the supply pantry. He also added dozens of items to the list of ingredients that should be on hand, and started throwing out ideas on what each challenge might entail.

By the time Dean hung up an hour and a half later, he couldn’t believe he’d ever thought of Cas as stoic. They’d both laughed over Cas’s confession that he’d burnt a tray of store bought biscuits just the other day, and Dean’s confession that he’d actually done the same thing the last time he’d bothered to bake anything at home.

The best part was they’d established a definitive schedule, from Dean’s tour of the set scheduled for the following Sunday, right through filming all six episodes. Sam would’ve been proud of him.

The following day at work, Donna and Charlie pestered him all day long for details. At one point Charlie brought him a tray of star-shaped cookies frosted with royal icing and asked him to autograph them with green frosting. He’d snorted and gone back to work on a delicate purple lily, mostly to hide his embarrassment.

“Nobody wants to buy a cookie with my name on it,” he’d grumbled out.

“Dean, you moron. People pay hundreds and sometimes thousands of bucks for cakes with your name on them,” Charlie retorted.

“Yeah, but not literally.”

“Edible business cards,” Donna said out of nowhere, frowning at her own random thought. “Appropriate for a bakery, but probably not practical once you stick it in your wallet.”

Dean and Charlie both laughed with her and got back to work.

Saturday was a flurry of last-minute decorating, reassuring grumpy wedding planners, and baking up an additional fifty cupcakes as an emergency add on order. Kevin and Donna left to deliver everything while Dean and Charlie cleaned up the kitchen and shut down the bakery until Tuesday.

“So you won’t be here Monday for prep?”

Dean shrugged. “If I get finished with the tv shit on Sunday I’ll be here. I’m sure you and Donna can handle it without me. It’ll be a good trial run for when filming starts.”

“We got your back, handmaiden.”

“I know you do.”

Charlie waited while Dean locked the door and then grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him right in the eye. “Don’t let Gabriel yank your chain. You march right into that studio and kick it in the ass.”

Dean grinned at her and pulled her into a hug. “I’ll do my best.”
The Hot Stove

Sunday morning, Dean swung by a coffee shop on his way to the Webflix studios. The extra shot of espresso he ordered wasn’t doing anything good for his already jangling nerves, but he hadn’t really been thinking straight when he’d placed his usual order. One of the downsides of being used to getting up before dawn was finding a way to keep himself occupied until normal human hours began on his days off. By the time he pulled up to the coffee shop, he’d already downed a pot of coffee puttering around his house.

Cas had agreed to assemble the entire crew at the studio at ten in the morning, which was still probably asking a lot of a tv production crew on a Sunday morning, but it had left Dean at loose ends as to what to do with himself for the last five hours. He’d decided to leave the house after another mini-marathon of Gabriel’s trickster show, wisely coming to the conclusion that it was only making him more nervous about working with the guy. Sunday morning traffic in LA hadn’t even cooperated to slow him down, resulting in the ill advised stop at the coffee shop that he regretted as he walked up to the front door of the studio-- his nerves hitting peak caffeine saturation-- just before ten.

He pushed his way into the lobby through the bank of glass doors emblazoned with the bold and glowing blue W. The entry was decorated like the waiting room of some futuristic dentist’s office, panels of lights embedded in the stark white walls that slowly shifted through a series of soft pastel colors as if transmitting some sort of secret code that he didn’t understand. At the far wall beneath an illuminated blue W sat a steriley tidy white desk, and Dean was beginning to panic that he’d wandered into some alien spaceship out of a sci fi movie instead of a functioning television production company. His fear was about to get the better of him as he edged his way back toward the door when Gabriel popped up from where he’d been lying across one of the two white sofas on either side of the otherwise empty room.

“Deano! Hey, you made it!”

Dean was almost too startled to reply, but he shook off the weird feeling that he’d accidentally tripped and fallen into an alternate universe and waited for Gabriel to straighten his clothes and ruffle his hair back into place.

“Sorry, just catching a few z’s while I had the chance,” Gabriel said. “Told Cassie I’d bring you back to the studio, but really I just wanted to get away from the chaos for a minute.”

Dean snorted at that. “I been watching your shows. I figured chaos was right up your alley.”

Gabriel reached up and dropped a hand on Dean’s shoulder and looked him directly in the eye. “Chaos of my own making is one thing, but everyone needs to get away from other people’s chaos once in a while, am I right?”

“Hell is other people,” Dean replied after an awkward moment, which set Gabriel off cackling.

“You and I are gonna get along just fine, Deano. Come on. The crew’s itching to meet you.”

“Did you put itching powder in their overalls?”

That set Gabriel off again, but he shook his head and smiled knowingly at Dean as they came to a stop outside a black set of doors with a large number 4 painted on them. “Since you seem to need a reassurance here, I don’t prank my friends like that.”
Dean nodded, feeling only mildly relieved by Gabriel’s tone. “Yeah, you probably save the really good stuff for your friends.”

“You have no idea,” Gabriel muttered almost lower than Dean was able to hear as he turned to dramatically throw the doors open wide and march onto the set. He yelled out, “Attention, the stars have arrived,” bringing a temporary halt to all the sounds of construction on the expansive soundstage.

The first person Dean saw was a woman in jeans and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She wore a headset draped around her neck and glanced up from the tablet she’d been studying. She frowned and looked them both over for a moment before heading over with a hand extended toward Dean.

“Hi there. Jody Mills. You must be Dean Winchester.”

Dean shook her hand and smiled politely. “That’s me.”

Jody nodded, letting go of his hand to wave around the studio. “I’m directing this circus. Castiel asked me to give you the grand tour and take any notes and suggestions you make into consideration.”

“Jody’s the best,” Gabriel informed Dean. “I’ve never been able to convince her to work for me before, but having you on board finally tipped the balance in my favor.”

Jody rolled her eyes at that but it was more like fond exasperation than genuine irritation. “Come on, I’ll show you around. No point letting them get farther along with construction than we have to if we end up making any major changes to the design.”

Considering they’d only begun construction two days earlier, Dean was impressed with how quickly the set had come together. One side of the studio had already begun to resemble three interconnected kitchens, complete with cheerfully painted cabinetry and fake windows with sunny garden scenes painted on backdrops behind them. On the opposite wall, a huge picture window stretched from the floor up to the top of the set wall with another hand painted scene that looked like they’d stolen it from a child’s drawing of a suburban garden. A row of fake hedges and several potted trees gave the painted scene a bit of depth, while doubling down on the cartoonish artificiality of the entire set. In front of the window sat a massive curving desk where the panel of judges would sit throughout the competition.

“How many of us are gonna have to fit back there?” Dean said, pacing in front of the long countertop and imagining at least half a dozen judges sitting there ogling the poor contestants while they sweated it out under the glaring studio lights.

“Just three,” Gabriel confirmed. “But we’re gonna be back there for a while, so why not make it comfy? Cassie splurged for some quality chairs, too. We’ll have some elbow room. Plus plenty of room to display the finished products for the taste tests.”

Dean just nodded, ran a hand across the polished wooden surface, and then followed Jody on a tour through the three kitchen stations. He pointed out a few practical changes they might want to consider, but nothing more serious than putting in an extra shelf or two. He was overall impressed with the layout, and it was obvious that Castiel had taken his advice from their conversation the other night into careful consideration when finalizing the plans.

“Okay, now the pantry,” Jody said, leading him through a wide doorway into a room lined most of the way around with wire shelving. The only other thing in the room so far was a commercial blast
chiller. Dean approved of its location, seeing as it wasn’t practical to install one of the specialized freezers at each of the stations, and for the purposes of the competition none of the contestants was likely to need it for more than a few minutes at a time anyway.

To both Gabriel and Jody’s delight, Dean approved of the rest of the plans he’d seen. Jody stuck two fingers in her mouth and gave a shrill whistle, and within a minute all work had ceased on the set and a small crowd had gathered around them.

“Oh, crew,” Jody said as a few stragglers wandered up. “You all know Gabriel, but this is our baking expert, Dean Winchester.”

Dean gave a little wave at the assembled crowd.

“This is Claire,” she said, pointing to the young woman at her side with her long blonde hair pulled up in a messy braid and a tool belt slung around her waist. “She’s our set designer and will be in charge of the stage. She’s also lead camera operator once production starts.”

Claire nodded and gave her hammer a twirl before holstering it in her tool belt. Jody held in a smile at that and moved on to introduce the woman next to Claire.

“This is Kaia, Claire’s assistant. If I’m not around, you can direct your concerns to either of them.”

Dean nodded, impressed that Jody entrusted the young women with so much authority on set, but just looking at them and what they’d already accomplished, he could tell it was well earned. Jody was about to go on to the next introduction when Gabriel leaped from his side and draped an arm around the next woman’s shoulders.

“And this is Patience,” he said, beaming beatifically up at the exasperated look on her face. “She’s my personal assistant, which means she spends most of her time trying to read my mind and anticipate my needs.”

Patience rolled her eyes but nodded in agreement. “Right now you need to let go of me,” she said, but not with any malice.

“Right you are,” Gabriel agreed jovially. “That is exactly what I needed. See, Deano? She knows me better than I know myself.” He smiled at Patience and strolled back to Dean’s side while Jody introduced the last woman.

“This is Alex. She’s our assistant director, but she’s also a trained nurse so if you have a medical emergency she’s your go-to.”

“Just try not to do any grievous bodily harm,” Alex cautioned him.

“I’ll try and keep it to a minimum,” Dean replied, grinning at her.

Jody looked around, frowning, until she spotted a young man on the other side of the set winding up a tangled extension cord. “And over there is our intern, Jack.”

When he heard his name, Jack looked up from where he’d become hopelessly tangled in the long cord, raised one hand and smiled cheerfully. “Hello!” Then he went right back to his work.

“He’s a good kid,” Jody supplied, “once you get to know him.”

All the girls agreed, casting Jack friendly smiles before turning back to Jody for their next assignments. She went over the changes to the design that Dean suggested, prompting a few
questions from Kaia and Claire, and a follow-up discussion about paint colors and appliance
dimensions. Dean sort of blanked on what they were talking about and let himself just soak it all in,
the feel of the set and how cheerful and comfortable it all seemed, right down to all the people who
worked there. Even including Gabriel, who had seemed so distressingly dangerous just going by
what Dean had seen of him on his trickster show, yet fit in so well and had shown so much care for
the people he worked with. It was a refreshing relief to Dean, confirming that he’d made the right
choice signing up for this project.

Jody concluded her impromptu meeting and dismissed everyone back to work, and Dean noticed
Gabriel conferring with Patience over a tablet computer they both poked at. He wasn’t exactly sure
what to do with himself and was beginning to feel a bit superfluous to current needs when Jody
strolled over and presented him with her tablet.

“Castiel gave me some information on the guest bakers for all six episodes,” she said, tapping on
the first guest’s contact information and pulling up a sample recipe list. “I thought we should go
over the details.”

“Details are what I’m all about,” Gabriel said, having dismissed Patience as well and was now
standing beside Jody, cheerfully trying to peek at the screen. “And these look like the kind of
details I can really sink my teeth into. Literally.”

The three of them retreated to Jody’s office to escape the noise of set construction. Over the next
few hours theyhammered out the details of everything from who would be baking their
professional samples to exactly how all the ingredients would be laid out in the pantry and at each
individual workstation.

They’d debated everything from whether the cake ingredients should be pre-measured for the
contestants to how long they’d be allowed to complete each unique challenge. Dean had argued
most strenuously that even a professional baker would find it difficult to complete some of the
challenges within the time frames Gabriel and Jody were suggesting, but they’d insisted that it
added to the competition factor.

“Besides,” Jody had argued, “most people underestimate how long it really takes to make a
professional cake. It’s part of the mentality we’re poking at with the whole concept here. We want
to highlight the value of your time and effort, in addition to the skills you’ve worked for years to
hone.”

“Yeah, Deano,” Gabriel said, taking a bite of the candy bar Patience had brought to him without
having been asked. “People see a chef do it on tv and think they can whip up the same thing at
home in half an hour, too. And that’s not the way it works in reality. Giving them three hours to
make a wedding cake is gonna sound generous, until they actually try to do it themselves.”

Jody nodded. “And that’s where you’ll come in, to remind them it would take you more than three
hours to make it look perfect, too.”

Dean let it go, and helped them come up with extremely tight yet also reasonable time limits. Over
lunch that Jody had ordered from a local sandwich shop, they devised a list of decoy ingredients to
stock the pantry with. At first Dean had thought it was just Gabriel trying to pull a prank, but he’d
been won over to the idea by Jody.

“There’s no harm in it,” she’d insisted over Dean’s objections that it was just cruel, deliberately
throwing even more stumbling blocks for contestants to potentially trip over. “It’s up to the
contestants to follow the recipes, as well as to use their own judgment. Substituting crushed corn
chips for a dusting of brown sugar to simulate beach sand might be a terrible choice, but those are
the sorts of things someone without any training might think was fine. It’s part of the challenge to
give them the tools to succeed, without cutting off potential routes to failure.”

“So it puts more of the burden on them,” Dean replied.

“We can’t help it if people make terrible decisions,” Gabriel replied with a wicked grin.

“Yeah, but we’re gonna have to taste test that shit, too,” Dean countered.

Gabriel shrugged. “Then we shouldn’t put rat poison in the pantry. I think we’ll manage to
survive.”

“Yeah, if we got something to wash it down with, I guess I can deal,” Dean agreed warily.

“So a full bar it is,” Gabriel agreed, leaning across Jody’s desk to point at her keyboard. “Make a
note of that. Stock up on the vodka.”

“Whiskey for me, thanks,” Dean muttered, and Gabriel winked at him.

“That’s the spirit, Dean.”

Dean hadn’t realized how long they’d been discussing the minute details when Claire knocked on
Jody’s door and interrupted.

“We’re headed out for the day,” she said. “Anything else you need, or…”

Jody checked her watch and blinked up at Claire. “Wow, okay. It’s late. How’s the set coming?”

“We’ve got everything assembled and painted, and the small appliances are going in tomorrow,”
Claire said. “There’s a bajillion canisters arriving tomorrow for the pantry, along with--” She
paused and cast a side-eyed glance at Gabriel’s eager face before continuing. “The shipment from
the C-A-N-D-Y distributor.” She’d spelled out the word, and said it in a stage whisper for good
measure.

Gabriel laughed, but Jody immediately turned to scold him, one finger raised like a mom warning a
small child.

“The pantry’s all been inventoried,” Jody said. “Castiel told me to make sure you were explicitly
aware of that fact.”

“I’ll be good,” Gabriel replied. “I can afford my own private candy stash.”

Jody nodded at him, appeased, and Claire bid them all a good night. There was one person that
Dean had been hoping to see again, but Cas hadn’t even bothered to pop in and say hi. Sure,
Sunday was probably the guy’s day off or whatever, but this show was supposedly a big deal for
him. Dean had been surprised and a little disappointed that he’d never even made a token
appearance.

“Well,” Jody said, looking through her notes. “There’s a few more things we need to get squared
away, but we can take care of it tomorrow if you’ve had enough for one day.”

Dean checked his watch, and it was rapidly coming up on five o’clock. He didn’t have a hot date or
any pressing business he needed to handle, and he was starting to think it would be better to do
what he could to avoid running into Cas after the guy had essentially ignored him all day. If
coming back into the office during regular business hours could run the risk of putting him within
Cas’s line of sight, it would probably be best to just finish up while he was already there.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he said. “While I’m here, may as well get through everything. If I can get to my shop tomorrow it would really help out my staff.”

“I thought you were closed Mondays?” Gabriel asked, as if he already knew exactly why Dean was suddenly squirming.

“Yeah, we are, but we still gotta do prep for the week. I got my own inventory to manage still.”

Gabriel smirked at him, looking quite pleased with himself, but Jody frowned.

“Castiel told me that you’d be available for filming on Sundays and Mondays,” she said, sounding suddenly concerned. “Is that gonna be a problem? Because we’ve scheduled this entire production around your availability.”

Dean shook his head, holding out a placating hand as he backtracked. “No, no. Not a problem. But, uh, I don’t think you need me just lurking around the set with nothing to do. If we’re almost done with my expert input or whatever, might as well save a trip back tomorrow, is all.”

Jody regarded him skeptically for a minute but then accepted his rationale. Gabriel stood up and stretched, giving a forced fake yawn and heading toward the door.

“You kids can work out all the nitty gritty about baking pans and spatulas or whatever. I’ll be here tomorrow if there’s any groundbreaking developments over how much high fructose corn syrup you need to order.”

“Thanks for all your help, Gabe,” Jody said. “Tell Castiel we’re almost finished here, okay?”

Gabriel gave a little salute and then headed out. Dean sat uneasily for a moment wondering if that meant Cas was in the building and just avoiding him, or maybe he’d been just as busy doing Producer Things as Dean had been doing Expert Consultant Things. He shook off the strange feeling of disappointment, and he and Jody got down to brass tacks over the variety and quantity of cooking utensils they’d need to order and how best to organize them for each challenge. They were just covering the last of Jody’s long list of supplies when they were interrupted by another knock on the door.

Castiel peeked his head in, looking contrite and just a bit rumpled, as if he’d been tugging at his tie and running a hand through his hair in frustration all day. Dean wasn’t entirely sure, but Cas seemed relieved to find Dean was still there.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Cas said.

“Not at all,” Jody replied. “We were just about finished, right Dean?”

“Yeah, I think we got everything covered,” Dean agreed, giving Cas a tired smile.

Cas nodded, looking relieved, and maybe even a little crestfallen. “Ah, that’s good. I’m sorry I wasn’t more help to you today, but I just got off the phone with the final sponsor. Kitchen Master will be supplying each of the first round winners with a generous prize package.”

Jody shook her head and smiled fondly at Cas. “Negotiations are never fun, are they?”

“No, but Claire did inform me that the set is nearly complete, so that was comforting.” Cas then turned to Dean. “I hope everyone’s been accommodating with you in my absence, Dean.”
“Yeah, you run a tight ship here,” Dean agreed. “I’m impressed with the entire staff.”

“Unless you got some sort of baking emergency, I don’t know what else I can do here,” Dean replied. “I think I’d just be in the way.”

Cas nodded, looking from Dean, to Jody, and then down at the floor for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “I would like for us to do a final walkthrough of the set, once it’s completed and before we begin filming. At your convenience, of course.”

Dean smiled, feeling a little bit relieved that Cas really did seem to feel bad about having ditched him all day. “Just say the word. As soon as it’s done I can swing by any night after work.”

“I’ll keep you apprised of the progress, then.”

“So when’s the first day of shooting scheduled for?” Dean asked, and then worried that he was being presumptuous when Cas gave him a look like a stunned puppy. “It’s just I should give my staff fair warning, maybe schedule some extra help in the kitchen for the Mondays I’m gonna miss.”

Cas swallowed hard, shuffled his feet, and deferred to Jody. “It depends on when the set is ready.”

“Should be by the end of the week,” Jody replied. “We’re just waiting on deliveries at this point. And we’re holding back the fresh ingredients like eggs and milk until the day before episode one shoots. Could start as early as this weekend if everything’s ready to go on your end.”

Cas nodded and glanced warily at Dean, then slowly walked the rest of the way into Jody’s office and shut the door behind himself. He hesitated for a moment, and then took the seat that Gabriel had vacated and looked right at Dean.

“I know we hadn’t discussed it, and it wasn’t explicitly part of your contract, but I was hoping that we might be able to film some background material about you and your bakery, your professional career, and what your regular work life is like.”

Dean thought about that for a second while Castiel waited impatiently for his reply. “What, like a tour of my bakery? Like for career day at school?”

“Yes, in part,” Castiel replied. “But also about your training, and possibly several short segments about how each of the challenge pastries would be made by a professional.”

Dean blinked at him, confused. “I thought the guest bakers were gonna be making the sample cakes.”

“Yes, they will be,” Cas replied, tugging on his already crooked tie until it flipped around entirely. “But if you could offer a few words describing the specific techniques unique to each pastry, what makes them difficult to prepare, or the special skills needed to execute them… any sort of expert commentary you’d care to offer, I think it would add the mark of your… particular brand of professionalism that could enrich the viewing experience.”

Dean’s smile grew as Cas bumbled through his increasingly flustered reply. “Sure, Cas. I’d be happy to. I’m gonna be at the bakery from about seven tomorrow morning if you wanna bring a
camera by. I’m sure I can make time.”

Cas nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, that would be excellent. Can I borrow Claire for a few hours tomorrow?” he asked Jody.

Jody shrugged, spreading her hands out wide. “I don’t see why not. I don’t think Claire would object to hanging around a bakery instead of labeling dry ingredients canisters.”

“All right, then,” Dean replied. “Just text me when you’re on the way. We’re not open on Mondays, but if I know when you’re coming I’ll unlock the door for you.”

“Good, good,” Cas replied absently. “Then if everything else is ready, we can schedule the first episode to film next Sunday.”

“I’ll contact the first and second round contestants in the morning and let them know,” Jody said, making a note of it on a stack of file folders, and then standing up and extending her hand across the desk to Dean. “It’s been a real pleasure, Dean. I look forward to working with you again.”

“Yeah, same,” Dean replied, getting to his feet and shaking her hand.

“If you’re done here, I can walk you out,” Cas offered, and Dean nodded his thanks.

“Tell me, Dean,” Cas said as they wove through long carpeted hallways toward the front of the building. “Has everything been to your satisfaction? It’s just… I feel terrible that I wasn’t able to show you around myself.”

“I get it, Cas,” Dean replied. “You have to keep your eye on the bigger picture. It’s all good.”

Cas nodded absently, looking straight ahead as they emerged into the stark lobby. It was already getting dark outside, and Dean realized just how long a day it had been.

“Then I look forward to seeing you sometime tomorrow, in your natural element,” Cas said as he ushered Dean to the front door.

Dean couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, my natural element is covered with flour and neck deep in fondant, but if that’s what turns you on…” He trailed off, biting his lower lip and realizing he’d let the casual comfort with Cas go just a little bit too far. He took a deep breath and was about to apologize for being so forward when he looked up to see Cas… who was *blushing*.

“Um, yes… well, to each his own, right?” Cas replied awkwardly. “I’ll see you in the morning, Dean.”

Dean nodded absently and took the generously offered out. He had about twelve hours to pull himself the fuck together before he’d have to spend several hours trying to act professional in front of Cas, not to mention in front of a camera. Considering he had barely managed it for a handful of minutes before shoving his foot in his mouth, he wasn’t terribly convinced of his chances of success.
Dean arrived to open the bakery at quarter to seven the next morning. He hadn’t bothered calling Charlie or Donna to give them the heads up that he’d be in, so when they showed up a few minutes later, they were both pleasantly surprised but also eager for all the details of his adventures at the Webflix studios.

“Regale us with the glamour of Hollywood stardom, or has fame already elevated you above your station as handmaiden?” Charlie said as she pulled on a white coat atop her Princess Leia t-shirt.

Dean snorted out a laugh and went back to measuring out cupcake batter. “Yeah, they showed me around the set, but I spent most of the day in the director’s office helping her figure out how many eggs to order and what oddball shit they should stock the pantry with to confuse the contestants. Not exactly rubbing elbows with Brad Pitt at the Oscars kinda work.”

“Whaddya mean, confuse the contestants?” Donna asked, not even looking up from measuring out icing sugar.

Dean shrugged and then walked two trays of cupcakes to the oven, shoving them in and setting the timer. “They’re gonna mix in a bunch of random things people might have in their kitchen at home, that they might use if they don’t know any better. Like bread flour instead of cake flour, or tapioca instead of nonpareils.”

Donna made a disgusted face at the thought of biting into a bunch of raw tapioca pearls. “Wow, I don’t envy you having to taste these cakes.”

“The assistant director’s a trained nurse,” Dean said, rinsing out the mixing bowl so he could get started on the next batch of cupcakes. “So she’ll be on hand in case of accidental poisoning. And I think Gabe may have negotiated an open bar into his contract, so at least I’ll have some good whiskey on hand to wash it down with.”

“Sounds like Gabriel has things under control, at least,” Charlie said, and then set to work mixing up a rainbow of different cake batters for an assortment of Pride Petit Fours.

Dean still hadn’t mentioned that Cas and Claire would be stopping by to film them at work. It was easier not to upset their usual pace. He also wasn’t entirely sure when Cas would call, and he definitely didn’t need to endure what might be hours of teasing after he finally got Donna and Charlie to stop pestering him with questions. His peace and quiet ended at quarter to eleven, when Cas texted to let him know they’d just arrived outside.

Donna was actually the first to encounter Claire and Cas. She was in the front of the shop filling the display case with cupcakes when they waved through the front window. She’d been in the process of pointing out that they were closed when Dean came flying through the kitchen door.

“That’s Cas and Claire,” he said, pulling the front door keys from his pocket. “We’re filming a few things for the show today.”

“Jeepers, Dean, you coulda given a girl a heads up. I’d have thrown on some lipstick and done my hair or something if I thought I might end up on camera.” She rolled her eyes, but smiled playfully at Dean so that he’d know he was forgiven as she slipped back into the kitchen to warn Charlie what was up.

Dean unlocked the door and ushered Cas and Claire into the shop. Claire’s eyes went wide before
she closed them and took several deep breaths.

“God, it smells like heaven exploded in here.”

Cas chuckled at her comment and smiled at Dean. “It’s nice to see you again. I take it you’ve had a productive morning?” Cas pointed at Dean’s formerly white coat, now stained in several places with various colorful batters and icings.

“Heh, yeah, just the nature of the work. I got a clean one to wear on camera. No worries.”

Claire stopped by one of the small tables and set down her equipment case. “Is it okay for me to leave this here?”

Dean nodded. “Sure. Either of you want some coffee or anything? Maybe something to eat?”

“That’s not necessary, Dean,” Cas replied, at the same time Claire asked, “If that’s salted caramel I smell, then yes, please.”

Cas heaved a sigh as Dean smiled at her. “Comin’ right up. You sure you don’t want anything, Cas? Cannoli? Cherry cheesecake brownie? We got macarons that’ll be up in about twenty if you’re willing to wait, too.”

Cas squinted at the mention of macarons. “Yes, I think I can wait. But I will have coffee if it’s convenient.”

“You got it,” Dean said, bustling around behind the counter and brewing a fresh pot. “So where do you want to set up?”

“I was thinking Claire could film several panoramic shots of the bakery, both interior and exterior,” Cas said, standing at the counter while Dean worked. “Perhaps some with you standing outside by the front window, as well as behind the counter, and then we could move to the kitchen.”

“So, just me in my element,” Dean replied, smiling as he served up Claire’s cupcake. “Might wanna wait to film in here until we get the case fully stocked. It’s still looking a little Mother Hubbard.”

“I got some goods for you,” Charlie said, pushing the kitchen door open and emerging with two large trays of vibrantly colored little cakes. She slid the trays into the display case and then turned to smile at Cas and Claire. “I’m Charlie, by the way. Nice to meet you, but you won’t be filming me today,” she said, as if it were already a foregone conclusion.

Cas nodded at her and then gestured to Claire. “This is Claire, and I’m Castiel. It’s nice to meet you, Charlie, and I promise we won’t film you without your explicit permission. Those cakes look delectable, as well. Did you make them?”

“Sure did,” she replied, waving a hand across the rainbow of little cakes before picking one off the rack and sliding it across the counter to Cas. “Here, have one. Tell me if it tastes as good as it looks.”

Cas took a bite and moaned. “Is that blueberry in the center?”

Charlie nodded happily while Dean tried to get a grip on himself watching Cas go through a series of raptures eating the little pastry in three eternal bites. He was grateful it hadn’t been a full sized cake. His dignity might not have survived. He finally shook himself out and his face returned to a semblance of polite interest. Unfortunately for Dean, Claire hadn’t missed a second of his
discomposure, and he caught her giving him a transparently knowing look.

“Well, um,” Dean said, scrambling to do something remotely professional. He turned his back to pour coffee. “I guess you can go ahead and start filming whenever. Just tell me where to stand and we can get this show on the road.”

Claire finished her cupcake while Dean and Cas worked out a general outline of segments they intended to film, making a rough list on a strip of receipt paper from the register. Without prompting, Claire stepped outside and filmed the exterior shots. She’d returned before Cas and Dean had even noticed she’d gone.

Dean glanced down at himself when she walked over with her camera raised to her shoulder, and remembered he needed to swap out his stained coat for the clean one waiting in his office. He stood and began unbuttoning it, making apologies for throwing off their schedule, and was about to dash back to his office when Cas laid a hand on his wrist to stop him.

“I think it’s fine for the exterior shots to show you out of uniform,” Cas suggested, nodding at the Led Zeppelin t-shirt Dean wore beneath his jacket.

Dean frowned down at the ancient, faded t-shirt and couldn’t understand how it was an improvement over his stained chef’s jacket. “Dude, this is like the least professional thing I could possibly wear.”

Cas nodded. “Exactly. I think the audience should be able to relate to you as a person, and not just as a professional baker. I’d like them to see you’re human, as well.”

Dean made a series of faces, running one hand down the logo of Icarus imprinted on his shirt, the winged man falling out of the sky, and finally laughed. “Yeah, okay, fine. If Zepp makes me human, I guess that’s fine.”

Dean stood on the sidewalk in front of the shop, beneath the window painted with the Winchester Pastry logo, and followed Cas and Claire’s directions as he moved through a series of poses. Claire kept filming even when he complained he was starting to feel a bit ridiculous modeling a ratty band t-shirt and jeans in front of his own bakery. Cas had encouraged him to keep going, and Dean had sighed and given in to the request. They went through a similar series of shots inside the bakery, but this time when Dean began to feel self-conscious and antsy, Cas had distracted him with questions, only some of which had been on their list.

Dean gave answers about his training, about running his own bakery, and about the responsibility of being entrusted with the centerpiece of so many wedding receptions. He hesitated when Cas suddenly asked him about why he’d wanted to become a baker in the first place, partly because he didn’t really have an answer, but partly because regardless of what he might say, he wasn’t sure he wanted it captured on film. Cas noticed his hesitation immediately, apologized for getting too personal and veering from their prearranged script, and suggested they move back to the kitchen to film the segment clips.

Dean left Claire and Cas in Charlie and Donna’s care while he went back to his office to fetch his clean jacket and take a minute or two to clear his head. He hadn’t quite understood why he’d been so reluctant to keep answering Cas’s questions. Sure, he’d been taken off guard, and he hadn’t really had a chance to come up with a reasonable reply on the spot, but the fact the question had shaken him at all when it was no secret that he’d always loved bakeries as a kid, and had always wanted to do something that made people purely happy. If something as simple as a well made cake could guarantee putting a smile on a customer’s face, the same way it had done for him when he was little, why had he been so reluctant to just say so?
His inability to rationalize his own reaction-- or lack of a reaction, since he’d stood there dumbstruck long enough for Cas to backtrack-- had him rattled. And he couldn’t quite put his finger on why. Dean stood in his office, methodically buttoning up his jacket, taking a few deep breaths and preparing himself to play the professional he surely was on tv.

The rest of the afternoon’s filming went off without a hitch. Cas didn’t press him for any more personal answers, and Dean maintained an air of professional distance as he demonstrated a series of baking and decorating techniques. Even though that had been the entire purpose behind filming the segments, Dean still couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d somehow managed to fuck up whatever warm feelings had been developing between him and Cas. And for the life of him, he couldn’t shake the odd feeling that Cas was equally at loose ends over the entire ordeal.

By the time Cas left, Dean felt like he’d not only lost any ground in what he’d thought was at least a developing friendship, but that he’d inadvertently pushed Cas even further away. He quietly despaired when Cas shook his hand and left with a businesslike and perfunctory reminder to be on set Sunday morning by nine for makeup and prep. Somehow he’d never felt more disappointed in himself in his life as he watched Cas walk out the door. Even Claire turned to him with a look of resignation, or maybe pity, before following after her boss.

Dean stood at the front door and watched them drive away, then turned to snatch up his stained jacket from where he’d left it draped over a chair. He tidied up the table they’d used, tossing their cups but carefully folding the receipt tape with Cas’s handwritten notes and stuffing it in his pocket. He’d pull it out later and maybe it would give him a clue as to where he’d gone so horribly wrong.

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Cas drove back to his office in silence, despite several attempts from Claire to make friendly conversation with him. Something about Dean’s reaction to what he’d thought an innocent question had thrown him, and he’d been feeling shaky and off balance ever since. He’d sat in his office going through the motions for the rest of the afternoon, unable to dispel the feeling that he’d missed something important.

He didn’t typically click with people, as Gabriel had been helpfully reminding him for most of his life, but something about Dean had been different right from the start. From the first moment he’d laid eyes on Dean Winchester, he felt like he needed to know the man better. Almost as if everything he’d ever done up to that moment paled in comparison to the green of his eyes. Cas sat at his desk and shook himself off. They’d barely begun to know one another, and he wasn’t about to let one lapse in his admittedly rusty people skills ruin what had the potential to be a wonderful friendship, if not something more.

A strange sense of loss and disappointment had begun to settle over him when Gabriel tapped on his open door and barged into his office, snapping through the funk at least for the time being.

“Why the long face, Cas? Feeling personally responsible for bee colony collapse again?” Gabriel asked, flopping down in one of the chairs in front of Cas’s desk and popping a caramel into his mouth.

Cas frowned as Gabriel tossed the candy wrapper at the trash can and missed. He stood up to deposit it in the trash while scolding his cousin. “We’re all responsible for the fate of the bees, Gabriel. All of humanity depends on them for our own existence.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. So if it’s not the bee thing, why do you look like someone kicked your puppy? And before you derail this chat again, I know you don’t have a puppy.”
Cas glared at his cousin, but Gabriel maintained his politely interested facade longer than Cas could maintain his pique. He gave up and sighed. “I thought things had been going well with Dean, and I may have inadvertently damaged the relationship we’d been building.”

Gabriel frowned at this, sitting up in his chair and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. For the first time in recent memory, Gabriel actually looked serious.

“Tell me you didn’t piss off my pastry chef.”

Cas sighed, leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. So much for Gabriel really being serious.

“Castiel, look at me already, and can the woe is me act, okay? Pathetic resignation is not a good look on you.”

Castiel leveled a blank stare at his cousin. “Is this better?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “So tell me exactly what happened. Underneath his sugar-coated exterior, is Dean just another self-centered dickwad?”

“As far as I can tell from our limited interactions, he’s exactly the way you described him to me before we met.”

Gabriel nodded, waiting while Castiel worked himself up to answering his first question.

“I asked him if he’d always wanted to be a pastry chef,” Castiel finally replied. “It seemed like an innocent enough question, even if it wasn’t on the list of topics we’d discussed before the interview began.”

Gabriel sat up straight, as if this was the most interesting thing he’d heard all week. “What did he say?”

“Nothing. He didn’t say anything,” Cas replied. “He looked into the camera and froze for a moment, and then I assured him he didn’t need to answer if he didn’t want to. We ended the interview and moved on to the other segments, but our interactions were completely different for the rest of the afternoon. Businesslike, and not at all personable.”

Gabriel considered this, muttering something about glitches in the matrix before snapping his fingers and startling Cas. “Have you considered the possibility that he just didn’t want to discuss anything that personal on camera? Not everyone’s as transparently willing to strip themselves bare on international television as yours truly.”

Cas blinked at Gabe and then slowly shook his head. “You may be right. I should’ve known better than to ask a question I didn’t already know the answer to. I feel as if I owe him an apology.”

Gabriel stood up and rapped his knuckles on Cas’s desk. “Yeah, I think you definitely need to clear the air. You never know, he might be feeling just as guilty as you looked when I walked in here for not wanting to chat about his childhood traumas or whatever. Give the guy a break. I’m sure it’s all just a big misunderstanding.”

Cas picked up his phone as Gabriel left his office. He knew all too well if he didn’t do something to clear the air between them, it would only make things worse when they inevitably would have to face one another again on Sunday.

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Dean had left the bakery shortly after they’d wrapped up filming. He’d felt like nothing had really gone right after the question he’d failed to answer. Even sticking around the shop and trying to funnel all of that uneasy energy into something productive had only served to make him feel worse. He’d spent an hour driving around aimlessly before he’d really started to feel like himself again. The warm evening air poured through Baby’s windows as he drove up into the mountains and he finally felt like he could breathe properly again. He was just turning around and heading home when his phone rang.

“Hang on just a sec,” he said, fumbling the phone as he tried to answer, and eventually pulling off the road to fish the phone off the floorboard. “Hello?”

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Castiel’s voice rumbled over the phone. “If this is an inconvenient time I can call back later.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Dean replied, surprised at how relieved he was to hear back from Cas. Just hearing his voice again snapped the last of that antsy, uneasy feeling. “I just dropped the phone. You’re good. I’m, ah… not busy at the moment.”

“That’s good,” Cas said, and then bypassed any additional pleasantries to drive straight to the apology. “I wanted to make sure there was no tension between us. I believe I may have been too forward this afternoon. I’ve been told I can be too blunt at times. I didn’t intend to make you uncomfortable, or pressure you into discussing your personal life in front of a television camera. I may have overstepped a boundary and I didn’t want you to feel as if I had put you on the spot…”

Cas would’ve kept right on apologizing, but Dean was already grinning and decided to put Cas out of his misery. “It’s fine, man. I swear you’re fine. I guess I just wasn’t as camera ready as I thought. I was already kinda twitchy trying to answer your list of questions without making myself look like an ass, and then that one sorta came outta left field. Totally not your fault, Cas.”

“In any case, I never should’ve presumed to pry into your private life, Dean. At least not on film, or where you may have felt obligated to answer against your will.”

“I know, and I appreciate that. I should probably get used to the idea of acting on camera, huh? It would kinda suck if I froze up like that during the actual show.”

Cas laughed. “It wouldn’t matter during the show. We’ll have at least six hours of footage that we’ll edit down into a half hour program.”

“That’s a relief,” Dean replied. “So if I totally fuck up I can get a mulligan?”

“Unless your fuck up involves falling face first into one of the contestants’ cakes,” Cas replied. Dean snorted and choked back a laugh. “Yeah, hopefully that’s not gonna be an issue. Guess I should stay outta Gabe’s open bar, huh?”

“Perhaps a drink or two might help soothe your nerves,” Cas countered. “But more than that is inadvisable. I’ll be cutting off Gabriel if he starts getting tipsy, too.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Dean agreed.

They were both quiet for a moment, and then Cas went on in a softer tone. “I went over the footage we shot, and you came across exactly as I hoped you would-- friendly and approachable, yet confident and skilled at your work. Thank you again for allowing us to film in your kitchen. It was an honor.”
Dean gawped, unable to formulate words, and not even willing to touch the honor thing. “Uh, thanks. I, uh, guess I’m… relieved.” He laughed, actually feeling the last of his tension melting away.

“Yes, well,” Cas replied, now sounding a bit flustered himself. “I may need your advice during the week if we run into any further complications with the set, and I would like to speak with you again on Saturday to finalize all the details regarding the first episode’s content, if that’s agreeable to you.”

Dean nodded, and then answered. “Yeah, sounds good. Saturday’s our big push day for deliveries, but I’m usually home by dinner time if you wanna call in the evening.”

“I’ll talk to you then, if not sooner,” Cas replied. “Thank you again, Dean. I’ve sincerely enjoyed working with you.”

“Yeah, Cas,” Dean replied, then cleared his throat. “Same here.”
The rest of Dean’s week went about as he expected it to. Cas hadn’t called again, but they had begun regularly texting back and forth. It had started up Tuesday afternoon when Cas sent a series of photos of the freshly stocked pantry shelves, filled with hundreds of clear plastic containers labeled with their carefully measured contents. He’d asked Dean if it met his approval, or if there was anything he’d wish to add to the shelves. Dean had looked the pictures and made a few suggestions about the arrangement of the ingredients, and Cas had replied with thumbs up and smiley face emojis. After they’d broken the ice again, the texting only increased in frequency for the rest of the week, becoming less and less about work the more they talked.

Dean texted Cas when he left work Saturday night, and then again when he got home. He opened the container of Pad Thai he’d picked up on his way home and sat down at his kitchen table with a beer and his laptop, going over the email Cas had sent with all the final details Dean would need to know before filming began. He read through the short bio of their first guest judge, an up and coming baker with a specialty in beautiful mirror glazing and artistic renderings in cake that were just as beautiful as the artworks that inspired them.

Eileen Leahy had made her sample cakes at the studio that afternoon, and Dean was certain the amateur bakers would struggle to duplicate them. He only hoped he’d be allowed to sample one of Eileen’s beautiful creations to offset what was likely to be a grand disaster. He was just imagining the numerous ways this could all go horribly wrong when Cas finally called.

They ran through Cas’s pre-show checklist fairly quickly, and Cas approved Dean’s request for Sam to tag along as his official representative on set. Dean had tried to tell Sam it wasn’t necessary to have his lawyer on the spot, and that he was perfectly content that Webflix and Cas would uphold the terms of his contract. But Sam had been pushing him all week with various arguments ranging from being on hand to step in if there were any issues on set to wanting to witness the baking disasters first-hand. After three days of unsuccessful wheedling, Dean finally agreed when Sam confessed he actually wanted to bear witness to Dean’s inevitable and hopefully hilarious failure as a television presenter. At least he’d finally had an honest answer out of his brother, and Dean agreed it would give him an extra incentive to kick it in the ass and not completely wash out on his first day on tv.

After getting through all the necessary business on the phone, Dean found himself falling back into easy conversation with Cas. Without the camera in his face, and without having to look into Castiel’s earnest, probing eyes, Dean found it a hell of a lot easier to answer his questions. They talked about everything under the sun, and Dean even told Cas about visiting the bakery with his mother when he was little and being allowed to pick out a treat; a cookie with a smiley face, or a cupcake with a little plastic angel pressed into the icing, whatever brought a smile to his own little face on any given day. They talked for hours, until Dean finally noticed the time.

“Shit, it’s late,” he said with a laugh. “I should probably get some sleep or it’ll look like I accidentally wandered off the set of that zombie show.”

“We can’t have that,” Cas agreed. “Go get your beauty sleep, Dean. I’ll see you in the morning.”

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Dean pulled into the parking lot at Webflix at quarter to nine on Sunday morning to find Sam already eagerly waiting by the front door. He rolled his eyes and picked up two large boxes of donuts he’d made the night before. Cas assured him there’d be plenty of coffee on set, and Dean
had thought the donuts would be a nice gesture-- and a potential bribe to win over the crew.

“Ooh, donuts?” Sam asked, looking curiously at the boxes and holding his hands out as if Dean was dumb enough to just hand them over.

“Yeah, and you can have one after the crew gets first dibs,” Dean replied, tilting his head toward the glass door until Sam pulled it open for him.

Sam followed him back to the set, which had been completely transformed since the last time Dean had been there a week earlier. The set structures and layout hadn’t changed much, but the ladders and paint cans and dropcloths and wires had been replaced with brand new appliances and kitchen gear and television cameras.

“Wow, this is actually really classy,” Sam said, sounding inordinately surprised.

Dean turned to glare at him but instead spotted the craft services table and the huge coffee urn. Jody and Claire stood beside it, sipping coffee and going over the day’s schedule, so Dean detoured over to check in with Jody and offer them a treat.

“Mornin’, ladies,” he said, setting the boxes down and opening the lid. “Can I interest you in a fresh donut?”

“Ooh, did you stop on the way over?” Jody asked, but Claire recognized the boxes and gave Dean a knowing look.

“Nope, I think he made these. So you know there’s probably love in every bite,” Claire assured Jody, picking out a strawberry glazed donut for herself.

Dean scowled playfully at her, but then grinned. “Guaranteed. You should probably also meet my brother, Sam, the hovering yeti,” he said, turning an actual scowl on his brother as he loomed over his shoulder to get a better look at the donuts. “Sam, these are the important people to know around here, Jody’s the director and Claire’s her assistant.”

“Stage manager, actually, and not general dogsbody,” Claire replied. “You can fetch your own coffee.”

“Noted,” Sam said. “So can I have one now?”

Dean sighed. “Sure, but just one. If you want more, you can drive over to the bakery and help yourself to anything we forgot to clear out of the case last night.”

“Deano, there you are,” Gabriel said, striding over from where he’d been talking to Jack the intern. He stopped in front of Sam and looked up at him. “And you brought your own shade. Handy.”

Dean introduced them as Jody glanced around the studio counting heads. Whatever she observed had satisfied her, and she gave a shrill whistle to assemble a last minute crew meeting. The same crew from the previous weekend, plus a few additional people assembled around them while Dean glanced around hoping to catch a glimpse of Cas. He was beginning to feel that same strange sense of disappointment from last Sunday when Cas pushed through the studio door looking far more harried than anyone had a right to that early on a Sunday morning. Cas glanced around and heaved a huge sigh of relief before making his way over to stand on the fringes of the assembled crew.

“All right, guys,” Jody started. “First things first. For anyone who hasn’t met them yet, these are our stars, Dean Winchester and Gabriel Novak. Dean was nice enough to bring donuts for everyone, so make sure you get one before they’re gone.”
Dean tilted his head to the side in a little shrug as a few members of the crew brightened at the mention of donuts.

“Eileen here is our very special guest host and judge today, and I think most of you have had a chance to meet her yesterday.”

Eileen gave a little wave, and Dean noticed Sam raising his hand to return the gesture out the corner of his eye. He turned to find Sam half-dazedly smiling at Eileen like he’d witnessed her turn water into wine and was trying to rationalize how she’d pulled off the trick. Dean couldn’t decide if it would be more fun to tease Sam about it or to be grateful that maybe Sam would be too distracted by Eileen to pay any attention to him. He decided he’d reserve the option for potential teasing for later and stick to making a good impression on his new coworkers first.

“And here’s Castiel,” Jody said, noticing him at the back of the crowd. “Our fearless leader. Any last words before we charge into battle?”

Cas cleared his throat as the entire group turned to him. “You’ve all excelled at capturing the spirit of Cakepocalypse in planning and constructing the set, and now it’s time to reap the rewards. I look forward to carrying that spirit of… fun and humor into the show itself.”

“Right,” Jody said, when she realized Cas was done. “What he said. Our contestants will be here in twenty for makeup and their initial impressions interviews, and I want everyone on set in position at ten sharp. See you then.”

A steady procession of crew members shuffled past and picked out donuts. While Dean was distracted receiving compliments and thanks, Eileen had opened a conversation with Gabriel and Sam. The last of the crew members had claimed their donuts, and Dean was looking over the remaining selection considering which one he’d claim for himself when Cas sidled up and picked a chocolate donut from the box.

“I take it the very tall man is your brother,” Cas said, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Yeah, he’s a regular tree,” Dean replied, grinning at Cas and then pointing up at his mangled tie. “Stressful morning?”

Cas glanced down at himself and smoothed the tie flat. “Yes, I suppose so. The first day of a shoot is typically the hardest, with everyone learning their roles and acclimating to the pace of a new show. It will be easier tomorrow. Or at least I can hope it will be. How about you? I take it you were able to sleep last night.”

Dean poured himself a cup of coffee as well and then picked a donut at random. He’d made them all, so it wasn’t as if he’d brought any that he wouldn’t like himself. “Yeah, but it’s still a little nerve-wracking, not knowing what to expect. This is all completely new to me,” he said, waving a hand around at the entire studio.

Cas nodded. “That might very well be an advantage, considering the nature of the show.” Dean thought about that for a second and had to agree. He’d been about to comment but Cas kept right on talking, noticing who Sam was conversing animatedly with. “I see you and your brother have met Eileen, then?”

Dean shook his head. “Sam’s monopolized the conversation so far, but they seem to be hitting it off.”

When Dean had learned that their first guest chef was deaf, he’d practiced a few signs to welcome
her. Eileen noticed Dean and Cas watching her, and smiled over at them when Dean waved and introduced himself, fingerspelling his name and fumbling his way through the signs for nice to meet you. She appreciated his effort and then demonstrated it correctly for him.

“Nice to meet you, too.”

Jody came back over to break up their little chat before it could even get started to whisk them all off to makeup and wardrobe. By the time they’d all suffered through the indignity of makeup and Dean was dressed in a freshly starched chef’s jacket with Chef Dean embroidered on the breast, he, Eileen, and Gabriel were laughing together like a bunch of old friends while Sam, Cas, and Eileen’s interpreter Mildred commiserated in one corner over just how difficult it was going to be to keep the three of them in check during the long day of filming.

When they were ready, Claire came by to walk them through the entire day’s procedure, demonstrating everything from how to open the cupboards where the sample challenge cakes were stored to how to operate the toy gun that would shoot a blizzard of play money at the winner at the end of the episode. Cas gave Gabriel a scathing glare the moment he tried to reach for the money gun, and Gabe held up both hands in surrender before making a vow not to attempt to shoot it prematurely. The money gun was placed into Eileen’s care after Cas determined she was the most trustworthy member of the cast.

During their set tour, Dean had gotten a glimpse of the gorgeous sample cakes Eileen had made. They spent the rest of their time waiting for filming to start discussing the finer points of baking and cake decorating, much to Gabriel’s— and everyone else’s— delight. If they were talking cake, they couldn’t be getting up to shenanigans.

“Okay, everyone,” Jody said, breezing back into the studio. “You should all have a copy of the schedule. Alex is finishing up with the contestants, and we’re gonna move right into the first segment as soon as we’re done here.”

Dean glanced down at the sheet of paper Claire had handed him when he’d sat down at the big judge’s table. He looked over the long list of shooting objectives, which he’d already committed to memory from Cas’s email the night before, and shoved the sheet back onto the little shelf below the desk. Cas had been right with his reminder that not knowing exactly how this was gonna go might very well work to their advantage.

“We’re ready when you are,” Gabriel assured her.

Jody nodded as Alex took her place behind the big camera, and Claire and Kaia took up stations on either side of her with shoulder cameras. It was only then that Dean looked around the studio and noticed what he hadn’t before. When he’d walked around the kitchens to inspect the setup, he’d been looking for all the things he’d normally expect to see in a kitchen, and not all the small cameras mounted inconspicuously around each station so every step of each contestant’s work could be recorded.

Dean leaned over to mutter at Gabriel, “Hell, I think I’d probably fuck up out of sheer panic with this much focus on my work.”

Gabriel smiled mischievously and waggled his eyebrows at Dean. “Good thing you just gotta stand around and look like you know what you’re talking about then.”

The lights in the studio kicked up a notch and Jody called action. Dean watched as a pre-recorded intro played on all the monitors, where Gabriel introduced the premise of the show to a snappy little tune. As the jingle crescendoed and the Cakepocalypse title card filled the screens, the three
contestants were ushered into the room and up to one side of the judge’s table.

“Welcome to Cakepocalypse, guys,” Gabriel said. “Are you ready to put your skills to the test?”

The contestants nodded, looking slightly panicky but hopeful and determined.

“So let’s get down to introductions, get us all on friendly terms. Ash, love the hair, by the way. Let’s start with you. What do you hope to achieve here on Cakepocalypse?”

The man looked uncomfortable in his apron, but tugged at it as he flipped his hair back over his shoulder and gave a confident look over at the judges. “I work at a roadhouse, flip a ton of burgers, even flip a few pancakes when the need arises. But my attempts at baking have left my employer less than impressed. I want to prove that I am more than just a line cook who takes the occasional nap on the pool table. Plus ten grand would make for some serious upgrades to my computing power for my… sideline interests.”

“Noble goals, Ash,” Gabriel replied after a pause to raise a curious eyebrow in Ash’s direction and then turned to the second contestant. “Linda, what are your goals today?”

The woman stood up straight, her hands folded in front of her. “My neighbor Eunis is always turning up her nose at my baking, as if her snickerdoodles are any better than the cookies I made for the school symphony’s bake sale last spring. My son, Kevin, liked mine better, anyway. But mostly I want Eunis to eat her words. Preferably in the form of delicious pastries.”

“Aah, revenge,” Gabriel said with an approving nod. “One of my personal favorite goals. And that brings us to you, Jenny. What are your secret cake-related motivations?”

The woman shifted from foot to foot, finally taking a deep breath. “I need to redeem myself from last Valentine’s Day’s office party fiasco. I didn’t know the candy hearts would melt when I baked them into the cupcakes, and I ended up with bleeding hearts in all my cupcakes.”

“Ooh, nicely gruesome, but maybe more appropriate for Halloween or April Fool--”

“Hearts! In my cupcakes!” Jenny repeated, cutting off Gabriel and clearly becoming frazzled.

Dean leaned back in his chair to shoot Eileen a concerned glance behind Gabriel’s back. From the look on her face Dean was pretty sure she was struggling just as mightily to contain her laughter. At least the two of them were convinced this episode was gonna be anything but dull.

“Yes, well…” Gabriel glanced from Jenny about to have a minor breakdown over to Jody beside the camera. Jody urged him to get on with it with a wave of her hand, so Gabriel did. “Hopefully today you’ll have a chance to redeem yourself. Because that’s the name of the game here on Cakapocalypse!”

Jody caught Jenny’s attention and gave her an encouraging thumbs up. Even Alex leaned out from behind her camera to give her a bolstering nod. Gabriel led Eileen and Dean out from behind the desk as he introduced the first challenge of the day.

“So we all know why we’re here today, to see which one of you is the least terrible, which is a highly attainable goal to shoot for. And speaking of shooting, the least terrible one of you will be leaving with ten thousand smackers. And by that I mean cold hard cash, and not some sort of novelty product. Though Eileen’s prepared to shoot your winnings at you with a fascinating novelty product.”

Gabriel eyeballed the money gun that Eileen had tucked through her belt after Jody cautioned her
not to leave it anywhere Gabriel might pick it up. Jody, Cas, and even Sam had caught the
movement and along with Mildred were all doing their best renditions of every possible gesture--
standard sign language or otherwise--to indicate that Gabriel was still forbidden from touching the
money gun. Dean caught them all in the act and shook his head.

“Yeah, they only trust Eileen to carry the gun.”

Gabriel shot Dean a commiserating frown. “It’s like they know us or something.”

Dean just shrugged and let Gabriel get back to his hosting duties, glad he’d at least finally had
something to say. He was really earning that paycheck now.

“But we’re not here to make war, because today’s challenges are all about love. Our fabulous guest
judge today has done us the honor of making three scrumptious cakes in a style she’s becoming a
celebrity for in her own right. Eileen, tell us about your creations, and help us spread the love.”

Gabriel stepped aside as the door of the first large cupboard opened, revealing three small but
beautifully displayed mirror glazed cakes, each unsubtly decorated to the love theme with vibrant
red hearts.

Poor Jenny came very close to passing out, save for Ash and Linda each grabbing one of her
elbows and offering her a bit of support.

“Sorry, Jenny,” Eileen said, looking only mildly apologetic.

“Hearts,” Jenny muttered. “Of course it would be hearts.”

“At least this time it’s intentional,” Dean replied heartily. “And they’re not cupcakes.”

“Why don’t you tell everyone what their objectives are, Deano?”

Dean cleared his throat. “Eileen’s mastered the mirror glaze, which can be tricky if the base cake
and mousse aren’t cold enough to harden the glaze on contact.”

“Sure, Dean, just hand over the keys to the kingdom, why don’t you,” Gabriel teased, letting the
contestants know, if they were paying attention and not still traumatized, that this was a vital clue
to producing a quality result.

“It takes a steady hand and it can be a bit tricky to keep the chocolate glaze at just the right
temperature to get that smooth, shiny finish,” Eileen added.

“So that’s your expert advice, contestants,” Gabriel said, and then turned to Eileen. “I gotta say,
Eileen, these are some of the most gorgeous confections I’ve ever laid my eyes on. They’re
literally shiny. It almost breaks my heart thinking about cutting them up and eating them.”

“They’re made to be enjoyed, and they taste just as good as they look,” she reminded him.
“Ah, such is love,” Gabriel mused. “So tempting, and so fleeting, devoured in a moment of ecstasy to live a lifetime on the hips.”

Dean snorted and shook his head, making a face at Gabriel’s terrible attempt at romantic poetry, or whatever the fuck he was trying to do. “It’s cake, dude. It looks good, it tastes good, you give it to someone you love because you want to make them happy. The cake’s not love, it’s just a cake. The love is in the making of it, and sharing it with people you care about.”

“Deano, you’ve got hidden depths, my boy,” Gabriel said, slapping him on the back and nudging Dean clear of what was about to be a contestant stampede. “Each of you will have an hour and a half to duplicate the sample cake of your choice. The recipes have all been uploaded on your tablets at each of your stations. When you’re ready, Eileen, you can give the command to start.”

She took a step back as well, holding up her left hand and twisting her right index finger against it.

“In case anyone was wondering, that was ASL for begin,” Dean said. “If I were you I’d get baking now.”

Maybe Linda and Ash took pity on poor Jenny, but they’d charged forward while she still stood there and blinked, shaking off the horror of her past cupcake failure. They left her with the one cake that wasn’t heart-shaped itself, and only had a few chocolate leaf hearts decorating the surface of the red and white glaze. Eileen gave her an encouraging nod, and Jenny took a deep breath and visibly composed herself before marching up to the cupboard and claiming her cake.

The three contestants got to work, two of them selecting a white cake base while Linda opted for a rich chocolate, which she added an inordinate amount of red food coloring to. Linda and Jenny dumped ingredients in their stand mixers while Ash attempted to whip together his batter by hand. He struggled to beat the butter and sugar together, but Dean couldn’t fault him on his persistence despite several messy spills.

Jenny and Linda poured their batter into round cake pans while Ash eventually slopped his lumpy batter into a heart-shaped pan. Eileen, Gabriel, and Dean offered up the occasional comment, but they also spent quite a bit of time wandering around the studio, both to get a better look at what the contestants were up to, as well as to simply alleviate the boredom of sitting in one spot and watching three people quietly go about destroying three kitchens.

“So, Cas,” Dean said, finding Cas by the coffee machine about half an hour into the first baking challenge.

“Hello, Dean. Shouldn’t you be observing the contestants?”

Dean shrugged and refilled his cup. “They got their cakes in the oven, and I’m already worried that Ash’s is gonna have big crystallized butter lumps all through it, and Linda used cooking spray instead of butter to line her pan. I think we all know how that’s gonna go. They can whip up their icing for a minute or two while I say hello to my favorite producer. So, how do you think it’s going so far? We got a show here, or what?”

Cas smiled at Dean’s nervous rambling. “Yes, Dean, I definitely think we have a show here, or I wouldn’t have funded the project.”

“But it’s going well, right? I mean,” Dean rubbed the back of his neck and then gestured over to the contestants hard at work mixing up mousse and glaze, “it’s kinda all up to them now, right?”

Cas looked at Dean seriously. “No, it’s up to you, and you’re doing wonderfully, Dean, just as I knew you would.”
Dean stood there and blinked at him for a second, having no idea how to accept that kind of compliment. He finally gave up and just nodded once before returning to his place at the judge’s table to offer more commentary.

“I didn’t know you could make buttercream with granulated sugar,” Gabriel commented at one point when Ash poured a couple cups of the stuff into a bowl and began hand mixing it with a whisk.

“You can’t,” Eileen replied.

Linda measured out powdered sugar for her icing, but added half a brick of cream cheese to the butter before setting it all to mixing. Dean glanced over at Eileen and asked if cream cheese frosting was standard for a mirror glaze. She just shook her head slowly and replied, “I always use a mousse, something light to counteract the heaviness of the glaze.”

Dean frowned and wondered if he shouldn’t have been more concerned about choking to death on a frozen hockey puck of a cake than accidental poisoning, but moved on to the final contestant.

Jenny had already set her icing to mix and dumped the ingredients for the two-toned mirror glaze into two double boilers to melt. She scooped up a few tablespoons of the red chocolate candy melts and drizzled it onto waxed paper to make four perfect heart-shaped adornments. Dean was impressed not only with her time management skills, but also her fortitude for persisting in the task. It was like watching her work through her baking-related trauma in real time.

She set the paper aside to cool and then all three contestants stopped to check on their cakes. Jenny’s was done, Linda’s was slightly overdone since she hadn’t put quite enough batter in the pan in her haste to get it in the oven in time, and Ash’s looked good on the outside but Dean was still silently cringing at what he knew it must look like on the inside.

Ash slathered lumpy frosting on his heart-shaped cake before it had even begun to cool, reducing the grainy mixture to a gooey, runny mess. Linda was slightly more successful since her thinner cake had cooled a bit more and her cream cheese frosting was sturdy enough to take the heat, but Dean was still slightly horrified as both Linda and Ash finally remembered the blast chiller. Meanwhile Jenny had put her cake directly into the little refrigerator at her station. She was a few minutes behind her competitors, but at least when she spread her icing, it didn’t melt into puddles. Linda and Ash brought their surface-frozen cakes back to their stations just as Jenny brought hers to the freezer to chill.

“Looks like Jenny’s having trouble keeping up with the competition,” Gabriel said.

Eileen shook her head. “She’s holding her own.”

“She’s got plenty of time,” Dean added. “She’s just got to pour the glaze and do a quick refreeze and they’ve still got fifteen minutes.”

Jenny must’ve heard them because she looked pained as she glanced up to see the huge timer ticking down. She bit her lip and looked at the freezer, then back up at the clock as it ticked through another minute, and then pulled out her cake and carefully raced back to her station.

“See?” Dean grinned at Gabriel before taking a look at the other contestants’ progress. “I’m honestly more worried about what Ash is up to with that piping bag.”

The bag in question was filled with a garishly bright orange frosting. He’d already made several attempts to craft a couple of purple flowers that looked more like painfully bruised nipples than
cheerful pansies, and Dean was not at all convinced he was gonna have any better luck with the orange. Linda, meanwhile, scattered a blizzard of coconut flakes onto an oddly shaped but well-poured red glazed lump. She set the heart atop her cake and took it over to the blast chiller with seven minutes left in the challenge.

“Did either of you see what she made the heart out of?” Dean asked amid the stirrings of a creeping sense of dread. “Because I didn’t see what she made the heart out of.”

Eileen turned from where she’d been watching Mildred sign Dean’s words, leaned forward around Gabriel and gave him an evil grin. “Cream cheese frosting.”

Dean frowned, mildly horrified at the thought of a fist-sized lump of frosted cream cheese and wondering if he’d be required to take a bit of it, while Gabriel cackled.

“Oh, this is gonna be good, and by good I mean disgusting.”

“Be nice, Gabriel,” Eileen said.

Gabriel cleared his throat. “Yo, baking peeps. This is your five minute warning. It’s time to close out those love letters you’re baking, because it’s just about time for Cupid to collect your deliveries.”

Dean side eyed Gabriel, who gave him a playful shrug in return. The three bakers picked up the pace, but none of them seemed about to derail completely, so Dean turned his attention around the rest of the studio. He was about to feel disappointed when he didn’t immediately spot Cas where he’d seen him last beside Sam and Mildred, but then he noticed him over at the craft services table refilling his coffee and picking out a donut. Dean let out a quietly pained sound, wishing with everything he had that he could just go eat one of his own donuts instead of having to taste the three abominations.

Cas noticed him watching and smiled, raising his cup in a goofy little toast to Dean. For his part, Dean shut his mouth and did his best to smile reassuringly back at Cas. If nothing else, the reminder that Cas believed in him and was still sticking around in a show of support felt pretty damn good. Dean let those thoughts comfort him while Gabriel counted down the last ten seconds of the challenge and the three bakers raised their hands and stepped back from their creations as a loud buzzer blared.

Jody called cut, and for the first time in an hour and a half, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay, take five minutes while we get everything set to shoot the judging. This is your big chance to use the bathroom, get a drink, whatever you need to do.”

Eileen got up immediately and went over to talk with Mildred and Sam, and Dean took the opportunity to refill his coffee mug. Not because Cas was still standing by the coffee machine. That was just a bonus.

“You really think people are gonna watch this?” Dean began as he poured his coffee.

Cas grinned at him over the rim of his own mug. “It will be far more entertaining when it’s been edited down into a thirty minute program.”

Dean huffed a little laugh at that and took a sip of his coffee. “Yeah, I guess there were at least five minutes worth of highlights in there.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Dean,” Cas replied with a grin. “I think we might be able to stretch it to seven.”
“So how are you doing? You don’t mind just hanging around at work on a beautiful Sunday morning?”

“It’s afternoon now,” Cas said, checking the big clock on the wall. “And no, I don’t mind. This is my job, and the hours might be unconventional sometimes, but that’s the nature of this business. I believe your work also necessitates long, irregular hours?”

“Yeah, well,” Dean hesitated, not really having an answer for that. “I hope you get some time off once in a while. And sorry if I’ve been eating away at what little free time you’ve got.”

Cas smiled a little shyly at that. “I don’t consider it a burden, Dean. I always appreciate our talks, and I’ve been very happy to get to know you better over the last weeks.”

“Yeah, same here, Cas. I’ve, uh…”

Dean wasn’t sure exactly where their conversation had been headed, but like every time he got to talking with Cas the rest of the world had fallen away until it all came rushing back with a repeat of the buzzer sound that had signaled the end of round one. This time it was followed up with Jody yelling for everyone to take their places.

Dean quickly topped off his coffee, flustered now that the weird bubble of intimacy around them had shattered so abruptly. He couldn’t even look directly at Cas, or he wouldn’t have missed the same frustrated disappointment on Cas’s face. “I guess I should get moving before Jody comes over to drag me away, huh?”

Cas just stood there nodding while Dean hustled back to stand beside Gabriel and Eileen in front of the judges’ table. The lights had been dimmed a bit on the three miraculously tidied up kitchens to showcase the three bakers now standing beside their creations, which were now waiting to be revealed on three metal kitchen carts. Claire stood ready to shoot closeups of each cake as it was unveiled, while Jack the intern hurried off set. Jody called out one final warning, and then filming resumed.

“Well, bakers,” Gabriel started. “That was fun, wasn’t it?”

Linda looked fairly confident, Ash just shrugged, but poor Jenny was still trembling and shooting worried glances at the opaque plastic dome at her side as if she was terrified to lift the lid and find a real beating heart in place of her cake, but she nodded absently at Gabriel’s question anyway.

“So are you all feeling the love?” Gabriel asked the bakers, before turning between Dean and Eileen. “I know these two want to feel some love. And I really want to feel some cakes. So let’s see what you’ve managed to create.”

Dean and Eileen followed Gabriel to Linda’s cart. As they approached, she lifted the lid, revealing her creation beside Eileen’s original. Considering Dean knew what was actually underneath the shiny surface, he had to admit that aesthetically at least she hadn’t done too bad.

“Well it definitely looks like a mirror glaze cake,” Dean said.

Eileen followed up with, “You managed to get a good shine and consistency to the glaze. That’s impressive for a first try.”

“Looks a bit like it’s got a bad case of dandruff,” Gabriel added, not particularly helpfully as Linda frowned at him.

“Yeah, the coconut’s a nice touch in moderation, but it’s not supposed to be a Sno-Ball,” Dean
agreed.

“Well let’s see if the inside is as nice as the outside,” Gabriel said, and Linda set to work cutting out a slice for them all to sample and plating it up.

Dean looked at the cross-section of cake, glaze and far too much heavy cream cheese frosting and strategically cut a piece that looked mostly like cake with his fork. Gabriel and Eileen followed after him, each of them tasting the sample before pronouncing their judgment.

“Interesting choice of the red velvet,” Dean said, “But it just tastes like a chocolate cake you dumped a bunch of food coloring in.”

“That’s what red velvet is,” Linda argued.

Dean shook his head and then shrugged. “It’s buttermilk and vinegar that make red velvet, and I don’t get a taste of that here. Just the cream cheese frosting.”

“I thought this was supposed to be a mousse,” Gabriel said, pushing his tongue around to clear the heavy, frozen frosting glob he’d shoved in his mouth. “I think that would’ve worked better with the thick glaze.”

Eileen nodded. “I think the cream cheese might be too rich for this, but the flavor is excellent, and the glaze is the perfect consistency.”

Linda smiled tightly and the judges moved on to Ash. He lifted the lid to reveal a lumpy, half-melted heart and Jenny let out a little strangled scream at the sight. Dean smiled apologetically at her and she got herself under control.

“Yeah, I don’t think I got this one,” Ash said, looking forlornly at his creation.

“I think you could’ve gotten a better consistency in the batter as well as the frosting if you’d used the mixer instead of trying to beat everything by hand,” Dean suggested.

Ash just nodded. “Yeah, technology is our friend.”

Gabriel prompted him to cut them a sample. Dean got a bit with a caramelized chunk of sugar in it, and deferred to Gabriel to begin the judging while he attempted to swallow it and finally gave up and spit it into his hand.

“All the flavors are in there, but maybe not in the right order?” he offered in explanation for what he was tasting.

Dean nodded, having finally pried the sugar lump off his teeth. “Mixer would’ve helped.”

“And freezing the cake between each step is practically a requirement of getting a solid base for the glaze. But the flowers aren’t half bad for a first try,” Eileen added encouragingly.

“Yeah, that one looks like a nipple,” Gabriel said, pointing to one of the purple flowers with his fork.

“I thought so, too,” Ash agreed confidentially.

“You might have a future in the erotic cake decorating business,” Dean replied, and Ash looked like he was taking that suggestion under serious consideration as they moved on to Jenny.

Gabriel looked at her kindly until she took a deep breath and seemed to relax a little bit. “It’s okay,
Jenny. You did great. Show us what you’ve got.”

She lifted the lid, revealing a cake that looked practically identical to Eileen’s sample, right down to the red chocolate hearts on top.

“Wow,” was all Eileen said.

“That’s really incredible work there,” Dean agreed.

“So which one’s yours again?” Gabriel asked with a smile, and Jenny blushed under the praise. “Okay enough of that. We all know you make a pretty cake. Let’s have a taste, shall we?”

Fortified, Jenny only hesitated for a second before plunging the knife into the glaze, cutting a portion that included one of the chocolate decorations on top.

“You layered the mousse on well. The cake is a bit rich, but the mousse balances it out nicely,” Dean offered.

“Tastes like a good vanilla cake with a good chocolate frosting,” Gabriel said. “I got no complaints.”

“The glaze is really well done,” Eileen added. “You blended the red and white smoothly and I honestly wouldn’t be able to tell it apart from one of my own.”

Jenny appeared to be on the verge of tears at the glowing commentary as Gabriel leaned in to add, “There’s heart in this cupcake, but it’s the right kind this time.”

Dean nodded behind him. “I think we have our winner.”


Jack the intern hurried over pushing another metal kitchen cart draped with a decorative sparkly gold cloth. He’d nearly made it the entire way before one corner of the cloth caught beneath one of the wheels and the entire cart nearly toppled to the floor. Dean reached out quickly and averted the disaster, as an apologetically horrified Jack stood there gawping at the near-fiasco.

“It’s fine, Jack,” Gabriel assured him, before turning to Dean. “He’s my idiot brother’s kid. He’s new at this, but he’s doing a great job.”

Dean smiled reassuringly as Jack bent down to tug the drape free of the wheel. When he stood back up, Gabriel told him to do the honors, and Jack whipped off the drape with a dramatic flourish, revealing Jenny’s prize for winning the first round.

“To help you keep making great cakes in the future, you’ve won a new stand mixer just like the ones in our kitchens, and a complete set of professional cake decorating tools,” Gabriel announced, picking up the remaining bit of sparkly gold fabric on the cart. “And as the winner of round one, you get to wear the fancy Golden Chef’s hat.” He walked over to her and put the oversized spangled hat on her head.

“Oh gosh,” she replied, straightening the hat and looking slightly dubious about that part of the honor. “I’m gonna have fun playing with all those tools.”

“I’m sure you will,” Gabriel agreed. “But first we have a second round challenge for all three of you. Let’s see what round two has in store for us!”
A little musical flourish reminiscent of the opening theme song played over the studio’s speakers and then Jody called cut yet again. She stepped out from behind Alex’s camera and checked her watch against the big clock on the wall.

“Okay, we’re gonna take twenty this time, and reset for round two. This is the last chance everyone has for a break for the next three hours, so smoke ‘em if you got ‘em, lunch is served, and everyone hit the head. There’s no potty breaks in round two.”

Dean grinned at Jody as she strolled out of the studio, and then turned to see Cas walking toward him. “I like her,” Dean said, pointing after Jody. “That is a no-bullshit lady.”

Cas nodded, watching her leave, and agreed. “She does run a tight set. The entire crew loves her.”

Dean sighed, taking in the buzz of activity and watching as Patience helped wheel one of the carts with Eileen’s cakes away. He called out to stop her, and then led Cas over to her.

“It would be a crime not to at least taste the real deal after all that,” Dean told Cas, handing him a fork and picking one up for himself. “Or did you have other plans for it?”

Cas shook his head. “As far as I know they’re all destined to be thrown out.”

Dean gasped in horror, glancing up at Patience and then handing her a fork as well. “We can’t let that happen as responsible human beings. Dig in.”

The three of them spent the next five minutes demolishing Ash’s sample cake-- the one without the weird purple nipples-- as Dean explained the finer technical details of its creation. Unbeknownst to him, Eileen was proficient at reading lips, and stood across the room beside Sam while turning a lovely shade of pink as they praised her baking.

Cake devoured, Dean and Cas let Patience get back to work. They heard Gabriel wail plaintively that she hadn’t managed to steal one of the cakes for him, but they were too busy talking and laughing to worry about it.

“And we’re set for round two,” Jody called out exactly twenty minutes later, and production started up again.

Gabriel, Dean, and Eileen stood beside the cupboard labeled with a large number two while the three contestants fidgeted in front of them, waiting for their final challenge to be revealed.

“It’s time to think about the consequences of giving your special someone a sweet and delicious piece of your heart,” Gabriel said, and then turned to open the cupboard doors. “The first challenge was a sweet nothing, but the second is gonna be a work of art to last a lifetime.”
He opened the doors to reveal a spectacular three-tiered wedding cake decorated to look like a Monet painting. The cake itself was airbrushed to resemble a pond, while three-dimensional water lilies adorned the top of each individual tier. Dean whistled in admiration of Eileen’s handiwork, and shot her a covert little thumbs up.

“For round two you’ll each have an emergency button you can press that will give you a full five minutes of help from either Chef Dean or Chef Eileen. You can only use it once in the entire round, so don’t be too hasty with it. And don’t worry, I swear I won’t try to help any of you,” Gabriel said. “But I might try to hinder you.”

“No he won’t,” Eileen assured them while Dean shook his head.

“We’ll tie him up if we have to,” Dean agreed.

“Kinky,” Gabriel said with a smirk at Dean, and then turned back to the contestants with a clap of his hands. “Okay chefs, the recipe is on your tablets, and you’ll have three hours to duplicate this exhibit of edible art. Will yours be worthy of a museum?” Gabriel asked, and nobody moved or replied. “Well, will it? Because I just started the clock. I need an answer in three hours.”

The contestants stood there for one more beat and then took off at a frantic pace while Gabriel watched them go with a snort. Round two went a little more smoothly for the judges, if not the contestants. Jody encouraged them to walk around, and to make superficially helpful commentary on all the baking without actually giving any directly helpful advice. Gabriel excelled at being unhelpful.

The contestants worked frantically trying to figure out just how much cake they needed and how best to bake all the layers and then assemble them, and then struggled to master the airbrush technique needed to decorate the fondant frosting. Ash completely abandoned the airbrush and instead decided to swirl the food coloring onto the cake by hand with a basting brush. Linda excelled with the airbrush, but had a bit of difficulty crafting the dozens of flowers out of fondant. Jenny’s flowers were artistically perfect, but by the time Gabriel gave the five minute warning she’d only managed to make three of them. With a sigh of despair, she finished assembling what she had as the clock ticked down to zero.
The annoying buzzer sounded again, and all three contestants looked on the verge of collapse as Jody called cut.

“Five minutes again,” Jody announced without additional commentary this time, and her crew jumped into action to reset the stage for the final judging.

Dean had checked in with Cas multiple times during the three hour challenge, where their conversation had largely remained in the relatively safe territory of some of the more glaring missteps each of the bakers had made, while Cas marveled at Dean’s expertise and Dean repeatedly downplayed his knowledge and skill as something that just comes with a lifetime of practice.

“The entire point is that not everyone has the ability or focus or dedication to invest a lifetime of practice into mastering a skill, Dean.”

Cas maintained forceful eye contact with Dean until he relented and accepted the compliment. For his part, Dean finally tore his gaze away to glance awkwardly down at his shoes before mumbling out his thanks, clearing his throat and strolling over to observe the baking again. After all, that’s why Cas had hired him in the first place.

Now he had only one more segment to film, and as Jack rolled the last cart out for the final judging, Dean looked over to Cas again. Cas and Sam both shot him an enthusiastic thumbs up as he took his place at the judge’s table, and then Jody gave Gabriel his cue to begin.

“We’ve seen some truly fascinating baking techniques today, and barring one minor fire I think you all did swimmingly.”

Ash gave a little shrug, having been responsible for the fire while attempting a shortcut and overfilling all his pans so that they overflowed in the oven as they rose. It was more smoke than fire, but Dean was really not looking forward to tasting his smoke-flavored angel food cake.

“So let’s move right to the main event here,” Gabriel said, as Alex maintained a close-up shot of Eileen’s gorgeous sample cake and Claire and Kaia flanked Linda’s cake for her big reveal. “Show us what you’ve made, Linda?”

“The airbrushing is really well done,” Dean said, as a side by side of Linda and Eileen’s cake flashed up on the overhead monitor for comparison. “Nice job with the fondant, as well.”

“And it’s definitely the right size,” Gabriel added, eyeballing both cakes against his own extended thumb.

Eileen snorted a laugh and then complimented Linda’s color palate and blending, and then asked for her to cut them a slice to sample. Linda brought them a large piece of the top layer that included one of the flowers and a green fondant lily pad to adorn the plate. Between the layers of white cake, the icing had a slightly pinkish tint that Eileen asked about before taking a taste.

“My son loves blue raspberry, so when I saw the blue cake, I knew it had to have raspberry filling.”

Eileen tasted it and hummed appreciation, then shoved the plate toward Gabriel to sample.

“Your son has good taste,” Gabriel added. “This is pretty damn good.”

Dean had to pull the plate out of Gabriel’s clutches to get a taste for himself. “Fondant flowers aren’t as easy as they look, huh?” he asked with a little smile and a quick glance over at Cas, who seemed exceedingly pleased that Dean had taken their earlier talk to heart. “But you’ve got the
flavors down here. This is a good cake.”

Linda thanked them, and they moved along to Ash, whose cake looked more like a foreshortened dome than a standard tiered wedding cake.

“So we had a little mishap with the baking, but you still managed to get something out of the oven,” Gabriel said as the odd mound of cake appeared on the screen beside the sample’s tall tower.

“Dang, it looks even sadder like that,” Ash said, glancing up at the monitor.

“When making a layer cake, it’s advisable to bake it in layers,” Dean said. “Four or five thin cakes stacked together. It cuts baking time, and makes for a much better consistency in the cake.”

“You don’t end up with burnt edges and a gooey middle,” Eileen added, nodding at Dean.

“Hey, I like my gooey middle,” Gabriel said, rubbing his stomach.

“Not in the middle of a cake,” Dean said.

“Says you,” Gabriel replied. “Go ahead and cut us your best slice, Ash.”

He did, and each of them took the smallest bite possible of the resulting product. There wasn’t much to it since he’d had to chuck more than half his original cake batter after the overflow incident, but what remained wasn’t nearly as tainted by the smoke as Dean had feared. He’d used a mocha flavoring for the icing which helped mask the burnt flavor, but it didn’t hold a candle to Linda’s delicate raspberry cake, and Ash was perfectly content to admit as much.

They moved on to Jenny’s cake, which was nearly as tall and well-formed as Linda’s, only slightly bubbled on the top and listing a bit to one side as a result.

“Next time, cut the tops of each layer off so it stacks together without tipping,” Eileen suggested, tilting her head to the side to adjust for the cake’s lean.

“It’s like the leaning tower of pizza, but with cake instead,” Gabriel commented.

“It’s Pisa, not pizza,” Dean corrected him, but Gabriel just smirked at him and asked Jenny for her sample slice.

Eileen complimented the flavor, Gabriel again commented on the architectural marvel of it all, and Dean raved about the technical details of her flower craftsmanship. Overall, Jenny seemed pleased with their reviews, but now it was time to pass final judgment.

“Jack?” Gabriel called out, and Jack came rolling into the studio wearing roller skates, and deposited a golden cake-shaped trophy on the desk in front of Gabriel as he sailed past and off the opposite side of the set. Gabriel grinned through the entire performance, and then cleared his throat. “We have here the trophy for the winner of today’s Cakepocalypse.”

Eileen finally pulled the money gun from her belt and set it on the desk in front of her.

Gabriel looked between Dean and Eileen, and they all nodded. They’d essentially already agreed on the winner.

“The winner, and the recipient of this spectacular trophy, the true meaning of love-- which is obviously good cake-- and the ten thousand dollar cash prize… is Linda!”
Eileen shot the money gun in Linda’s direction, spraying a shower of fake bills across the stage, as all three of them walked around to congratulate her and present the trophy to her.

Linda looked directly into the camera as Gabe handed it to her, and said, “Suck it, Eunis.”

A flash of surprise crossed Gabriel’s face, but then he turned to the camera and grinned. “I don’t know you, Eunis, but you inspired a great cake today. From me, Dean, Eileen, and everyone here in the Cakepocalypse, thanks for watching.”

The camera slowly backed away, the shot widening out to show the entire studio as the closing credits theme song played, and then Jody called cut. The music stopped as an entirely different bustle of activity burst out on the set. Cleaning crews set to work on the three kitchens while another team restocked the pantry, and yet more people busied themselves with resetting the equipment for the next morning’s shoot. Jack rolled around the studio on his skates, pushing a broom and collecting up all the fake cash. Gabriel had disappeared along with his assistant, and Dean wasn’t really sure what he was supposed to be doing now that they’d completely run off the end of the day’s schedule.

Castiel rushed in with stacks of paperwork and brought each of the three contestants over to the judges’ table to read through and sign all the release forms as well as handing over their compensation packets. Dean couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed that Cas was obviously too busy to just hang out again. He looked around the studio hoping he could use Sam as an excuse to loiter around the set until Cas was free again, but he froze in his tracks when he spotted his brother involved in an intense and seemingly flirtatious conversation with Eileen. Sam may have spent most of his life inadvertently cockblocking him, but Dean wasn’t about to barge in and screw things up when it looked like they were both into each other.

While Dean was distracted staring at the spectacle of Sam enacting his weird moose mating dance, Jody came over and startled him.

“They are kinda cute,” she said, noticing Sam and Eileen before tuning them out and turning to Dean. “Great job today, by the way. We finished up early. Tomorrow’s guest host is local-- or at least more local than Eileen. He’s bringing his sample cakes with him in the morning, so we’ve officially closed the kitchen for tonight.”

Dean nodded absentmindedly at this barrage of information. “Thanks. It’s been a lot of fun. You guys run a tight ship here.”

Jody grinned at him and patted him on the shoulder. “You can thank Cas for that. He’s a great guy to work for.”

Dean craned his neck around to see Cas still going over paperwork with Linda and Jenny. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“Well, you have a good night, Dean. We’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning. I guess I shouldn’t expect another batch of fresh donuts, eh?”

Dean shook his head and smiled sadly. “Probably not. I think I’m gonna grab some dinner and hit the hay. Who knew it was more work sitting on my ass all day watching other people bake than actually baking myself?”

Jody laughed at that and then hurried off to finish up her work so she could go home as well. He was just in time to see Sam waving goodbye to Eileen as she hurried off toward the door to the studio with Mildred in tow. Dean frowned and then slowly made his way to his brother’s side.
“Everything okay, Sammy?”

Sam smiled until the door had closed behind Eileen. “Yeah. I invited her to dinner, but she’s got a flight to catch.”

“Flight?” Dean asked, realizing that he’d been assuming Eileen lived somewhere in LA, or at least in the surrounding area after Jody had mentioned that she wasn’t local.

“She’s living in Ireland right now,” Sam replied with a little frown and a pinch between his eyebrows.

“Oh,” Dean said, actually feeling a tug of pity for Sam. “Well, that sucks. She makes a damn fine cake.”

“Yeah,” Sam replied absently before perking up a bit. “You did good out there, too.”

“I stood around watching people fucking up cakes, and pointing out exactly how they were fucking up. It’s not rocket science.”

Sam’s smile widened. “You have no idea what a decent human being you are, do you?”

Dean grumbled a little bit and headed toward the door. He cast one last glance over his shoulder to see Cas still preoccupied at the desk before sighing and giving up waiting. “How about dinner, then?”

Sam was right on his heels. “I don’t have any other plans. How do you feel about Thai?”

Dean was practically out the door before Cas glanced up just in time to watch him go. Cas heaved a resigned sigh and then dove back into his work. He’d make sure he’d do better tomorrow.
Dean and Sam parted ways on the sidewalk after dinner. They’d spent an hour rehashing the entire day, and despite a bit of friendly teasing over the fact that Sam had at least walked away with Eileen’s phone number, it had largely been a good distraction for Dean. When Sam left, he had nothing else to keep his mind off Cas. He drove home wondering if he should’ve stuck around a little bit longer. Mabe there was something he should’ve said or done differently. Or maybe he should’ve at least said goodbye.

It had been a long time since he’d felt so completely at a loss around anyone. Dean was the first person to admit that he wasn’t always the smoothest dude when it came to people he was attracted to, but he couldn’t remember feeling this utterly baffled by anyone. He and Cas had definitely hit it off, evidenced by their increasingly easy conversations over the phone and texting the last few weeks. There was just something so different about Castiel that gave him pause, and for the life of him Dean couldn’t figure out why.

By the time he got home, Cas hadn’t texted him, hadn’t called, even though they’d sort of gotten into the habit of exchanging messages. Dean spent a very long and restless night wondering if he’d somehow fucked things up between them again.

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Cas finally shook Linda’s hand and thanked her again for participating on the show. The studio had mostly cleared out by the time Linda had read the entire release form in excruciating detail, questioning half the clauses. He’d had to defend the legality of a good portion of the document before Linda was satisfied and finally signed it. He almost felt bad for poor Eunis when Linda finally walked out the door with her winnings in hand. A glance up at the clock on the wall informed him that it had been nearly an hour since he’d watched Dean leave with his brother.

He rested his elbows on the desk and rubbed his temples to massage away the beginnings of a headache. The craft services table had long ago been cleared away for the night, and it looked like it would be another tv dinner for him. The thought did nothing to ease his headache.

Grateful that at least it seemed that Gabriel had also left the building already, Cas stacked up his copies of all the signed release forms and trudged off to his office. He dropped the papers on his desk to be dealt with later and headed out in an exhausted daze. After more than twelve hours at work it was long past time to be leaving it behind for the day. As he made his way to his car and out onto the road hoping for a little respite, Cas’s thoughts stubbornly remained in the studio, frustratingly fixated on Dean Winchester.

Cas sighed when he was stopped by yet another red light. Traffic may have been blessedly light that late on a Sunday night, but that just made his slow progress home all the more insufferable. A few blocks from his building he gave in and pulled through a fast food window to pick up dinner. A greasy burger and fries seemed like just the thing to cheer him up as he chewed over his increasing Dean problem.

Not that Dean himself was a problem. Quite the opposite, actually. The man intrigued him like no one he’d ever met before. Despite the one little hiccup when Cas had inadvertently crossed a line and pried into his past on camera, Dean had proven to be a kind, engaging, intriguing man. If he wasn’t mistaken-- and he acknowledged that he often was in these matters-- Dean may have even been flirting with him a time or two.
Dean may technically be his employee as far as Cakepocalypse was concerned, and Cas had never presumed to use his position of power over anyone for his own personal romantic or sexual gain, so maybe that had something to do with his hesitancy now. Or perhaps their professional relationship was the reason he felt Dean may have been holding him so awkwardly at arm’s length. Cas wished his people skills hadn’t become so rusty. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d even considered engaging in a romantic relationship with anyone, and as he sat at the pick up window waiting for his order that thought gave him a case of mental whiplash that made him grateful he hadn’t still been driving.

He sat there, staring at the traffic driving past on the highway without really seeing it at all, desperately trying to recall a memory that felt just out of reach. It seemed like it was something he needed to remember urgently, something that would help him explain everything-- Dean, his feelings, his reticence— but the harder he tried to remember the more it all slipped away again. The window slid open with a bang, startling him out of his thoughts with the ruckus and the wafting scent of hot fries and a mouth-watering burger. He shook it off and thanked the woman who handed him his bag, driving off with nothing more than the vestiges of an itchy feeling that he still had no idea how to approach his little Dean problem.

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Dean arrived back at the studio by nine Monday morning. He’d stopped by the bakery on his way in and picked up a few dozen muffins that Charlie had made for him. It almost felt like cheating that he hadn’t made them with his own two hands, but at least they were his own recipe. In the lot beside the Impala was a bakery delivery truck from a shop called Purgatory up in Santa Barbara, and Dean did a double take. That was a long fucking way to go to order baked goods from, especially when they were filming a baking show inside the building. But then he shook his head and remembered that it was probably just today’s guest judge, some guy named Benny who was popular for his monster-themed pastries. Damn, if he was even forgetting the day’s schedule already, he needed to get some coffee in him before he forgot how to bake anything at all.

He’d been grateful that Sam had to go back to his own job and wasn’t lurking around outside the studio waiting for him until he needed a hand opening the door. With his hands full of two large boxes of muffins, Dean stood there contemplating how to get a finger around the door handle without dropping everything. Racing footsteps grew louder behind him and suddenly an out of breath Cas was offering him assistance.

“Did you jog here or something?” Dean asked as Cas gulped down air and shook his head.

“I parked across the lot just now and saw you struggling, so I ran to get the door for you.”

Dean couldn’t help but smile at that, but it turned to a frown as he took in the rest of Cas’s uncharacteristically haggard appearance. Even more than the day before, the guy looked like he could use a few more hours of sleep and maybe a massage with a happy ending. Dean shook that thought off and stuck to safer territory as Cas opened the door for him.

“You look beat, man. How late were you stuck here last night?”

Cas unthinkingly replied, “For about an hour after you left.”

Dean’s frown intensified as Cas led them through to the studio waiting for him until he needed a hand opening the door. With his hands full of two large boxes of muffins, Dean stood there contemplating how to get a finger around the door handle without dropping everything. Racing footsteps grew louder behind him and suddenly an out of breath Cas was offering him assistance.

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“You look beat, man. How late were you stuck here last night?”

Cas unthinkingly replied, “For about an hour after you left.”

Dean’s frown intensified as Cas led them through to the studio door and opened that for him as well. “Shit, dude, did you need me to stick around last night? I wasn’t sure, but everyone else seemed to be leaving. Please tell me I didn’t make you have to stay after school because I fucked off without telling you. It’s just… you looked busy, and a little bit annoyed. I didn’t want to bother you.”
Cas blinked through Dean’s entire rambling explanation as they walked to the craft services table. Dean set down the muffins and offered one to Cas. They poured coffee and fell easily back into their customary comfortable banter.

“I wouldn’t have been bothered, Dean. It’s my fault for not confirming that we were done filming for the day before attending to the contestant paperwork. My apologies for that.”

Dean finally smiled again, tapping his coffee cup gently against Cas’s and then taking a sip. “I guess we’re all good, then?”

Cas nodded, and the two of them discussed a few slight changes to the filming schedule until Jody showed up on set. She walked through the door and then held it open behind her for a large man who looked more like an old timey ship’s captain than a baker. Since he was pushing a cart bearing an assortment of boxes labeled *Pastry From Purgatory*, Dean assumed this must be Benny. That guess was confirmed when Cas introduced himself and Dean and offered to help him set up.

“Well, I reckon I should get the lay of the land,” Benny said to Cas, but he smiled at Dean, looking him up and down like he was debating whether or not he’d like to take a bite.

Dean couldn’t shake the odd feeling that he knew this Benny from somewhere, and he’d been about to ask if they’d ever met when Gabriel came swooping into the studio. Patience trailed behind him, having given up trying to go over the day’s schedule with her boss and resigning herself to the fact that Gabriel would not be bound by anyone else’s timetable.

“Ooh, are these today’s sweet treats,” Gabriel asked, eyeing the boxes and rubbing his hands together before glancing up at each of them. “What are our contestants gonna try to kill us with today?”

Cas cleared his throat and frowned at his cousin. “You didn’t succumb to an early grave yesterday, I think there’s a high likelihood you’ll survive today as well.”

Dean snorted a laugh while Gabriel just shook his head.

“You mock, Castiel,” Gabriel said, laying a solemn hand over his own heart and ruining the effect by smirking. “But it’s our burden to bear as judges. You must be Benny,” he added, holding out his hand for Benny to shake.

“Long as these contestant’s ain’t got access to poison, I think we’ll all pull through,” Benny replied.

The next hour dragged along once Benny had arranged his treats in the two display cupboards. Dean noted that Castiel hadn’t wandered off to take care of any other business. He even followed along when he, Gabriel, and Benny took their turns in the makeup chair. In addition to the inexplicable feeling of familiarity that Dean felt toward Benny, he also caught Cas giving the man strange looks on several occasions. Dean tried to brush the strange notion off as some inherent quality of Benny’s and did his best to focus on the day’s filming.

The three new contestants were ushered in the same way the previous day’s group had been, and Dean settled down into the routine of giving them little hints where he could and poking gentle fun along with Gabriel. The monster theme of the episode seemed to make the contestants a bit wary until Benny unveiled their first challenge.
Monster-themed cream filled donuts. Hannah emitted a little cooing noise while admiring them, Naomi made a disapproving noise and frowned slightly, while Zachariah looked offended that he was being asked to prepare something as uncouth as a donut with a goofy face drawn on it. All three of them, however, looked determined to win the round. They raced to select their samples when Gabriel announced they’d have one hour to complete the task.

Dean had walked around observing their progress, but as he headed back to the judges’ table he caught Cas lingering in the shadows just out of camera range and detoured over to see him. Cas had been standing with his hands in his pockets, frowning over at Naomi with a slight pinch between his brows. Dean glanced at her over his shoulder to watch her carefully jamming a syringe filled with raspberry jam into one of the donut monster’s heads.

“You look like you seen a ghost,” Dean whispered to him. “Something wrong?”

Cas shook himself off and gave Dean a tired smile. “It’s a slightly unsettling challenge, I suppose. I didn’t sleep well last night, and I believe I let my thoughts run away from me.”

“I feel you there, buddy,” Dean replied, letting his attention drift back over to see Zachariah scraping a hunk of half cooked dough out of the middle of one of his donuts. He turned back to see Cas’s frown had been redirected at him.

“Did you not sleep well either?” Cas asked.

Dean shook his head. “Just had some weird dreams, I guess. I should probably get back there,” he added, waving a hand vaguely at the table.

Cas nodded solemnly and Dean turned to discover Benny and Gabriel both watching his little exchange with Castiel. Benny leaned over and whispered something to Gabriel, who laughed and shook his head. Dean couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he was pretty damn sure it was all about him.

Naomi was pronounced the winner of the first round, since she’d produced the only monster donut that didn’t look like it’d been hunted through the woods and ritually slaughtered. After she’d been crowned with the sparkly golden chef’s hat and Jack wheeled out the cart with her prizes, Jody announced a short break for lunch while they reset the kitchens for the second round. While everyone descended on the craft services table like vultures, Cas waved Dean aside and quietly led him out of the studio and down the hall to his office.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I thought you might appreciate a bit of a respite from the crowd,” Cas said as he opened his office door. “I ordered a pizza for myself and I thought you might like to share it with me.”

Cas hadn’t looked up at him once during the entire exchange, and Dean wasn’t positive, but he
thought the man might be blushing. There was something about the way he stood, his shoulders hunched a bit as if he’d expected Dean to laugh or make a joke about it, that plucked at that same odd feeling that had plagued Dean’s dreams the night before. He decided in that moment that he liked that feeling, maybe too much.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean said, his voice quiet so it wouldn’t crack under the weight of warmth filling his chest.

Neither of them said it, but the rest of their quick but companionable meal felt all too much like a date. They were back on set ready to shoot the rest of the episode long before Dean was ready to leave the soothing calm of Cas’s office. Dean had the strange urge to just lean in and kiss Cas goodbye, but he managed to shove that impulsive thought down before he made a fool of himself and shuffled back to his place by Gabriel’s side.

“For today’s big challenge numero two, our friend Benny here has whipped up a real spooky treat,” Gabriel said, opening the cupboard and revealing the cake inside.

“It’s a black forest black forest cake. Just look at all those gloomy trees! I bet they’re hiding all sorts of horrific… things. Use your imaginations, good luck, and you’ve got three hours to bake us up your own haunted woodland.”

The three contestants raced off to get baking. There were a only a couple minor disasters over the next few hours. Zachariah attempted to melt the chocolate for his cake batter in the microwave and thankfully used his emergency help button that gave him five minutes with one of the expert chefs for advice. Dean took one look away from the billowing smoke at Zachariah’s station to give Benny a look of abject horror before the other chef grudgingly got up to offer his assistance.

Dean watched horror-struck as Naomi carved up a pack of black licorice instead of forming the delicate wisps of tree branches out of chocolate ganache. He liked licorice just fine, he just wasn’t
sure the flavor combination would work with the rich cherry chocolate of the cake.

Meanwhile Hannah’s cake came in a few inches shorter than Benny’s original, but at least he hadn’t been put off by any of her choices or techniques. In the end, it all came down to time. The contestants, inexperienced at creating such complex designs, simply ran out of time to experiment. When Gabriel shouted out their ten minute and then a five minute warning, all three of them rushed to add as many finishing touches as they could.

“And that’s time, bakers!” Gabriel called out as Jody’s buzzer rang again. “Step away from the cakes!”

One final break was called, and Dean looked over to see Cas going through his bundle of release forms and other paperwork with Patience. The two of them both looked a bit frazzled, and instead of interrupting, Dean decided it was probably better for him to just stay put. They only had a few minutes anyway. He stood where he was and chatted a bit with Benny as the three final cakes were brought out and set up beside the cake Benny had made. When Dean glanced over at Cas again, it was to catch a flash of something that looked remarkably akin to disappointment on the man’s face before Jody called them all to action again.

The three judges sat at their table while each of the three contestants explained how they’d created their masterpieces, and then offered encouraging and mostly helpful input. Dean wasn’t sure Gabriel’s suggestion that the combination of licorice and black forest cake was “only a little bit disgusting,” was actually helpful, but at least it was honest.

Benny had the audacity to remind Zachariah that chocolate should always be melted slowly, and preferably over a double boiler and not set for five minutes on high in the microwave. Zachariah took offense and yelled something back about Benny being a “low rent Paul Hollywood.” Jody watched in horror, ready to call cut, and the tension in the studio quadrupled. Dean laughed nervously as the two men stared daggers at each other across Zachariah’s lopsided cake, and the sound was enough to bring them both back from the brink of fisticuffs.

“Why don’t you cut us your best slice, then,” Dean suggested, which was a suggestion he deeply regretted a few minutes later. Half of each layer was burnt, and it was like choking down cherry flavored ashes.

Hannah was crowned the winner by default, for producing a cake that was entirely edible. Benny showered her with cash from the money gun as Jack stumbled out from the wings to present her trophy. Zachariah nearly stormed out of the studio, and Cas had to go chasing after him to sign his release forms.

“Well, brother, it was a sincere pleasure working with you,” Benny said after the final cut was called. “Can’t say it was entirely enjoyable, but it was definitely good for a laugh.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Dean replied. “You too.”

Benny grinned at him and leaned in closer. “You wouldn’t happen to know how a man could spend the rest of a stressful Monday unwinding in this town, would you? I don’t have to be back to Santa Barbara until morning. I’ve got an entire night to kill here in tinseltown.”

Dean stood there gawping like a fish trying to figure out of he’d just been propositioned. “I… I gotta be at work at six am,” he finally sputtered out.

Gabriel seemed to notice his distress and hurried over to drape an arm around Benny’s shoulders. “Deano here’s a regular working stiff, but if you’re up for letting a C list celebrity show you
around, I think the two of us can find something or other to keep us occupied.”

Dean shrugged helplessly but cast Gabriel a relieved and grateful look, mouthing thank you as the other two men sauntered past where Cas was going through the rest of his paperwork with Naomi and Hannah. Cas looked up with a frown at Benny’s dark laugh, and then seemed surprised that it was Gabriel leading the man from the building. He almost fell out of his chair craning his neck to look through the open studio door, before frantically looking around the rest of the room until his eyes finally settled on Dean slumped back against the craft services table looking a bit worn out and oddly relieved.

Hannah and Naomi both signed their documents and accepted their prize packets without any undue fuss, and only a few minutes later Cas was free. He was surprised to see Dean still standing by the coffee maker, looking a bit less drained as he sipped stale coffee from a paper cup.

“I thought you would’ve left by now,” Cas said, pouring a cup for himself.

Dean chuckled darkly and tossed his empty cup in the trash. “Benny invited me to paint the town red with him, but Gabriel nobly sacrificed himself instead.” Dean missed the flash of relief that crossed Cas’s face and looked up at him with a tired smile. “Now I’m debating whether I should stop for tacos on the way home or if I’ve got the energy to make mac and cheese.”

Cas frowned at that. “You must be more exhausted than you look if opening a box and boiling water constitutes a labor intensive endeavor.”

Dean laughed, shaking his head and dropping his hand onto Cas’s shoulder. He could probably blame the overly familiar gesture on mental fatigue, but he didn’t let his hand linger there. “You have clearly not had my mac and cheese. I don’t know if I’ve even got all the ingredients at home. Sunday’s usually shopping day for me, and I was here all day yesterday. Looks like it’s gonna be tacos anyway.”

Cas looked at him seriously and then nodded. “That’s probably for the best. I appreciate you sacrificing your limited time off for the show, and I’m sorry it’s cut so drastically into your normal routine.”

“It’s not a big deal, Cas. It’s only for a few weeks, and honestly? This has been a hell of a lot of fun.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, Dean.” Cas fidgeted with the file of papers in his hand and then heaved a sigh, resolving himself to say something. “I need to drop these in my office, but if you’re not busy, perhaps we can find something better than fast food for dinner?”

“Dude, I’m not going for fast food. We’re going authentic.”

A surprised smile lit Cas’s face and he happily agreed. He dropped the paperwork at his office while Dean replaced his chef’s jacket with a soft flannel shirt, and then they met up in the front lobby so Dean could give him directions.

Dean looked up at his rearview mirror every chance he got to make sure Cas was still following behind him on the way to the restaurant. It was just a little hole in the wall place, but it was one of Dean’s favorite places to eat. He had to keep reminding himself that this wasn’t a date, he hadn’t asked Cas out on a date, because he would never bring a date anywhere he regularly stopped for dinner after a long day at work. This was one of his personal escapes, and not the kind of place he’d risk having to give up if a date went south. So this was definitely not a date.
Not to mention, Cas still was kinda-sorta his boss, at least for a few more weeks. So this was
doubly definitely not a date. Dean could quite happily rationalize that Cas may have been his boss,
but they’d become friends over the last few weeks, as well. They could grab some tacos and a beer
as friends. That was the sort of thing normal, regular, not-dating friends could do. It wasn’t like
their relationship was going anywhere beyond friendship, Dean attempted to convince himself
again for the hundredth time.

He pulled into the parking lot behind the restaurant and sat in his car as Cas drove past to find
another empty spot. Dean caught a glimpse of Cas behind the wheel of his car in the mirror and
was flooded with the strangest sense of deja vu. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as a rush
of thoughts churned just below the surface of his consciousness. It was a disturbingly similar
feeling to the wave of near panic that had assaulted him the week before when Cas had asked
about his childhood. There was something urgent that he needed to remember, but he couldn’t
catch hold of any of the thoughts which had shoved up nothing but a feeling of profound loss.

Without anything concrete to connect the phantom feelings to, Dean just sat there feeling
inexplicably bereft until Cas tapped on his window, startling him out of the weird melancholy that
had gripped him out of nowhere. He shook the last of the feeling away and looked up to see Cas
frowning down at him. Dean took a deep breath and got out of the car, greeting Cas with a smile
and the excuse that he might be more tired than he’d thought. He was relieved that Cas accepted
his explanation, because for the life of him Dean didn’t have a fucking clue how Cas seemed to
have this kind of hold over him. He could save it to worry about later when he was tossing and
turning in bed.

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Dinner had been just what Dean had needed. Comfort food and the warm and easy conversation
that flowed between him and Cas as soon as they’d sat down together. Despite their exhaustion,
they even lingered over dessert and coffee before regrettfully drawing what had become a lowkey
private celebration to a close. Dean had yawned at the table despite the coffee, and Cas had looked
at his watch in horror.

“Dean, I’m so sorry to have kept you this late,” Cas began as Dean paid the bill. “I know you have
to be at your shop early.”

“Crack of dawn, more like” Dean replied, shuddering as he suppressed another yawn. He grinned
fondly at Cas’s frown. “I’ll be fine. I promise. Trust me, Tuesday’s our slowest day of the week.”
Cas nodded doubtfully but he didn’t press the argument he knew Dean would never let him win.
“If you insist.”
“I insist, Cas. If you need proof, then just stop by tomorrow sometime and see for yourself. I think
we got a couple of appointments for consults, but aside from that we probably won’t see much
traffic until close to closing time. Shockingly, nobody seems to feel much like treating themselves
on Tuesday. It’s not the same as rewarding yourself for surviving Monday, or the week’s-half-over
of Wednesday, or the almost to the weekend of Thursday, or the end of the week binge of Friday.
It’s just...”

Cas was already laughing, resting one hand on Dean’s wrist. “Fine, fine. I concede the point.” He
smiled at Dean for maybe a little bit too long before finally withdrawing his hand as they stood to
leave.

“This has been the best start to a week I’ve had in a long time,” Dean finally admitted as they
parted in the parking lot. Only he’d said it to Cas’s retreating back, far too quietly for the other
man to have heard.
Dean was back to business as usual the following morning, interrupted by the occasional text from Cas. Unsurprisingly, Cas also took him up on the offer to stop by the bakery. Garth called him out of the kitchen where he’d been decorating cupcakes for a kindergarten class birthday party, and had spent a pleasant half hour sitting and having a cup of coffee with Cas.

By Wednesday, Cas had emailed the finalized details for the upcoming weekend’s episodes, and Dean called him when he’d had a chance to read through the challenge information and google his guest hosts. By Thursday Cas began sending him reports on how the editing for the premiere episode was coming along, but Dean was almost too busy preparing the first of the weekend’s orders to think too much about it. When he finally closed the door to the shop on Friday night and checked his phone on the way to his car, he saw several new messages from Cas and felt a strange tug of that ephemeral melancholy that had been plaguing him for weeks now. For almost as long as he’d known Cas.

>>If you have time this evening, would you like to stop by the studio and see the first rough edit?

An hour later, he’d tried again.

>>I could provide dinner, if that would be convenient.

About fifteen minutes later, timestamped just half an hour ago, Cas sent one last message.

>>I suspect you’re too busy to even check your messages. I’m leaving work now, but I would be happy to bring you a copy of the first episode if you’d like to watch it before Sunday. The offer to provide dinner still stands.

Dean grinned down at his phone like the sap that Cas had become an expert at bringing out in him. He was about to ask for a rain check, since he was usually out of the shop by early afternoon on Saturdays, but he sat behind the wheel of the car and frowned. He hadn’t been grocery shopping yet, and he was getting tired of eating every meal out. He was also down to his last clean pair of socks and had only had time to run one emergency load of laundry on Wednesday night while he’d been on the phone with Cas or he would’ve already run out of clean pants. His apartment was slowly turning into a hazardous waste zone, and he sighed with resignation as he informed Cas he wouldn’t be able to fit it into his schedule any earlier than Sunday. He typed out the text and dropped his phone onto the seat, ignoring it until he’d finally made it home with a greasy bag of burgers and fries.

>>I understand, Dean. I’ll see you Sunday morning.

And there was that feeling again, like he’d somehow missed something earth-shatteringly important. Like he’d lost out on a chance he hadn’t known he’d been offered. He sat at his kitchen table, eating but barely even registering it as he stared down at his phone wondering if Cas had simply dismissed him. When he’d finished eating, he picked up the phone and tapped out a reply.

<<How about a rain check? Sunday night after the show I’ll make you some real mac and cheese and we can watch the episode, if you’re up for that.

Dean waited to see that his message had been delivered, and then waited a bit longer for the little dots to start flashing. Cas’s reply came through a minute later.

>>That sounds like a plan. I look forward to it.

Dean just stared at the message and heaved a sigh of relief. He had no idea why, but everything felt...
okay again. The little dots started flashing again before he pulled himself together enough to reply.

>>Goodnight, Dean.

He smiled down at the phone.

<<Night, Cas
Saturday was rough. Charlie and Donna berated Dean half the morning for turning down the chance to get a sneak peek of the show no matter how exhausted he’d been, and no matter how disgusting his apartment— and his laundry situation— had become. When the final details went on to the last tray of personalized wedding cookies and it came time to make the delivery runs, Donna grabbed the keys out of his hand and sent him home with a stern order.

“Go run your errands, and then you get yourself home and let yourself relax. Have a bubble bath and don’t you worry about a thing. You just rest up so you look pretty for the cameras tomorrow.”

“Yeah, boss man,” Charlie cut him off when he was about to protest. “You’re literally the face of the company. Gotta uphold brand standards.” She patted him on the cheek as Donna pushed him out the door.

The rest of the day went by in a disappointing whirl of adulting. On the up side, his occasional texts with Cas became a running commentary on their equally dull afternoons. By the time Dean was getting ready for bed, he realized that he probably should’ve just invited Cas over anyway. He fell asleep to the strange feeling that he was somehow in the wrong bed, in the wrong apartment, somehow in the wrong life entirely.

That feeling carried through when he woke up, unsurprisingly an hour before his alarm but still an hour later than he usually got up for work. He dragged himself out of bed anyway and trudged off to the bathroom, turning on the shower and letting it steam up the bathroom. He stared into the fogging mirror, feeling profoundly, uncomfortably detached as his reflection blurred and faded from view. Trembling, he ran a hand down the glass to assure himself he was still there and then jumped into the shower before he could disappear again.

The water was almost too hot, but he found himself shivering intermittently, as if someone had hit him with an occasional bucket of ice water every time he recalled another snippet of one of the troubling dreams that had been plaguing him more and more frequently. As disturbing as the dreams were, he still felt like he should be able to remember them, as if they were important in a way he didn’t understand right now, but that would be obvious if he could just hold on to them. Like the strange fits of angst he’d been periodically seized with over the last few weeks, the dreams seemed to confirm that there was something unsettlingly urgent that he needed to remember. For whatever reason, the intense feeling passed just as quickly as it had arrived and he was once again left feeling adrift and confused.

By the time he got out of the shower, dressed, and made himself a decent breakfast, he barely had enough time to drive to the studio for his 9 am call time. He sat in the car for a moment, waiting to see if his brain was going to attempt to betray him again. When nothing out of the ordinary happened for a full thirty seconds, he collected the day’s bakery offering for the craft services table and headed into the building.

“Croissookies,” he informed Cas, holding up the boxes when they met in the lobby.

Cas frowned at the boxes and then turned his look of confusion on Dean, who laughed and lifted the lid of the top box to demonstrate.

“Croissant cookies. I got chocolate cream, chocolate chip, and pecan shortbread.” He held the box closer to Cas as his confusion turned to interest. “Go on, have one.”
“Thank you, Dean,” he said, selecting one with an Oreo cookie stuck to it. “You know you don’t have to bribe the crew with delicious treats. They all already adore you.”

Dean grinned at that and shrugged. “They love me because I bribe them with delicious treats.”

Cas gave him the look that comment deserved, but didn’t comment as he held open the studio door for Dean and they both fell into the now comfortable routine of preparing for the day’s show. Dean had already been through makeup and pulled on his starched chef’s coat. He was loitering around the judges’ table chatting with Cas and Gabriel about croissookies when a man dressed all in white strolled into the studio like he owned the place.

“Good morning, Webflix minions!” he announced with his hands raised as if he were offering benediction to anyone lucky enough to be graced with his presence.

“Who does he think he is?” Dean muttered out the side of his mouth to Gabriel. “The ghost of Colonel Sanders?”

Gabriel snorted but shook his head, looking to Cas for answers. Cas sighed heavily and informed them that it was the day’s guest judge. Dean and Gabriel both frowned at Cas and then at one another.

“I thought today’s guest was Donatello Redfield?” Dean asked Gabriel, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“So did I.”

Cas corralled the man in the suit and brought him over to the judge’s table for introductions.

“I neglected to mention that I got a call from Donatello about an hour ago. He’s not going to be able to make it today, but his business partner kindly agreed to take his place so it wouldn’t affect the shooting schedule. Gabriel, Dean, this is Carl Asmodeus.”

The man leaned against the desk and grinned at Dean and Gabe as if he were trying to decide which of his eleven herbs and spices would give them just the right seasoning. Gabriel just glared at the guy, while Dean was torn between making chicken jokes and just sitting there paralyzed by a pang of entirely unfounded fear. He compromised by nodding dumbly as the man, Asmodeus, gave him a saucy wink and then wandered off to makeup.

Dean shuddered and made a little noise of revulsion, and then Gabriel laughed. It wasn’t a happy laugh, more like something tinged with expectant menace. Dean wondered what heinous plan Gabriel was concocting to send the man running back to Bennet Manor with his tail between his legs.

“For a dude dressed all in white, he gives off some fucking dark vibes,” Dean said.

“Just try to get along with him,” Cas ordered them both, while wearing a deep frown of disgust. “We’re either stuck with him for today, or we’ll have to scrub the entire episode. We don’t have the budget to reschedule the entire crew and pay another guest judge. If it helps, Donatello didn’t seem particularly happy with the change in scheduling, either. I believe Asmodeus may have… manipulated him into the arrangement.”

“We’ll survive, Cas,” Gabriel assured him, looking more grimly serious than Dean had ever seen him. “You can’t fault us for playing a little defense, and maybe taking a little shine off his snazzy white shoes.”
“Just don’t do anything he could sue us for,” Cas urged.

The day didn’t improve from there. For some reason, all three of today’s contestants seemed to know one another already. They’d challenged each other to prove definitively which of them was the best-- and the worst-- baker of the three of them. Their squabbling rivalry had been compelling enough in their application video that Cas’s boss had insisted that they needed at least one episode with a more antagonistic flair. Mick, Toni, and Ketch definitely fit that bill. And with Asmodeus along for the ride on this one, Dean was sure the antagonism would spill across both sides of the judges’ table.

He hadn’t been wrong.

The first challenge of the day saw the contestants physically wrestling one another to get to their assigned pastries. Dean and Gabriel stood back and watched, mortified, as they fought to collect three large cookies decorated with their own portraits. Gabriel had given them the order to begin by announcing, “Go bake your faces!”

Dean had been horrified at the level of amusement that Asmodeus seemed to derive from watching the contestants hurl verbal barbs at one another throughout round one. He and Gabriel quickly learned that their guest chef wasn’t a chef at all, and merely bankrolled Donatello’s bakery. He didn’t even have any particularly useful advice or commentary to offer, but he sure did seem to enjoy sitting there lording it over the entire set.

Gabriel and Dean’s commentary grew steadily more pointed as they witnessed one of the worst baking atrocities either of them ever had the displeasure to set eyes on. When Jody called time, Mick was coughing and waving away a cloud of smoke with a dish towel, Toni had somehow managed to cover both of her hands with red icing that dripped down to turn her cookie into the cold open of a cop drama, while Ketch won by default for managing to actually produce a cookie with something recognizable as a human face painted on it. The fact that none of them looked edible, let alone inviting, concerned everyone about the impending disaster round two was sure to be. Everyone except Asmodeus, who found the entire proceeding quaint.

When they broke for lunch, Gabriel followed Dean and Cas out of the studio just to get away from Asmodeus, who was standing around delightedly telling everyone who would listen some pretty grim stories about some of the businesses he owned. None of which sounded even remotely as wholesome as a fast food chicken joint.

Gabriel sat quietly and contentedly eating a sandwich while leaning against a filing cabinet in Cas’s office, cheerfully watching Dean and Cas talk as if they’d forgotten he was even in the room with them. Dean related one of his strange dreams that had involved a contestant from the previous weekend, Naomi. He couldn’t remember the majority of the dream, aside from the fact that she’d calmly attacked him with an egg beater.

“That’s not normal, is it?” Dean asked, finishing off his potato chips.

“Dreams aren’t typically known for seeming logical once you’ve awakened from them,” Cas replied thoughtfully.

Dean snorted. “Yeah, so what’s it mean? I mean I woke up in a cold fucking sweat at three in the morning because some chick was threatening to scramble my eggs.”

Gabriel laughed at that, and then laughed again when Dean and Cas both startled. “Probably means you should have ordered your eggs over easy instead. Come on, we’ve got three more hours to hang around with Mr. Fancypants out there and then we’re free of him forever.”
“If I don’t set him on fire before then,” Dean grumbled under his breath as they returned to the studio.

The entire studio fell silent when Asmodeus revealed the second round challenge cake. He stood there completely silent, grinning at everyone as he opened the cupboard on the most on the nose cake that has ever been witnessed in the history of mankind.

“Chicken?” Dean said, confused for a moment, and then Gabriel broke out laughing so hard they had to call cut to wait for him to recover. Half the crew were laughing along with him, but the three contestants were entirely unamused. They used the extra time to strategize, each of them appearing to be pondering how to backstab the other two most effectively with a plastic spork. Through it all, Asmodeus gritted his teeth together and muttered something about getting even with Donatello for this, and Dean was honestly worried for the man he’d never even met.

Dean and Gabriel knew that this was going to be a tromp l’oiel challenge from the schedule Cas had sent them days ago, but everyone had been expecting the cakes involved to resemble sushi, as per Donatello’s original arrangement with Cas, and not a big greasy bucket of fried chicken. But this was what was in the box that Donatello had sent with his business partner, so that’s what the crew had set up. It was too late to do anything about it, so Gabriel instructed the three contestants to get baking despite Asmodeus’s fuming.

“This is gonna be a tricky challenge,” Dean said as they watched the bakers scramble around the pantry sizing up their options. “It’s always difficult to duplicate a real thing in pastry, but duplicating other foods is one of the hardest. Making sweet fondant look like savory fried chicken is harder than it looks.”

“I’m looking forward to the edible bucket myself,” Gabriel replied with a grin as Ketch-- trying to wrangle four pans full of batter on his way to the oven-- wailed as one of the pans slid off the stack and landed on the floor with a squelching clatter. “Loves me some bucket.”

Asmodeus was still feeling too affronted to even make a show of trying to participate in the discussion. He grew more and more withdrawn and hostile as the challenge wore on. Even Gabriel and Dean were deliberately trying to include him by the end of the challenge, but the guy simply refused to lighten up.

With about forty minutes left in the round, in a fit of abject frustration with the deep fryer she’d
been attempting to use to recreate the french fries out of funnel cake batter, Toni finally relented and mashed her panic button. It gave her five minutes of expert assistance from one of the judges. Dean had been taking a short break to grab some coffee and hang out with Cas for a minute, and he heaved a sigh and shot Cas an apologetic look as he prepared to head over to help, seeing as he was the only legitimately qualified person on the judges panel to even offer the contestants any advice. Before he could turn to walk away, Cas grabbed his elbow and watched in horror as Asmodeus stood up from the desk, cleared his throat, and blithely strolled toward Toni.

“I do believe I have been summoned,” he said to her with a look that could freeze salt water. “What are you trying to do, little lady?”

“I’ve never used a deep fryer before,” Toni replied.

Cas still hadn’t let go of Dean’s elbow, but the both of them edged just a little closer to the set. Dean could already tell this was gonna be a shitshow. He might know how to dress like a fried chicken baron, but Dean was sure Asmodeus didn’t know the first thing about deep frying anything.

“Well let’s see here, what do you need to fry?”

Toni held up the bowl of thick batter and the funnel she’d planned to use to shape it into fries. Asmodeus ignored the funnel entirely, grabbed the bowl, and dumped the entire thing into the sizzling oil. Dean watched in horror as flames chewed their way from the oil, up the stream of gooey batter, and caught the pristine white cuff of Asmodeus’s fancy suit on fire. He shrieked and dropped the bowl, splashing flaming oil over the counter. He grabbed the closest thing to hand-- a large pitcher of ice water that Toni had set aside for mixing her icing with, and threw it at the flames.

Dean and Cas both raced onto the set as Patience and Jack ran in from the opposite wings with fire extinguishers. Dean tackled Toni to the ground as a huge gout of flames erupted from the fryer, followed by a cloud of blistering steam laced with droplets of boiling hot oil. Cas smothered the still-screeching Asmodeus in a fire blanket as Jack and Patience calmly extinguished the counter and floor.

The entire crew stood aghast, watching the horror unfold. Well, everyone but Jody who was already on the phone with 911 awaiting an ambulance for Asmodeus, and Gabriel who sat smugly at the judges’ table with a satisfied look on his face.

An hour later, once the ambulance crew carted Asmodeus away and some minor repairs had been carried out to Toni’s workstation, filming reconvened with Cas now occupying the third judge’s chair. The day improved exponentially after that.

Gabriel was delighted with himself, that he hadn’t needed to lift a finger to cause so much mayhem. Dean was delighted to get to spend the next hour talking and joking with Cas without having to sneak off set for covert coffee breaks, and Cas was delighted that there was no longer an imbecile who didn’t know better than to throw water on a grease fire on his precious set.

The final hour of filming proved to be one of the most entertaining and hilarious that Dean had spent on set yet, and he didn’t doubt that Cas’s editors would be hard pressed to edit the day’s show down to just half an hour-- not even including all the fire-related drama.

Toni’s cake hadn’t suffered much from the lack of fries, and was easily the best tasting of the three. Ketch had made the bizarre choice to crumble spicy cheese curls to create the fried chicken
texture, and none of the judges, nor anyone else in the studio, had even been willing to taste that bizarre flavor combination. Mick’s cake had an uncanny likeness of Asmodeus painted on the side of the bucket in place of Colonel Sanders, and as a result Gabriel decided that Mick would be crowned their champion. Jack, hiding behind the judge’s table, raised the trophy up with one hand until Gabriel grabbed it from him and presented it to Mick. In all the hubbub, Cas had forgotten that one of the guest judge’s duties was to fire off the money gun, until Dean covertly slid it across the table with a raised eyebrow and a knowing nod.

“You mean, I…” Cas started.

“You know you want to, Cas.”

He sat there for a moment, unsure, and then a huge grin bloomed across his face. “You’re absolutely right. I do.”

Dean stuck around after filming to assess the damage done to Toni’s kitchen. He and Claire discussed the repairs that would need to be made before the following morning’s shoot as the rest of the crew bustled around cleaning up the mess. One countertop needed to be replaced, a few floor tiles, and the fryer itself needed to be cleaned out and inspected to make sure it would be safe to use again. By the time they’d worked out all the details, Cas was making his way over to them.

“Claire,” he said, nodding at her, before turning to Dean and holding up a DVD. “I know it’s later than we planned, but I’m still up for dinner and a movie.”

“Ooh, am I witnessing the first bloom of romance, here?” Claire asked, suddenly far more interested in them than in prying up the damaged section of countertop.

“Yeah, real romantic, watching that chick from last weekend have a breakdown over heart cupcakes,” Dean replied, rolling his eyes.

He unrolled them just in time to catch Cas frowning at him, and instantly felt bad for being so flippant with Claire. He barely even knew her, and yet he’d felt compelled to cover the fact that he and Cas had been growing closer over the last few weeks. It was as if the words had come out of someone else’s mouth, with someone else’s baggage attached to them. And he’d inadvertently hurled all that baggage directly at Cas. Shit. He had to fix this.

“I was gonna make dinner for us, and Cas was gonna show me the first episode,” he said to Claire as a smile blossomed across her face. He turned to Cas and made sure to look him in the eye so he could attempt to telepathically convey his apologies for being so terse about their dinner. “It’s definitely not too late. Are you ready to head out?”

Cas looked slightly relieved, but still more distant than he’d been all afternoon, like he was suddenly less sure of himself. Still, he pulled himself together and nodded. “Yes, Dean. I’m ready when you are.”

Claire shot Dean an apologetic look for teasing him and bade them both a good night before getting back to her work. Dean and Cas left side by side, with just a little more distance between them than Dean would’ve wanted. Sure he’d thought there was something more growing between him and Cas, but neither of them had said anything directly. It had shaken him a bit to have someone else jokingly point out just how obvious their developing attraction was. Maybe it was something he and Cas needed to talk about, but it would have to wait as they got into their separate cars and Cas followed Dean home.
Cas had thought things were understood between them. Well, to be honest with himself, he wasn’t sure that he understood what had been developing between him and Dean. He’d only known it felt good, and right, if not precisely easy. But the fact he’d had to work so hard to get to know Dean had made each new discovery and every conversation with the man into a revelation. The more he learned about Dean, the more he’d wanted to know. Cas couldn’t remember ever feeling that way about anyone else, and the thought kind of terrified him as much as it exhilarated him.

He followed Dean to a little apartment building near the beach, and then up to Dean’s second floor apartment. It was small but cozy and inviting. He almost felt like an intruder entering Dean’s personal domain, but Dean welcomed him in warmly as he kicked off his own boots by the front door.

“Make yourself at home,” Dean said, strolling off toward the kitchen to turn on the oven. “I wasn’t sure how late we’d be getting started, so I took the liberty of preparing everything last night.”

Cas watched as Dean pulled a foil-covered pan out of the fridge and stuck it in the oven, hovering in the doorway as Dean bent down and then stood up again. As he shut the oven door, Cas caught a glimpse of what looked like the most decadent macaroni and cheese he’d ever seen, covered with a blend of cheeses and mixed throughout with what looked like crisp bacon. He wasn’t sure which he’d rather stare at-- Dean bending over or the dish in the oven.

“Can I get you a beer?” Dean asked, turning around and catching the hungry look on his face. “Or something else?”

Cas cleared his throat. “A beer would be nice, thanks.”

While dinner was in the oven, they retired to the living room to watch the episode. Cas assured Dean that it was just over half an hour long. That gave them just enough time to watch the episode before the food would be ready.

Dean watched, mesmerized by how what he remembered as a very long day had been reduced to a solid half an hour of pure entertainment. At least that’s what he kept telling Cas. Cas mostly spent the time watching Dean, at first just to gauge his reaction to the show, but as the tension between them slowly ebbed away again, he found himself content just to watch Dean, period.

When the episode ended, Dean got up to check on dinner, and returned with two plates filled with a portion of his mac and cheese in addition to a colorful salad. Cas had raised an eyebrow as Dean returned to the kitchen to grab a couple more beers.

“What, don’t judge me,” Dean replied, sitting back down on the sofa and handing Cas one of the bottles. “Man can’t live on cheese and bacon alone.”

As they ate, conversation turned from the show and toward more personal subjects again, and Cas was relieved that Dean didn’t attempt to steer them back toward safer topics. He still didn’t bring up Claire’s comment about their apparent relationship status, but by the time he left several hours later, he was at least reassured that Dean wasn’t uncomfortable with the notion that, for all intents and purposes, this had felt very much like a date. They both hesitated in the doorway as Cas left, before Dean reached out and pulled Cas into a slightly awkward but nevertheless warm embrace before flushing a lovely shade of pink and stuttering out a flustered see you tomorrow.

Cas drove all the way home feeling lighter than he could remember, as if he could’ve flown.
Substitutions

Dean was up early the next morning and didn’t even fight the urge to get out of bed. His dreams were growing increasingly bizarre and unsettling. At least a few of them now featured Cas’s comforting presence, but for the most part he was left feeling like the dreams had been more like glimpses into another world, just as real as his own, but a hell of a lot darker. There were monsters, and demons, and fire. Dean grumbled all the way to the bathroom, blaming that idiot Asmodeus for giving his imagination such rich fodder for nightmares. He needed to shake off that feeling and ground himself in reality, so he headed off to the bakery to help out for an hour before he needed to be on set.

Donna and Charlie were surprised to see him, but put him to work piping out macaron shells onto a long row of baking sheets. Charlie had to remind him when it was time for him to head out, he’d become so absorbed in crafting perfectly uniform batter disks that he’d lost all track of time. It had been a mindless task to stop him from dwelling on that dream world where he and Cas had been hunting for monsters together. Donna presented him with a large box of macarons to bring to the studio, and then sent him on his way with a pat on the cheek and a reminder to smile pretty for the camera.

Dean had half expected to run into Cas on his way through the building to the studio, but he didn’t spot Cas anywhere amid the bustle of getting the last of the kitchen repairs finished while the rest of the shorthanded crew scrambled to get everything else set up for the day’s filming. He held on to his precious box of goodies, wanting Cas to at least get first dibs at the fresh cookies before the rest of the crew devoured them. He’d only had to wait a minute or two, offering Claire and Kaia compliments on their work, before Gabriel and Cas stormed into the studio. Dean felt the smile melt off his face when he began to piece their loud and antagonistic conversation together.

“You had no right to do this, Gabriel. It’s highly inappropriate.”

Gabriel smirked and gave Cas a rather condescending pat on his shoulder. “It’s gonna be fine. You just have to trust me.”

“Trust you?” Cas bellowed. “At the very least you should’ve consulted with Dean before arranging this entirely behind his back.”

Dean frowned at that and cautiously made his way over to the arguing men. “What did he do behind my back now?”

Cas startled at the sound of Dean’s voice and cast one last black and stormy look at his cousin before turning his back on the other man to give Dean his full attention. “Gabriel took it upon himself to arrange today’s slate of contestants. Without my knowledge.”

Dean shrugged. “Okay, I don’t have a problem with that.”

Gabriel grinned at him, but he left Cas to deliver the blow. “Today’s contestants are your family members, Dean. Your brother, your mother, and your stepfather.”

Dean let that sink in for a minute and shook his head in slowly dawning horror. “Sammy? Mom? And Bobby? What the hell, Gabriel?”

“In my defense,” Gabriel replied, entirely unperturbed, “The three of them are adults fully capable of making their own choices. I mentioned the idea to Sam when he was here last weekend, and he
thought it would be hilarious. He wanted to surprise you when they showed up today. For some reason, the gigantor thought you’d be amused.”

Dean stared at Gabriel, unsure how to react. Cas glared, arms folded across his chest, waiting for Gabriel to offer any sort of apology at all.

“Whether or not Dean is amused by this little stunt, the casting department had three other contestants lined up for today’s show that will now have a legitimate complaint to file against us.”

“Relax, Cas,” Gabriel replied. “It’s all taken care of. I explained there’d been a scheduling mixup, and sent them each five hundred bucks out of my own pocket as an apology. None of them are gonna complain.”

Cas stared him down for another few seconds, but Gabriel would not be budged even by Cas’s most intense glower. He finally sighed shook his head. “I hope not, but if they do I’m sending them directly to you to deal with.”

Gabriel gave a little mock salute and then strolled off to chat with Claire and Kaia. Cas turned to Dean, deeply apologetic, but before he could say a word Dean opened the box of macarons and silently offered one to Cas. He looked both relieved and inordinately pleased by the brightly colored selection of cookies, and happily chose a green one before smiling up at Dean.

“Hello, Dean.”

“Hey, Cas,” Dean started but then shook his head and started over, pointing at the cookie in Cas’s hand. “That’s pistachio, by the way.”

Cas glanced down at it, but Dean kept right on talking.

“I guess Sam knows full well what he was signing up for after last Sunday, so if my family really wants to do this, I’m not gonna fight ‘em on it. It’s practically impossible to tell my mom what to do anyway.”

“Well, I’m certainly relieved to hear it, because they’re due to arrive any minute. I didn’t think it was fair to spring that on you without any advance warning, even if Gabriel and Sam thought it would be amusing.”

Dean just shrugged. “Shit like that happens all the time in my family. You get used to it.”

It turned out that Gabriel had arranged for Sam to record their “application video,” and as it aired just after filming began, Dean felt both touched by his family’s words and proud of them all for being willing to put themselves on national television to prove that Dean’s skills in the kitchen were in no way an inborn genetic talent.

On the video, Mary said without any hint of embarrassment that she knew next to nothing about baking. She never bothered to learn, because Dean had always been perfectly happy with the dessert selection at the Piggly Wiggly. From Gabriel’s other side, the day’s guest judge snorted a laugh, her eyes twinkling as she turned a bemused gaze on Dean.

“Well, that’s just precious, Deano,” Meg said, while Dean grumbled and kept his eyes on the monitor.

Sam and Bobby had their turns, both confessing that they’d never baked anything more advanced than refrigerated cookie dough and box mix brownies. The next thing Dean knew, his family was strolling determinedly into the studio. They may not have had a clue what they were doing, but
damn if they wouldn’t do their best to kick it in the ass anyway. Dean couldn’t help the grin that overtook his face as they introduced themselves for the camera.

“This is gonna be so much fun,” Meg muttered to Dean as Gabriel led them all to the first challenge cupboard. “Like a little family vacation.”

Dean frowned at her as she glided over to open the doors to reveal their first challenge. In addition to three artfully designed cupcakes, there were three equally artfully designed drinks. For a second Dean wondered why the drinks were part of a baking challenge, but Meg revealed all, to his eternal consternation. She was grinning now, but she was in no way prepared for any gathering of Winchesters that involved alcohol. Or kitchens. Or any combination thereof.

“We’re sending you on an all expenses paid getaway to your very own tropical paradise… in alcoholic cupcake form. Sex on the Beach, Tequila Sunrise, and Mai Tai cupcakes, along with their namesake drinks.”

“That’s right, Dean’s loved ones,” Gabriel added. “You’ll have to make the drink and the cupcake. And since this is a competition and not a vacation, you’ve got an hour.”

They leapt into action. Sam held back to let Mary and Bobby go first, whether out of deference to his parental figures or because he just wasn’t sure which cupcake to pick for himself. Mary went straight to the Tequila Sunrise, and Bobby snagged the Mai Tai. Sam grumbled and shuffled off muttering about not wanting to talk about sex on beaches with his mom in room.

In a pleasantly surprising turn of events, Dean’s family were not only quick studies in the kitchen, their banter back and forth nearly left Dean without any additional commentary of his own to add. Instead, when Gabriel raided the liquor cabinet, they took turns mixing up their own tropical cocktails just for the hell of it. So far, Meg still seemed to be enjoying herself, and to Dean’s relief had reserved her snarkiest critique for their experimental creations and largely refrained from commenting on the progress in the kitchens.

Cupcakes went into ovens within ten minutes, which left them plenty of time for Mary, Bobby, and Sam to plan out their decorations and drinks.

“Interesting choice Sam’s making using crumbled graham crackers for the beach sand,” Meg commented to Dean. “I would’ve gone with sugar cookies myself. In fact, I did go with sugar cookies.”

“Yeah, well, he got to be a moose by eating healthy, I guess,” Dean replied.

Meg smirked at him and took another sip of the spiced rum drink Gabriel had dubbed a “low tide,” as Sam then tried to pipe a few decorative seashells out of gooey icing before cursing at the mess and running back to the pantry to see if it offered him any better solutions. “I guess I can see why you call him moose now.”

Dean snorted, watching Bobby forming delicate flower petals out of red chocolate melts. He was impressed the old man had such a steady hand, but Bobby had always been one for details. The few times he’d actually cooked anything for Dean, though, it had always come out of a can or a
microwave, and not for the first time, Dean felt like he didn’t know his new stepfather at all.

Mary carefully sculpted the tiny flip flops, palm trees, and the bucket of drinks from fondant, but the trees were top-heavy and she struggled to make them stand upright. She gave up in frustration when the oven timer dinged, and she raced from the oven straight to the blast chiller to cool off the cupcakes.

“Your mom knows what the deal is, even if her entire baking experience is confined to watching you bake for her,” Meg said, for the first time actually sounding impressed about anything aside from Cas.

Dean had frowned when he’d seen her talking flirtatiously with Cas right before filming had begun, but he hadn’t been able to hear what they were discussing. Cas had seemed mildly amused by her, and Dean had suffered through an intense and yet entirely unjustified pang of jealousy. Of course Cas was being polite to their guest judge. He hadn’t behaved any differently with Meg than he had with any of their other guest judges. Then again, Cas had been a bit short with Benny toward the end of the day, but that was probably because it had been an arduous day by that point. Dean was sure it had been nothing, and tried to convince himself he was being ridiculous. He turned his focus back to his family, now struggling to mix their coordinating drinks.

If there was one thing Sam could do blindfolded, it was follow directions. Dean at least expected that he could duplicate a recipe well enough to produce an edible result, even if his technique might’ve been a bit lacking. But it was nigh on impossible for him to completely fuck up alcohol, so Dean watched bemused as Sam struggled to carefully perch an orange wedge and a tiny paper umbrella on the rim of the glass.

Mary was doing the same with her tequila sunrise, adding a cherry and a tiny plastic sun affixed to a toothpick in lieu of the umbrella. Dean asked Gabriel where it had come from. He hadn’t remembered seeing any plastic decorations in the pantry, but Gabriel just shrugged, and then drew Dean’s attention to Bobby. He was hunched over the countertop carefully cutting a lime peel into a delicate little curl and tacking it to a pineapple wedge with a tiny plastic sword. Dean could only watch in utter bemusement. Until that moment, he hadn’t known Bobby had a single frou frou bone in his entire body, but this was absolutely the proof.

The man had met his mother a few years back, and despite their very different backgrounds, they’d hit it off. It had come as a surprise to Dean that Mary would want to get married again, but they made each other happy, and Dean couldn’t ask for anything more for his mom. That didn’t mean the two of them couldn’t be vicious competitors, though, and Dean was both looking forward to and dreading the judging.

Mary was still fiddling with her droopy palm trees when Jody’s timer buzzed and she was forced to surrender her efforts. Jody called for the standard five minute break to set up for judging, and Dean was torn between his usual trip to visit with Cas and checking in on his family. He gave Cas a nod, picking up his latest drink creation and waving a hand vaguely toward the kitchens. Cas grinned at him, acknowledging that he didn’t think Dean wasn’t ignoring him. With that little understanding settled between them, Dean went first to tease his brother.

“So you survived an hour of sex on the beach knowing mom was just on the other side of the wall there. Was it good for you?”

Sam gave Dean an exasperated frown and wiped the sweat from his brow as he proceeded to ignore Dean’s teasing. “I’m pretty sure you won’t die from eating it, at least.”

“Really, though,” Dean said more seriously. “Are you having as good a time as you thought when
you schemed your way onto my show?"

“I didn’t scheme, Dean. Gabriel and I got to talking, and he thought it would make for a fun episode. He said the show was about proving the fact that this sort of baking isn’t just something anyone can do from reading an internet recipe and watching a couple videos. What better way to prove that than to have your whole family demonstrate that fact.”

Dean thought about it that way for a second and then grunted. “So the three of you decided you wouldn’t mind looking like idiots on national television?”

“No, Dean. We’re not. We’re doing great, but we’re doing great for normal people who aren’t professional bakers. That’s the whole point. You don’t love us any less if we make a crappy cake, because it’s done with love. And we don’t love you any less if we don’t have the skill to bake something you could sell in your shop. And we’re all grownups enough to see that. And let me tell you, it’s giving me a whole new appreciation for what you do, man. I had to make one dumb cupcake in an hour, and you fill up a whole bakery and cater a dozen weddings and parties every week like it was nothing. It’s fucking impressive, Dean. Own it, okay?”

Dean blinked at his brother for a minute, but Sam just stared him down. “Okay, Sammy. Thanks.”

He’d fully intended to check in with Mary and Bobby, but he had to settle for giving them a thumbs up from across the studio when he realized it was about time to start the judging. He could wait a few more minutes to visit with them during their longer lunch break. As he hurried back to the judges’ table, he caught a glimpse of Cas over by the coffee pot talking to Meg again. Dean stood beside his chair, frowning at the spectacle of Meg standing all the way up in Cas’s personal space. For his part, Cas didn’t seem to mind and then laughed at something she’d said.

“Yo, Dean, if you’re not careful your face is gonna freeze that way,” Gabriel said from his chair beside Dean’s.

Dean glanced down to find that Gabriel wasn’t even looking at him, but was sitting with his arms folded across his chest and giving Cas the stink eye. Dean didn’t have time to puzzle that out before Jody was calling everyone to their places. He watched Meg lean in close to whisper something to Cas which left him flushed before sashaying back to her seat and smiling with satisfaction. Dean glared at her, then glanced up to see Cas looking extremely flustered before walking off into the shadows at the edge of the studio. As much as he wanted to rush after Cas to make sure everything was okay, Dean was required to sit there and smile at his family as they served him their dubious baked goods. At least there would be more alcohol.

Sam was up first, and delivered his slightly melted cupcake and meticulously decorated drink to Gabriel with a hopeful expression. He then stood there like a puppy waiting for his reward.

“Not bad, moose,” Meg said before Dean had a chance to get the first poke in. “The shoreline looks a little choppy, and I think there’s a riptide out there in the water,” she added, pointing to where some of the blue frosting had begun to slide off the cupcake.

“The drink looks fabulous, though,” Gabriel said, picking it up and taking a sip. “Mmm, yep. That’s good sex right there.”

Sam practically choked and cast an apologetic glance back at Mary, who was politely trying to hide a laugh behind her hand.

“But is it an edible beach?” Dean asked taking a fork to the cupcake.
Meg and Gabriel both came in to steal a bite as well, while Dean chewed thoughtfully, letting his face clearly display the journey Sam’s baking had sent him on. Mary was barely containing her laughter at all now, and Dean set down his fork to focus a forced disappointed look on his brother.

“It tastes great, Sam. You got just the right hint of peach flavor in the icing, but I think Meg’s right. The graham crackers kind of overwhelm the other flavors.”

“Sugar cookies next time,” Meg said, shooting Sam a confidential wink. “But the drink is perfect, especially after an hour of letting these two idiots play bartender. I have no idea how Gabriel managed it, but he ruined a perfectly good shot of rum.”

Dean finally got a good sip of the drink and had to agree with Meg and Gabriel. “Yeah, I never claimed to be a bartender. I can pour beer or whiskey, and that’s about it.”

Bobby was up next, and he gruffly laid his offering on the table and took a step back awaiting the verdict. Meg picked at the delicate chocolate flower on top of the cake and took a tiny flake of one of the petals to taste.

“I usually sweeten the chocolate with orgeat to give it a little more flavor, but I really can’t complain with your artistry. That’s a damn fine flower.”

“The orgeat’s in the icing,” Bobby informed her, and watched in horror as Gabriel swiped a finger through his painstakingly swirled frosting.

“Yes, it is,” Gabriel confirmed after licking his finger, and went in for another swipe.

Dean caught him by the wrist and made a disgusted face. “No double dipping, you freak.”

Bobby sighed and rolled his eyes, walking over to his workstation without a word and returning with the bowl containing the unused icing and a spoon. He slid it across the table to Gabriel, who grinned up at him gratefully and crammed an entire spoonful in his mouth. Dean made a gagging noise, but left Gabriel to it and cut of a bite of the cupcake that Gabriel hadn’t befouled with his finger.

“Oh wow, this is awesome, Bobby,” he said around a mouthful of rum-soaked cake.

He made a grabbyhands gesture at the corresponding drink, which Gabriel took a gulp of before handing it to Dean with a smirk. Dean glared at him as he took a sip as well, and then passed the glass behind Gabriel’s back to Meg.

“Well, the drink’s perfect again,” she said. “I’m docking a point for the plain candy on top of the cupcake, but I’m adding back two for the drink.”

“Agreed,” Gabriel replied, as Bobby stepped back and Mary stepped forward.

“Well it looks like your palm trees had a little too much tequila,” Gabriel observed, attempting to make the floppy trees stand up.

“Yes, I had no idea how to make them sturdier without making them so fat they looked like coconuts,” Mary replied.

“I probably would’ve treated them as non-edible, and wrapped the fondant around a toothpick,” Dean suggested. “Or even a coffee stirrer or a straw.”

Meg confirmed that, or even suggested buying little plastic trees, pointing to the cheerful plastic
sun sticking out of her drink as an example. “Not everything on a cupcake has to be edible.”

Gabriel took a bite of the cupcake first and his eyes bugged out. “Is there such a thing as tequila goggles for your tongue? Because that tastes like a damn fine tequila cupcake right there.”

“No, I think you’re just drunk,” Meg replied, but then agreed that it was a pretty good cupcake.

The three judges ended up wrestling for the drink until Mary cleared her throat and gave them all the Mom Look.

“Sorry, Mom,” Dean said, setting the glass he’d won fair and square down in front of him.

Gabriel decided it was time to declare a winner, and summoned Jack with his rolling cart of prizes. He grabbed up the sparkly gold chef’s hat and looked from Sam to Mary, to Bobby, before finally giving in and handing it over to Bobby. “It was a nearly impossible choice, but I couldn’t bear to hide Sam’s glorious mane under that thing, so congrats, Bobby. You’ve won the first round. Which means it’s time to see what kind of trouble we’re in for round two.”

Jody called cut and announced the usual lunch break. Dean noticed that Meg had already turned her attention in Cas’s direction, so he made the executive decision to monopolize Cas for himself. He raced around the judges’ table, practically shoving Meg-- still in her chair-- out of his way, but he didn’t worry too much about it when he beat her to Cas’s side.

“Heya, Cas. I thought maybe I could introduce you to my mom, if you’ve got a minute?”

Cas snorted out a little laugh, having witnessed Dean’s beeline to him like an excited kid. “I assumed you would’ve wanted to take your lunch break with them today, but I’m not otherwise occupied at the moment.”

Dean heaved a sigh of relief and led Cas over to where Mary, Bobby, and Sam were perusing the lunch offerings at the craft services table. They passed Meg on their way, and Dean wasn’t sure whether the smirk she flashed him was incredulous or smug. He quickly forgot about it as they stepped up behind Mary and Dean cleared his throat.

“Hey, Mom, there’s someone you should meet,” Dean said, and Mary looked up from the tray of sandwiches. “Mom, this is Cas. Castiel. He’s the producer, and… and he’s become a real good friend, too.”

He felt like kicking himself for that idiotic introduction, but Mary’s smile softened as she turned to Cas and set her plate down to give him a quick hug. It didn’t escape his notice that Cas had made a little surprised noise and turned to blink at Dean while Mary scooped him up.

“Any good friend of Dean’s is a good friend of ours. Thanks for letting us be part of this, Castiel.”

“Uh, you’re more than welcome,” Cas replied, frowning at Dean over Mary’s shoulder while Dean shrugged in a just go with it sort of gesture. “It’s… I’m glad you’re enjoying yourselves, but inviting you here, that’s all on Gabriel.”

Mary tilted her head in a little shrug and smiled like she’d already known exactly how they’d wound up on the show, while Sam tried and failed to look innocent and unaware behind her and Bobby kept his focus on finishing his lunch.

“Whatever the case, I appreciate it.”

“Yes, well…” Cas replied, as Dean glanced up at the clock and began hurriedly cramming a
sandwich into his mouth. “Would you mind terribly if I borrowed Dean for a moment? There’s something I need to discuss with him.”

Dean looked up at him, and Cas looked slightly panicked, jerkily nodding his head toward the studio doors. He frowned slightly as he chewed, but Cas became more insistent, so the moment he’d swallowed he agreed. As they walked quickly out of the studio, Dean glanced back at his family to make sure they weren’t disappointed, only to see Mary striking up a conversation with a rather frustrated looking Meg. Well, that explained Cas’s sudden need to get out of there.

In the relative quiet of the hallway, Cas finally spoke. “I’m sorry to ask that of you, Dean. I hope your mother won’t think poorly of me for dragging you away from them, but I wasn’t looking forward to enduring another of Meg’s rather salacious flirtations.”

Dean stopped walking as Cas continued on a few steps, but then raced to catch up with him. “Wait, you weren’t flirting with her this morning?”

Cas turned, his eyebrows all scrunched down together, and looked at Dean like he wondered if Dean had had one drink too many. “I introduced myself to her when she arrived, and she insisted I go over the shooting schedule with her one more time. I only realized later that she may have been coming on to me, and misinterpreted her intentions.”

Dean tried to keep himself from laughing when Cas used finger quotes for emphasis, but he felt his heart racing a bit as he laid a hand on Cas’s shoulder. “Don’t ever change, Cas.”

Cas tilted his head to the side. “Are you making fun of me, Dean?”

Dean shook his head. “Not even a little bit.”

“Gabriel has told me repeatedly that I need to improve my social skills.”

“Gabriel’s an idiot, Cas. I think you’re awesome, okay?”

Cas’s face broke out in a huge smile. “I appreciate that, Dean. And, I, uh… I appreciate what you said to your mother, about us being good friends.” He used the finger quotes again.

Dean let his hand slide down Cas’s arm. “Well, it’s true,” he said, feeling his throat tighten around the words as they turned to little butterflies in the back of his throat. “We are friends, right? I mean, I’ve spent more time talking to you in the last month than I’ve spent talking to anyone else in the past year, outside of maybe the people I work with. Can’t really avoid talking to them, though.” He laughed nervously, letting his hand drop from Cas’s elbow.

Cas looked relieved and nodded. “I always enjoy our conversations, Dean. I do enjoy spending time with you.”

“Yeah, same here,” Dean replied, feeling a little bolder now. “And just for the record, no matter what, I’m happy to be your excuse to get out of difficult situation. My family would understand, too. Like Sammy keeps reminding me today, we’re all grownups here.”

“Thank you, Dean,” Cas replied after a few more entirely comfortable moments in the quiet hall.

Dean had forgotten he was still holding half his sandwich in his hand, just enjoying standing there smiling like a dope at Cas. Their staring match was only interrupted when a rather frantic Patience came skidding around the corner with an exclamation of relief.

“There you are! Jody’s been looking everywhere for both of you. Round two is ready to go, as
soon as Dean’s ready.”

She froze, realizing she may have interrupted them, but Cas smiled at her and nodded. “We’re on our way.”

Patience looked uncertain for a moment, but slowly backtracked the way she’d come.

“Well, I guess you’re in the clear with Meg, for now,” Dean said.

“I don’t know what gave her the impression that I was interested in her advances, but I didn’t know how else to inform her without overstepping professional lines.”

“I’m sure it’s fine, Cas. Some people just see someone they want and get a little pushy in the pursuit.”

Cas stopped walking and frowned at Dean. “You’re not… pushy,” he said, tasting the word like it didn’t entirely express what he’d wanted to say.

Dean laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “I guess I know where the professional line is and try to stay on my side of it.”

Aside from a little hum of consideration, Cas was quiet the rest of the way back to the studio. For the first time all day, Dean was hit with one of his unsettling pangs of longing, the phantom feeling clawing into his chest and leaving him on the verge of gasping for air. He’d nearly forgotten about the attacks, maybe because he’d been so busy worrying about his family and Cas all morning, but that only seemed to add to the severity of the current bout. This one felt worse in a new way, too. In addition to the paralyzing burst of feelings, a sudden pain shot through his head. It was gone almost as quickly as he’d felt it, but it left his vision blurry for a split second as he blinked away the pain. He could’ve sworn, in that tiny fraction of a second as Cas walked through the doors ahead of him, that he’d seen two huge broken wings sprouting from Cas’s back. He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath before plowing through the door, glancing over at Cas to make sure it had just been a trick of the light, and then walked determinedly back on set.

Meg and Gabriel were already in their places when Dean joined them by the round two cupboard for the big reveal. After Gabriel’s brief introduction, Meg flung open the doors to reveal a cake that looked more like a school science fair project than anything Dean would consider eating. It was a tropical island volcano, complete with smoke billowing from the crater on top when Meg poured some sort of liquid over it.
“Probably a vacation destination you’d want to avoid, but hopefully it’ll be a cake that will have us asking for seconds. You have 10,800 of them, beginning right now.” Gabriel said, and when nobody moved, he clarified. “You now have 10,743 seconds to recreate Vesuvius here. That’s three hours, for the mathematically challenged.”

They wiped the looks of bewildered dismay off their faces and ran off to their workstations to get baking. Over the next three hours, more alcohol was consumed by both the judges and the contestants. After the one hour mark, Gabriel even started mixing drinks for Cas. Meg seemed to have finally gotten the point that Cas wasn’t interested, but that hadn’t done anything to quell his discomfort while she was still in the room. Dean was at least grateful that Gabriel had mixed his cousin up something he called a Woo Woo with vodka and peach schnapps, and restrained himself from foisting off one of his dubious cocktail experiments on Cas. When Gabe returned from delivering Cas’s second drink, he gave Dean a grim, conspiratorial little nod. That one gesture completely endeared him to Dean. So they were both on Team Save Cas. It was a strange little bonding moment in the midst of the baking chaos.

When Jody finally called time on the challenge and they took their final break before judging and crowning the winner, Dean had stopped drinking more than an hour earlier. He went over to meet Cas at the coffee pot, knowing he’d have less than an hour to sober up enough to drive home, and it looked like Cas had the same idea.

“You feeling better now, Cas?”

“Yes, thank you, Dean.”

“I, uh, was gonna ask the family if they wanted to go out for pizza when we were done here,” Dean started awkwardly. “I thought you might want to come with. I mean, I haven’t even asked them yet, but you’re welcome to join us.”

Cas smiled at him again, looking far more relaxed than he had all day. “I think I’d like that.”

“Great,” Dean said, downing the rest of his coffee and backing away slowly. “It’s a date, then. Or whatever,” he added, tripping up the little riser from the studio floor to the set floor, and turning around before he crashed into any expensive tv equipment.

Sam, Mary, and Bobby stood beside the carts where their respective cakes waited to be revealed,
and Gabriel thanked all of them for being such good sports. He even apologized to Dean for trying to surprise him with his own family. Dean accepted it, but absolutely did not trust the mischievous look in Gabriel’s eye and wondered what he was already plotting to torment him with for the next episode. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be worse than springing his family members on him, right?

Dean shoved that thought aside as Sam uncovered his masterpiece, dramatically pouring a cup of water into the crater over a block of dry ice as fog billowed out of the lopsided volcano.

“It looks a little like it’s already erupted,” Meg said, pointing out how a stable base of rice krispy treats could’ve better supported the overall structure.

“I’d never thought of cake as architecture before,” Sam replied, frowning as one side of the volcano shifted even further out of alignment.

“You got a very realistic eruption effect happening, at least,” Dean added.

Sam cut a slice out of the uncollapsed half, and everyone agreed it tasted pretty good for a major natural disaster. Then it was Mary’s turn. She forewent the dry ice fog in favor of a handful of sparklers wedged down into the crater. She lit them and half the people in the studio let out a little simultaneous ooh at the pyrotechnical display. Like Sam, Bobby also went for the fog, but at least his volcano held together. Both their cakes rated well on the taste testing too.

“Well, this is gonna be a tough choice,” Gabriel said, leaning back in his chair and considering the three cakes in front of him. “Especially since Deano here doesn’t get a full vote.”

Meg and Gabriel conferred for a moment, and then declared Mary the winner for her outside the box thinking with the sparklers. Meg didn’t immediately fire off the money gun, so Gabriel seized his chance to shower the entire studio with cash as the closing theme music played.

As usual, as soon as Jody called cut, Cas corralled the three bakers and set about explaining all the release paperwork. Dean hung around waiting for them all to finish to ask about going out for dinner. He was leaning against the wall out of the way, surreptitiously watching Mary sign form after form, when Meg came over and stood herself right in front of him.

“Congrats, Deano. You’ve got a great family there,” she said, casting a wistful glance over at Sam, Mary, and Bobby, just as Cas laughed out loud at something Sam said that Dean couldn’t make out at that distance.

Dean was pretty sure she’d been including Cas when she’d mentioned his family. And for once, he allowed himself to admit it and accept it. “Yeah, I do.”

Meg didn’t say anything else, just watched as Cas said something that had all three of them laughing, before strolling out of the studio without even saying goodbye.

When Cas began collecting up the paperwork, Dean knew that was his cue. He walked over and congratulated Mary with a hug, shook Bobby’s hand, and gave Sam a thump on the back. None of them were able to make it for dinner that night, but Mary promised they’d schedule something for the weekend after filming was done.

“I was planning a party for next Saturday night anyway, to celebrate your inevitable rise to stardom,” she said. “I may or may not have already ordered a cake from this nice little bakery you may have heard of.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Great, so I have to bake my own congratulatory cake.”
“At least you know it’ll be great,” Mary argued.

“She also might’ve invited your whole staff down at the bakery, and half the crew on set here,” Bobby added with a grin.

“And Cas, too,” Sam said. “He hasn’t given his RSVP yet, but we expect you to be there.”

Cas nodded happily. “I’ll need to make sure I’m free, but I’ll let Dean know as soon as possible.”

Dean’s family left after another round of hugs that also included Cas, and suddenly they were alone again. Dean decided he was too hungry and tired to beat around the bush, so he just came right out and said it.

“Can you believe they turned down pizza? Sometimes I wonder how I’m even related to them,” he started, and then sighed. “We’re still on though, right?”

“That sounds good, Dean,” Cas said, looking more relieved than Dean figured was warranted if it had just been about grabbing dinner. “Where would you like to go?”

“If I didn’t have to be up at five to open the bakery in the morning, I’d suggest going back to my place and making you the best pizza you ever had, but it’s kinda late to start bread rising.”

Cas covered a flash of surprise at the suggestion with a look of honest disappointment. “While that does sound tempting, I understand. There’s a shop a few blocks from here that the staff regularly orders from that’s pretty good, though.”

“Well, if you’re up for that, I’m game,” Dean replied.

They agreed to walk since it was a pleasant evening, but still ended up staying out later than Dean normally would on a work night. There was just something about hanging out with Cas that made it all too easy to lose track of time. By the time they returned to their cars in the otherwise empty studio lot, it was well past nine. Dean reluctantly wished Cas a good night, feeling a little down that he wouldn’t have a reasonable excuse to see him again for nearly a week.

Dean spent the entire drive home chewing over his entire relationship with Cas, feeling a bit bereft. He normally loved the grind of his work at the bakery, even in peak wedding season, and felt out of sorts on his days off without anything to do. For maybe the first time in recent memory, he was actually regretting the full week of baking ahead of him.

That strange melancholy stuck to him even through his shower and an episode of GBBO he’d turned on to help take his mind off Cas. It clung to him as he crawled into bed knowing he’d be useless if he didn’t get at least four hours of sleep, and lingered into his dreams.
Cas had been feeling slightly off kilter all day. Granted, it hadn’t started on the right foot, thanks to Gabriel and his meddling. At least it had all worked out in the end, and Dean hadn’t objected to the familial scheduling changes. Even with his mood improved after Dean’s reassurances, he’d still felt unsettled and a bit disconnected from reality. The overt propositions from their guest judge had thrown him almost as much as Gabriel’s shenanigans had. His discomfort had even led him to rather selfishly pull Dean off set, away from his family, just so he could ground himself in reality for a few minutes. While he was grateful that Dean had understood, and even seemed to sympathize with his plight, he could also tell that something had been troubling Dean as well.

It had all seemed like water under the bridge by the time the two of them went out for dinner together, but by the time he arrived home the sense of heavy foreboding had settled over him again. It felt like there was something he needed to be doing, something incredibly important, but for the life of him he wasn’t sure what it was. That feeling only intensified in his dreams.

Cas woke up several times during the night, unable to completely recall his dreams other than that the first few involved a lot of confusing imagery of wings and fire and light, and that in the last he seemed to be sitting in Dean’s bakery talking with Gabriel. Their conversation had made perfect sense to him within the dream, but on waking he only remembered feeling inexplicably reassured and encouraged.

When he finally gave up on tossing and turning and got out of bed, Cas made the executive decision to do the unthinkable and take a day off work. It’s not like he hadn’t been running himself ragged for the last few weeks, spending long hours hammering out all the production details and then sacrificing his weekends for the filming schedule. He could afford to have one day just for himself. The world wouldn’t fall apart without him in the office holding it all together.

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Dean slept terribly, plagued by bizarre dreams he wasn’t sure counted as nightmares; but considering the effect they’d had on him, they might as well have been. He awoke, dressed, and trudged to the kitchen for coffee like the shambling dead while surreal bits and pieces of leftover dreams rose up to poke at his subconscious before fading away again. Even worse, his headache was back.

He grabbed his coffee and headed to work, glimpses of Cas with tattered wings and a desolate hellscape of a world pushed out of his mind as he fought his way through early morning traffic. He tried to focus on the parts of the dream he could actually wrap his head around, and the vast majority of those had revolved around Cas. Dean only let himself feel weirdly guilty about having such intense and unsettling dreams about his friend for a split second before allowing himself to take comfort from what he felt was becoming a solid friendship in reality.

Being in the kitchen, despite his earlier reticence, proved to be a balm. Dean internally credited his improved mood to Donna and Charlie’s endless wells of positivity, but out loud he told them it was impossible to stay pissy while surrounded by cake. In reality, it was a bit of both, in addition to the meditative comfort of routine.

His routine was interrupted halfway through putting the finishing touches on a tray of cupcakes when Garth stuck his head through the kitchen door to announce Dean had a visitor. Donna and Charlie braced themselves for Dean’s standard outburst-- yelling at Garth to have them schedule an appointment-- but to everyone’s surprise Dean just calmly walked over to peek through the
window in the swinging door. A smile grew across his face as Dean thanked Garth and pushed his way out into the shop.

“Hey, Cas. You playing hooky today?”

“Hello, Dean,” Cas replied, lifting his eyes from the case of pastries and smiling up at Dean. “I took the day off. I hadn’t had one since the week before we started filming, and I couldn’t bear to face my desk again this morning.”

Dean returned his smile. “I hear ya, man. It’s been a busy couple of weeks. At least my office doesn’t have a desk.”

“Sure it does, Dean,” Garth said, and then paused and furrowed his brow. “Oh, but you don’t really sit at it much, I guess.”

Cas and Dean both snorted at Garth, and Dean asked him to get them a couple cups of coffee.

“Comin’ right up,” Garth replied cheerfully and puttered off.

“So, you used your day off to come rub it in my face?” Dean teased.

Cas looked horrified for a moment, but then noticed Dean was biting back a grin, and wasn’t actually angry about it. “I suppose I just enjoy your company, and the prospect of spending the entire day at the studio without your sparkling wit and charm seemed a rather bleak one, I’m afraid.”

Dean froze for a second, unsure if Cas had actually meant it, or if he was simply returning the joking barb he’d lobbed at Cas. Cas picked up on the tension in Dean’s stiffened posture and worked out where he’d gone wrong. Garth brought over two mugs of coffee and set them down in front of Dean without another word, rushing off to attend to a customer who’d entered the shop just in time to give Garth an excuse to escape the cone of awkwardness that had descended around Dean and Cas.

Dean picked up the mugs and tilted his head toward the table at the back of the shop that was mostly reserved for employee breaks. Customers rarely hung around long enough to make use of the tables anyway, but this one in particular was tucked away against the back wall of the shop between the kitchen, a large pastry display case and the bathrooms. Not exactly prime real estate for impressing customers with. The upside was they had at least the illusion of privacy now.

“Can I get you something to eat?” Dean asked, setting down their mugs while Cas took a seat. “A donut, or maybe a croissant? They’re fresh out of the oven.”

“Maybe later,” Cas replied, looking up at Dean and nervously lifting his mug to take a sip.

Dean grunted and pulled out the chair across from Cas, taking momentary refuge in his own coffee.

“I meant what I said, Dean. It wasn’t sarcasm,” Cas said after a few tense moments. “I didn’t sleep well last night, and the thought of being chained to my desk today was supremely unappealing. I decided I needed to get out of the house before those walls started closing in on me as well, and I guess I just ended up here.”

The longer Cas talked, the more Dean felt at ease. Cas clearly noticed it, too, and by the end he was flushed, fidgeting with his mug handle, and barely able to look Dean in the face.
“I’m sorry if I gave you the impression I wasn’t sincere.”

Dean grunted again and took another fortifying gulp of coffee. “No, it’s fine Cas. I’m just not used to people saying that kinda shit to me and actually meaning it, I guess.”

Cas frowned at that. “I can’t imagine why, Dean. You’re one of the most enjoyable people I know. Your family feels the same, as does the entire crew at the studio. I’m sure your employees would agree, as well.”

“Yeah, well, I sign their paychecks. Makes it easy to like me.”

“Dean,” Cas replied, his tone scolding. “Stop selling yourself short.”

“So,” Dean said, trying to change the subject. “You just accidentally showed up at the bakery for a visit?”

Cas shrugged. “It wasn’t entirely accidental. I may have been driving in this general direction for the last hour debating whether or not it would be appropriate to just drop in like this.”

Dean snorted. “For the record, I’m glad you decided to drop in.”

“Me too,” Cas replied.

Dean did manage to talk him into having that croissant, along with a second cup of coffee, but eventually he needed to get back to work. He’d regretfully informed Cas that cakes don’t bake themselves. Cas tried to disguise his disappointment, but Dean wasn’t fooled. He’d spent the morning feeling just as adrift as Cas looked now, and Dean wasn’t about to deny the fact that just having Cas visit had been exactly what he’d needed to lift his own mood. It was only a little worrying that Cas already had that sort of pull on him. Mostly it just made him feel happy.

Cas slowly stood up and pushed in his chair while Dean sat and watched, frowning. Dean didn’t have any casual words for this. As reluctant as Cas seemed to be to leave, Dean was equally reluctant to let him go. Cas cast a glance at the door over his shoulder and then gave Dean a resigned little smile. It gave Dean the brilliant—not completely desperate—idea to invite Cas back to the kitchen to put him to work.

Donna and Charlie welcomed a perplexed yet enthusiastic Cas into their domain and set him to work rolling out and cutting cookie dough. They may not have gotten quite as much done as usual, but they all had a hell of a lot of fun doing it. When Garth came through the kitchen to clock out after closing up the storefront, Dean did a double-take.

“How the hell is it already past six?”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” Donna suggested, setting the leftover icing from the last batch of cookies in the fridge.

“We need to have Cas help out more often, then,” Charlie replied with a grin.

“I really enjoyed myself today,” Cas said, “Thanks to all of you for your patience with me.”

Dean elbowed him and grinned. “You’re probably better qualified than most of our contestants now.”

Cas laughed at that, but Dean was completely serious. Without another word they tidied up the kitchen and closed down for the night. By mutual agreement, the four of them went for dinner at
the diner down the road. It was nothing fancy, just burgers and fries, but a day that had started with an air of gloom and doom had been infinitely redeemed.

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The rest of the week passed quickly for both Cas and Dean. Cas surprised him again on Thursday just as Dean was coming to the end of a very long day prepping for the weekend’s dozen weddings, a baby shower, and a fiftieth anniversary party. The last thing he wanted to do after a twelve hour shift was think about cooking dinner for himself, so when Cas arrived with a bag full of Pad Thai and tom yum soup, Dean had been more than happy to invite him in. They sat at their little table at the back of the shop until Dean finally gave in to exhaustion.

“I’m really sorry I’m not living up to my standard-- what was it? Sparkling wit and charm,” Dean said around another yawn. “It’s been a long damn day.”

“I know, Dean,” Cas replied. “And I know you have another long day ahead of you tomorrow. I didn’t mean to keep you so late.”

Dean finished locking the door to the shop and turned to rest a comforting hand on Cas’s shoulder. “Dude, you’re more than welcome to keep me late with Thai food any time the urge strikes you.”

They stood there smiling at one another for a few beats longer than common courtesy dictated, and Dean didn’t even try to stop himself from telling Cas how he felt. Maybe it was exhaustion, maybe combined with the satisfaction of a fully belly, and maybe it was just a side effect of spending time with Cas, but it felt wrong to keep the truth from him.

“You know that stuff you said the other morning? I’ve kinda been feeling the same, actually. I like it when you’re around. Kinda makes everything better, you know?”

The smile Cas gave him was worth it. “I’m glad you feel that way, Dean.” He’d been about to say something else when Dean yawned again, and then shook his head. “I’m sorry, Dean. I should let you get home so you can rest. I’ll see you on Sunday morning.”

“Yeah, okay,” Dean replied. It looked for a split second like Cas was considering giving him a hug, or maybe even a kiss, but instead he just gave Dean an awkward little wave and shuffled off to his car. “See ya, Cas.”

Saturday afternoon again prompted a round of emails from Cas about their two final episodes. The emails prompted a round of texting, which in turn prompted a round of phone calls. Their conversation flowed easily, but it also had the secondary effect of pushing back the increasingly vivid and frankly terrifying dreams that Dean had been having. They’d continued to haunt him during the day, except when he was talking to Cas. He’d nearly forget them entirely, aside from the strange feeling that rose up once in a while to remind him of Cas’s featured role in those dreams. The haunting feeling was usually banished back to insignificance within seconds, and easily forgotten again until they finally wished one another a good night.

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Sunday morning brought Cas yet another round of Gabriel’s meddling. It hadn’t been obvious when he’d first read over the daily schedule and roster of contestants, at least not the way seeing Sam Winchester’s name had. Cas had no reason to confront Gabriel; and even worse, he’d had no reason to think he needed to prepare Dean for the three people who were about to walk onto set.

He introduced the day’s guest judge to Dean over cupcakes and coffee. Dean and Rowena had
been discussing the uncanny similarity between the floral theme of the cupcakes Dean had brought in for the crew that morning and the cake she’d made for the second round challenge when a strange voice called out across the studio, startling Cas out of his amusement.

“Dean? Dean Winchester, is that you?” The woman had been following Alex to the green room, but detoured over to them when she’d spotted Dean.

“Lisa? What are you doing here?” Dean asked, frowning.

“Baking,” Lisa replied. “Or, trying to, at any rate. Don’t tell me you’re involved with the show?”

“Dean’s our expert judge,” Cas replied, now frowning between Dean and Lisa. “Do you two know each other?”

Rowena didn’t object to the lack of an introduction, savoring the intrigue and her cupcake instead. Dean cleared his throat and threw a slightly helpless glance toward Cas.

“Yeah, um. We actually dated for a while,” Dean replied. “Years ago. So, uh… how’ve you been?”

“Really good. Ben’s in college now, playing baseball still.”

“That’s great.”

“I guess you’re doing well, too, from the looks of it,” she replied, waving a hand vaguely around at the set. Alex came over and saved them any further awkwardness by clearing her throat and getting Lisa’s attention. “Yeah, I guess I need to go get ready, or whatever.”

“Yeah, good luck.”

“Thanks, Dean.” She smiled and let herself be led away, to Dean’s relief.

“What the hell?” Dean said to Cas. “I haven’t seen her in like six or seven years.”

“You know him, as well?” Rowena asked, finally unable to contain her curiosity. “Is that giant of a man another contestant?”

“He’s my brother,” Dean replied. “And he’s already been a contestant. Gabriel hauled in my entire family as a surprise last weekend.”

“Shame,” Rowena replied. “He’d make for something nice to look at, even if he can’t cook.”

The next surprise through the studio door was Dean’s friend Jo. He informed Cas that they hadn’t seen each other in a while, and that they had had a couple of awkward dates more than a decade
ago before deciding to remain friends. Cas had been just about to storm off to give Gabriel a piece of his mind when the final contestant arrived-- the first serious girlfriend Dean ever had nearly fifteen years earlier, Cassie Robinson.

“Well, isn’t this just cozy?” Rowena replied, sipping a cup of tea and looking as if her entire day had improved tenfold.

Cas excused himself to hunt down Gabriel, leaving Dean to make small talk with Rowena. She was no longer interested in discussing cake, now that it was clear that Dean’s dating history would be playing a starring role in the day’s proceedings. He confirmed that none of his exes had any real talent for baking, and was saved from any deeper inquiry into his personal life when Sam wandered over looking rather more grim than he had before.

“Were you in on this?” Dean asked as soon as Sam was in earshot.

Sam held up both hands in self defense and stopped just outside of punching range. “No, I swear. Gabriel called me last night and invited me to come by today. He told me I’d find it interesting, but wouldn’t tell me why. I figured you might need to have your lawyer present, and it looks like I was right about that. What the hell, Dean?”

“It’s like a soap opera, isn’t it?” Rowena piped in, holding out a hand and taking a few steps toward Sam. “Rowena McLeod. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Samuel.”

Sam shook her hand, gave her a polite smile, and then shook his head as he went right back to his analysis of Dean’s situation. “On the up side, your three exes seem to think it’s hilarious. They’re back there in makeup having a great time together.”

Rowena shot Dean an impressed look. “Well, that says something about the character of the women you’ve courted. Or at least the women Gabriel managed to dig up and convince to bake on television.”

“She’s right, Dean,” Sam agreed. “This could’ve been a lot worse.”

Dean grunted at that, thinking back over his long and not entirely stellar dating history. He left Sam and Rowena chatting together, which was probably a mistake, and went in search of Cas and Gabriel. It was pretty clear that Gabriel was fucking with him now. Like last week with his family, it was probably too late to do anything about it, but at the very least he needed to clear a few ground rules with his co-host. They only had one more episode to film, but Dean needed to know if Gabriel was already planning to use it to up the ante on him again. When he said it could’ve been worse, it really could’ve been a hell of a lot worse.

He checked the green room, all over the set, and even Cas’s office, but had no luck tracking them down before Jody called for everyone to take their places. Gabriel snuck in from the other side of the set and took his place at Dean’s side right as Jody called action. Unable to chew him out with the cameras rolling, Dean settled for glaring daggers in Gabriel’s direction as he cheerfully recorded the intro segment.

To Dean’s relief, Sam had been right about how well Lisa, Cassie, and Jo had gotten along. His fears that the show would somehow either turn into a sort of cold war of hostility or else devolve into a public service announcement about why nobody should ever date Dean Winchester proved unfounded. Despite their complicated history, the three women gave themselves over to the spirit of the show, determined to enjoy themselves and do their best.

The first challenge left Dean rolling his eyes at everyone, as Rowena opened the cupboard on three
small cakes decorated to look like couples enjoying a romantic soak in tiny fondant hot tubs.

It didn’t help when Rowena described the little confectionery lovers as “honeymooners,” but even Dean began to get into the spirit of her teasing eventually. It wasn’t until the first challenge had begun that Dean spotted Cas, looking far more harried than he had before and talking quietly and urgently with Sam. Dean frowned over at them until Sam caught him looking and tried to give him a reassuring thumbs up. Dean just shook his head and focused his attention on the baking, and on keeping Rowena on his side since it was clear that Gabriel was out to get him.

The first challenge went by quickly, and before he knew it, Jody was calling cut and Dean was sprinting over to where Cas waited nervously with a cup of coffee for him. Before Cas had a chance to say anything, Dean did what he could to soothe his apparent anxiety.

“Yes, I’m pissed at Gabriel, but I’m over it. The episode’s going really well, and most important, I’m not blaming you for it,” Dean said in a rush before taking a careful sip of his precious coffee.

“I told you, Cas,” Sam said. “And Gabriel swore to me he’s done screwing around with you, Dean.”

Dean snorted. “Yeah, for what his word’s worth.”

“Thank you, Dean,” Cas said. “I don’t know what he was thinking, and I’m glad it turned out as well as it has,” he added, glancing over at Lisa, Cassie, and Jo chatting happily together while Jack and Claire arranged the set for the judging segment. “He didn’t only put you on the spot, he also put my position with the network at risk. If this had blown up in his face it would’ve surely been bad for me. I authorized this entire production, and it’s my reputation on the line as a producer.”

Dean was a bit taken aback by that reminder, and mentally kicked himself for having been so wrapped up in his own personal issues that he hadn’t even considered Cas’s predicament. This whole baking show was just a lark for Dean, but Cas’s entire career was on the line here.

“Yes, I’m gonna have a talk with him about that,” Dean said, glancing over his shoulder to see everyone in position to begin filming again. He downed the rest of his coffee and turned back to Cas, laying one hand on his shoulder and looking him in the eye. “In fact, we should corner him over lunch.”

Cas smiled and nodded at that, taking Dean’s empty cup as he jogged to his mark. Jody called action and the show was on.

Lisa chose to use white jelly beans to make the bubbles atop her cake, and Dean thought the little
fondant dude looked a little too much like him for comfort. The fact he was all snuggled up to the little fondant chick that bore a striking resemblance to Lisa only added to the creepy feeling. The chocolate cake inside was layered with peach jam, which combined with the coconut flavor of the jelly beans and the dark cocoa of the cake made for a confusing taste journey. When Rowena questioned the palate she’d chosen. Lisa replied that Dean had baked her a cake with peaches once, and she remembered how much she’d loved it.

“Yeah, that was a peach and bourbon pound cake, I think,” Dean replied, trying to remember things he’d baked years ago. “Or was it the vanilla cake with the peach compote?”

Lisa looked a bit embarrassed, and shrugged. “I just remember it was peach flavored, and delicious.”

Jo’s cake looked a little rough around the edges, where she’d had a difficult time getting the sides of the hot tub to stand up. At least neither of the two little fondant people looked anything like him, and she shot Dean a satisfied and knowing smile when he commented on the fact that both figures were women. Gabriel was about to clear his throat and likely make an inappropriate comment, so Dean elbowed him.

Despite its shaky appearance, Jo’s cake tasted good, with layers of vanilla and orange cream, and a hint of cinnamon spiciness. Rowena complimented the flavors, giving Jo the once over, but Jo just smiled serenely back at her.

Cassie’s cake was a near duplicate of the original, right down to the bubbles. Despite that, she still looked unsure of herself as the three judges tasted her creation. The strawberry shortcake filling laced through with chocolate was a hit with all of them. Gabriel declared it “appropriately decadent for a honeymoon,” and crowned her the winner of round one as Jack bumbled over with the prize cart.

The moment Jody called cut and announced the lunch break, Dean grabbed Gabriel’s arm so he couldn’t escape. He smiled at Rowena and excused himself and Gabriel, ushering the man without complaint to Cas, already waiting by the studio door.

“I took the liberty of having lunch sent to my office,” Cas informed them as Dean marched Gabriel along behind him. “Dean and I would like to clear the air with you.”

The three of them sat around Cas’s desk, Gabriel cheerfully digging into his lunch while Dean and Cas exchanged a look of dark agreement and turned their attention to Gabe.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, Gabriel, but it needs to stop,” Cas began. “Do you bear some grudge against Dean that I should be aware of?”

Gabriel looked up from his food, mock horror plastered across his face. “Dean? Hell, no. I love the guy.”

“Funny way of showing it,” Dean replied. “If this had gone to shit, how do you think it would’ve looked for Cas, you ass. Did you even think about that?”

Gabriel’s mock horror melted into something more contrite. “I, uh… guess I hadn’t thought of that. But I knew it would work out. You think I can’t read people well enough to know how far I can push ‘em? I built my entire career around it.”

Cas rubbed his eyes with one hand in exasperation. “I pulled a lot of strings to make this show happen for you, Gabriel. I just want to make sure you understand the gravity of the situation you’ve
“Dude,” Gabriel replied, looking a little offended. “If you only knew what it cost on my end, you’d know I’m not about to fuck this up. The fate of my whole world rests on this going according to plan.” Gabriel shut his mouth and frowned for a second, as if he’d said something he shouldn’t have, and then shook his head. “Look, Cas, this is important to me, too. I wish you had a little bit of trust in me, man. I’m not gonna fuck this up, okay? Just look at what we got so far today. This is gonna be our best episode yet, and Dean’s coming off looking like the sweetest bastard to ever woo a woman. Have you seen those three out there? Knockouts with hearts of gold and personalities to match. Mature, intelligent, independent women who don’t bear Dean any ill will despite their histories. Because that’s the kind of guy Dean is. Do you get it, yet?”

Gabriel leveled an intense look at Cas, which Cas returned with interest. Dean sat and watched their silent exchange until Cas finally blinked and waved a hand at Gabriel.

“Fine, Gabriel,” Cas said, rubbing his eye like he was massaging away a phantom headache. “Just give me a little warning if you intend to pull any additional stunts. We only have one more day of filming, and I’d like to avoid any potential last minute disasters.”

Gabriel winked at him and grinned. “You got it, cous. No disasters without fair warning.”

“That’s not what I…” Cas started, but Gabriel was already walking out the door.

Cas leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I think that’s the best we’re likely to get from him. If I were you, I’d assume that tomorrow will entail some escalation of Gabriel’s antics.”

Dean nodded slowly. “Yeah, but he’s not wrong, either. This is like the opposite of a disaster, and so was having my family on. I kinda hate myself for even thinking it, but maybe the guy actually does know what the fuck he’s doing.”

Cas laughed at that, and then the two of them set to quickly finishing their lunch before hurrying back to the studio. The soundstage had been reset for round two, and when Dean and Cas walked in it was to find Jody casually chatting and laughing with the three contestants. It was a surreal sight on at least four different levels-- not the least of which was Jody the consummate professional being casually social while on the clock-- but Dean let it go with a shiver as Cas gave him a reassuring pat on the back.

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Round two opened with Rowena apologizing for taking the theme of the day-- weddings and honeymoons-- out of order, revealing a fairytale castle themed wedding cake to follow up the first round’s honeymoon cakes.
The three contestants oohed and aahed until Gabriel gave them three hours to duplicate it for the judges. Then the typical challenge panic set in. The three contestants unilaterally decided to forego fancy flavor in their base cakes to better focus on the architectural engineering of the final display. The judges made a few comments about not looking forward to three identical vanilla-on-vanilla flavor profiles, but all agreed the final products at least would stand a chance of looking good, which was kinda the point.

Dean, for one, was impressed with how dedicated all three of his exes were to producing the best possible cake they could. None of them were treating this like a joke, or complaining about the work, or letting any minor setbacks get them down. It was honestly inspiring, and reminded Dean why he’d been attracted to each of them in the first place. Things may not have worked out with any of them romantically, but he was grateful that any of these incredible women had shared even a small portion their lives with him.

At about the two hour mark, watching Rowena answer Jo’s panic button call for professional intervention to stabilize the castle atop her cake, Dean had to excuse himself from set for a bit while Lisa and Cassie both shouted encouragement to Jo. He wasn’t hiding, per se, but he didn’t need the cameras capturing his unmanly display of emotion, either. Coffee was sure to do the trick, or at least give him a reason to hide in the shadows for a few minutes.

Sam had been standing with Cas by the coffee pot when Dean suddenly got up from the judge’s table, but he whispered something to Cas and hurried off in the direction of the men’s room the moment he caught sight of his brother headed their way. An almost unconscious wave of relief spread through Dean, and he decided in that moment he wouldn’t taunt Sam over the outrageous flirting he’d been exchanging with Rowena all day.

Cas handed him a cup of coffee and smiled nervously. “It looks as if we might owe Gabriel an apology.”

Dean sipped his coffee a little too fast and coughed, hoping that nearly choking on the hot liquid would be enough to justify the flush on his cheeks and the moisture welling up in his eyes. “Yeah, I guess so. At least for today. I’m not extending him any credit for whatever shit he’s got planned for tomorrow.”

“I can hardly imagine you have any dark, terrible secrets in your closet,” Cas started, and again Dean nearly choked on his coffee. Cas gave him a curious look and went on. “After meeting your family, your employees, and the women in your past, I think it says a lot about your character in general.”
“Yeah, well, some of us got deep closets,” Dean muttered in reply.

Cas frowned at that. “Dean, if there’s anything in your past that you are truly not comfortable about airing, please know that I will take your side. Even if we have to reschedule filming, I won’t force you to participate in an episode you have any personal objection to.”

It was Dean’s turn to frown at that. “Even if it screws you over with the network?”

Cas shrugged. “I’m the one who convinced you to sign the contract, Dean. You trusted me enough to step outside your comfort zone, and you’ve more than fulfilled your end of this bargain. I refuse to allow Gabriel to use that trust against you. I wanted you to know that.”

Cas had said it with resolute finality. Dean didn’t doubt he meant every word of it, either. Maybe it was just the emotional overload, but something in that moment sparked another jarring sensory episode. For a brief moment, Cas seemed to glow with some sort of holy fire from within, and Dean would’ve sworn he could see the shadows of two mangled wings rising up behind him again. Dean blinked that vision away as he recalled their very first filming session weeks ago at his bakery, viscerally recalling the way he’d shut down completely when Cas’s questions had become too personal. Dean wondered if Cas was recalling that same day in making his declaration to defend Dean’s right to keep his personal life personal.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean replied quietly, allowing himself to finally settle into the comfort he’d become accustomed to finding at Cas’s side. “But as much as you’re trying to protect me, I’m gonna try to protect you, too. I signed that contract knowing I’d be working with Gabriel. I figured at some point I’d be the target of one of his pranks, you know? There’s stuff in my past I’m not proud of, but I don’t think he’d pull any of that out during the finale just to fuck with me. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Gabriel, it’s that he sees shit through to the end. This whole damn show was his idea, and I don’t think he’d tank it at the last minute just for kicks.”

Cas considered Dean thoughtfully for a few moments and then nodded. “I believe you’re right. But my offer still stands.”

Dean smiled and laid a hand on Cas’s shoulder. He had to clench his teeth to restrain the urge to give Cas a hug— or worse— but this was not the time to make romantic declarations or marriage proposals. “You’re a keeper, Cas. Don’t ever let anyone tell you different.”

In the shadows of the set lights, Dean could’ve sworn he’d seen Cas blush as he gulped down the rest of his coffee and headed back to his chair. If Dean wasn’t careful, he’d end up embarrassing himself in front of the entire crew, three of his ex-girlfriends, and possibly a national television audience. He let the knowledge that he only had one more day of filming before he could corner Cas without the specter of his contract standing in his way of asking the guy out for real. Because he wasn’t sure he’d ever wanted anything more.

As the clock ticked down on the current challenge, Dean’s thoughts strayed through a hundred different scenarios he’d lived through with each of the contestants, wondering if things would’ve gone differently if he’d lived through them with Cas instead. His first awkward meeting with Cassie where he’d practically knocked her down as she hurried to class and he hurried to work. The apology coffee he’d bought her that had made them both late, but had also kindled the first real relationship either of them had ever had. Meeting Jo at her mother’s bar and flirt-fighting with her for years before finally testing the waters and taking her out to dinner, only to decide after the second date that neither of them could take each other seriously enough for any sort of romance to develop. And Lisa, who’d opened her life to him along with her son, welcoming him into a picture of domestic bliss he’d tried his level best to fit himself into. One of the hardest things he’d ever had to admit to himself was that he loved the idea of Lisa more than he could ever love her, not to
mention that life he’d always thought he was supposed to want but hadn’t fit him well at all, and they’d decided to go their separate ways. But how would any of that have turned out differently if it had been Cas by his side all along?

Dean managed to throw out an occasional comment for the cameras, and paid attention enough to respond to Rowena and Gabriel’s conversation, but he found himself stealing more glances at Cas than was strictly appropriate. He almost didn’t care anymore if anyone else noticed, even when Sam caught him looking.

The final break of the day for the crew to set up for round two judging was a blessed relief. Dean excused himself, hurried over to tell Cas that he’d be back in a few minutes, and dashed out of the studio and down the hall to the men’s room to have a few minutes to himself. He leaned over the sink, resting both hands on the edges of the basin, and studied himself in the mirror. It was still him looking back, but he almost didn’t recognize himself. The version of himself in the mirror looked dangerously close to… happy. Dean barked out a laugh at that sudden, simple revelation and bent over to splash cold water on his face. He stopped himself from actually doing it, knowing Jody would just send him back to makeup to get his nose powered again, and laughed even harder at himself.

He returned to set to find everyone patiently waiting for him. Cas stopped him to make sure he was feeling okay, and Dean assured him he felt fantastic with a pat on the back and a big smile. He walked back to his chair, clapping his hands once and then rubbing them together.

“What’s get this show on the road.”

Cassie was declared the winner after a debate wherein Gabriel and Rowena disregarded every bit of input that Dean offered, and their comedic deliberations had the entire studio on the verge of hysterics. Cas swooped in with his customary paperwork, and as they signed the forms and left the studio, Dean thanked and congratulated each of his exes in turn. They thanked him for the fantastic experience, and for waiting around to see them off. Dean let them each think that had been his sole motivation for sticking around. He’d also stuck around after Cassie left, despite her dropping several hints that she wouldn’t mind going out for some celebratory drinks with Dean. Flattered as he was, he knew their relationship had ended for a reason, and much as he might enjoy her company as a friend, he had bigger plans for what he hoped his future could hold. So he saw her to the door and then accompanied Cas to complete the ritual of delivering the signed documents to his office.

“So, I was gonna swing by this place near my apartment for dinner,” Dean said as he and Cas left the office. “They make these fucking ridiculous sandwiches you need a bigger mouth to eat.”

“That sounds both alarming and intriguing,” Cas replied. “If they also serve milkshakes, count me in.”

Dean grinned at him, threw an arm around Cas’s shoulders and cheerfully led the way. Once again the two of them lost track of time, sitting in a quiet little sandwich shop on the beach until the owner threw them out when he closed up at nine o’clock. As Dean walked Cas back to his car, parked a few blocks away in the lot at Dean’s building, conversation turned to reminiscing over the last month or so they’d gotten to know one another.

They talked about the show, about the last day of filming bringing an end to the entire whirlwind of an experience for both of them. Dean had resisted the whole idea of it at first, but now that the show was almost over, he realized just how much he was going to miss it. All of it, really, but most especially Cas. He was roused from that wistful train of thought with the revelation that Cas had been thinking the very same thing.
“I’m going to miss our spontaneous evenings out,” Cas said with a sigh. “Most nights I don’t do anything more exciting than microwave a dinner for one and watch whatever happens to be on television. You’ve provided superior conversation and culinary variety.”

Dean tried to hide his pleasure at that by staring down at his feet as he walked. “It’s not like my life is that much different than yours, Cas. Most nights I’m sitting up there eating mac and cheese and watching a game until I pass out.”

“But you do make excellent mac and cheese,” Cas countered.

“Yeah, but my sparkling wit and charm or whatever just goes unappreciated,” Dean replied with a smirk.

Cas laughed and shook his head. “I’ll always appreciate you, Dean. You’re more than welcome to call me any time for reassurance.”

Dean felt a flush of warmth rush through him at those words, his breath hitching in his throat. It was all too tempting to tell Cas he’d take him up on that offer, to tell him how much he wanted to keep seeing him like this, to just confess his feelings and lay himself bare for Cas.

One more day, he repeated like a mantra. He could survive one more day, take Cas out for a celebratory dinner after the final shoot and do this properly. Dean was almost entirely sure Cas would accept, but he’d already waited this long. What was one more day?

As they were saying goodnight beside Cas’s car, Dean took one little risk and pulled Cas in for a hug. He had to suffer through a split second of panic that he’d read this whole situation wrong until Cas sighed and wrapped his arms around Dean. They pulled apart before it could become awkward, or Dean gave in to even more impulsive urges, but their hands lingered for just a moment.

“Thanks, Cas, for everything.”

“No, thank you, Dean. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Dean waved as Cas pulled away, and then trudged up to his empty apartment alone.
Dean’s nightmares had evolved into his very own personal horror show. He woke up screaming twice in three hours, and gave up on sleep in a fit of cold sweats and uncontrollable shaking. The dreams were both vivid and horrifically memorable, filled with imagery he’d rather forget.

He’d been trapped inside his body, unable to control it, while his hands carried out atrocities he was forced to watch and yet powerless to stop. Cas had been there, too, throwing himself in Dean’s path over and over again, pleading with him to stop as Dean tried to scream warnings at him, but sickening, mocking laughter had been the only sound to come out of his mouth. Dean watched in horror as his body lashed out at Cas while he fought to regain control.

The worst of it all wasn’t the agony of what he did, but the absolute certainty that he could also feel Cas’s pain. And not just physical pain as Dean’s hands slammed into him. There was that, of course, but there was also the torrent of emotional anguish, as if Dean could feel Cas’s heartbreak right alongside his own. The cherry on top of it all was the conviction that-- despite all of this-- he could feel Cas aching for him, longing even, as if nothing else mattered to him than somehow freeing Dean with no concern for his own fate.

Dean showered and dressed, waiting impatiently for his coffee to brew before heading to his bakery at four in the morning. He set about mindlessly making cannolis just for something to keep himself occupied. By the time Donna and Charlie arrived, he’d made six dozen of them.

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Across town, Cas hadn’t been having much luck with sleep, either. He’d dreamt that he’d been chasing after Dean for weeks, through a heart-pounding and pervasive feeling that he had to save Dean; that something was terribly, possibly irreparably wrong. No matter how hard he searched, he’d never been able to find Dean, and kept waking up feeling panicky and unfulfilled. Once again, his last dream of the night was of a long, uncharacteristically quiet conversation with Gabriel. This time they sat together at a battered wooden table in a strange library that felt inexplicably familiar and comfortable, and the only thing Cas remembered about their conversation was Gabriel assuring him that he’d have no memory of it when he woke up. It had seemed a strange thing to take comfort from, but nevertheless Cas awoke feeling more hopeful and confident.

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Dean arrived at the studio with a few dozen cannolis within moments of the final day’s guest judge. He recognized her from the website Cas had shown him at dinner the night before, and walked over to see if she needed any help.

“Hey,” she said by way of greeting, her hands occupied with a large cake box.

“It’s Billie, right?”

She nodded, giving Dean a once over and waiting patiently for him to continue.

Dean introduced himself, offered her a cannoli, and told her to wait there for just a minute while he ran inside and wrangled up one of Jack’s rolling carts. He dumped his cannolis into Cas’s hands with a wink and raced back outside to help Billie bring in her cakes.

“That was one delicious cannoli,” she said when he returned. “I’m gonna want that recipe.”
“Consider it yours, then,” Dean replied.

Back inside, Billie met with Jody and Alex to set up her displays while Dean finally found Cas setting out his pastry boxes on the craft services table. A few curious crew members who’d grown accustomed to Dean’s daily treats had begun to circle, so Dean grabbed a coffee and drew Cas aside.

“It’s like watching a pack of vultures descending on a zebra carcass,” Dean commented with a nod to the scavenging horde.

Cas elbowed him and continued to appreciatively devour his chocolate striped cannoli. “I have to compliment them on their taste. This is the best zebra carcass I’ve ever had.”

Dean laughed at that and the two of them headed off toward the makeup chairs. Cas stood by and watched Dean endure the treatment, and then waited again for Dean to recover from being grumpy about being a “painted whore” before slowly working the conversation around to the final episode’s contestant list.

“Gabriel has informed me that he’s hand selected the three challengers again today, but infuriatingly he refuses to give me their names yet.”

Dean just shrugged. “I ain’t worried. I got you to stand up for me,” he said, grinning contentedly at Cas as they walked back to set.

The two of them spent a few pleasant and relaxing minutes chatting with Billie, and exchanging cannoli recipes, before Gabriel dared to show his face in the studio. He only stuck around long enough to snag Patience and one of the makeup artists before scurrying off to wherever he’d apparently stashed the day’s contestants. Patience gave them a worried glance before following after her boss with a spare cannoli to shove in his mouth should the need arise.

Dean and Billie had made themselves comfortable at the judge’s table and Jody was beginning to panic that they had no host and no contestants with five minutes left to go before the cameras were scheduled to roll. Patience returned to the studio and carried out a hushed and urgent conversation with Cas before Cas threw a not-particularly-reassuring frown in Dean’s direction and the two of them left together in a rush. Dean studied them intently, but despite straining to overhear, he had no idea what fresh hell Gabriel had conjured up.

Gabriel strolled in with just two minutes to spare with a glint in his eye that Dean had learned not to trust in the least. He took his place on his mark and gave Jody what was supposed to be a reassuring wink that everything was ready to go. Without any alternative, Jody took him at his word and shouted action. Dean glanced around in hopes of getting some silent signal of reassurance from Cas, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had one flash of horror that maybe Gabriel had tied him up and shoved him in a closet somewhere before he spotted Cas leading two unsettlingly familiar faces into the studio. Dean let the reality of Gabriel’s game settle in and wondered where the third contestant was hiding, until he noticed the look on Cas’s face.

Two men from Dean’s past stood on either side of Cas wearing their aprons embroidered with the Cakepocalypse logo. Crowley’s was appropriately red, seeing as how Dean figured the guy fashioned himself as the devil, while Aaron’s was green. Between them, Cas wore a deep glower that Dean suspected had potential as a weapon of mass destruction and a cheerful blue apron that brought out the color of his eyes. Dean was at a complete loss for words, and was grateful that he wasn’t expected to actually say anything coherent while Gabriel handled all the introductions.

“As one of the most in-demand wedding planners in the country, Crowley knows what goes into a...
great cake, but does he know how to assemble it all himself?” Gabriel asked as Crowley strolled to his mark with a confident smirk.

Dean groaned, having known the man for years. At the beginning of their professional relationship, they’d had a mildly embarrassing fling that they’d been able to put in their past to continue working together. Crowley still savored any opportunity to bring it up, and Dean often wondered if the man still harbored feelings for him. Given the leer Crowley leveled at him now, Dean had to assume that at least one of those feelings was probably lust. This was not going to be a good day for Dean Winchester.

“Aaron is a research librarian, but have any of his studies extended into the world of pastry?” Gabriel asked next, turning to Dean with a slyly raised eyebrow.

Dean rubbed at his temple and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Yeah, Aaron’s studies extended into the world of pastry, but as far as Dean knew that ended at the point Aaron had asked him out in a fit of rapture over a maple bacon donut. Dean had accepted, and they’d ended up at a bar where they realized that the mutual love of bacon wasn’t enough to found a relationship on. They had remained friends, and Aaron was still a loyal customer of the bakery.

“And last but definitely not least, Castiel. Full disclosure, he’s my cousin, and as our executive producer he’s the reason we’ve been able to make this show in the first place. He’s watched us film five episodes, and sources tell me he’s been spending an awful lot of his free time in the company of my co-host here,” Gabriel said, hooking a thumb in Dean’s direction, “but is it possible to learn the fine art of baking by osmosis?”

Cas rolled his eyes and stepped up to his mark beside Crowley and Aaron.

“Without further ado, I’d like to introduce our very special guest judge, Billie. She’s made a name for herself at Sweet Surrender bakery with delicious treats that are to die for. And today she’s brought two of the most decadent challenges we’ve had yet. So let’s take a look at what we’re all in for today.”

Claire followed the judges with one camera while Kaia kept the other trained on the three contestants as they all walked over to the first cupboard. Gabriel ceded the floor to Billie, and she opened the doors to reveal a positively sinful looking chocolate cake. There were several gasps from the crew who were just seeing it for the first time.
“Death,” Billie said, turning a raised eyebrow on the three contestants. “We’ve all heard of Death By Chocolate. There’s as many variations on this classic recipe as there are people who’ve baked one, but for today’s first challenge, I’d like to see your personal versions.”

If Dean hadn’t spent the last half hour chatting politely with Billie, he probably would’ve heard that challenge as a threat. Gabriel chuckled at the contestants’ stunned faces, and Dean figured the threat had landed appropriately.

“Okay bakers, you heard the lady,” Gabriel said, rubbing his hands together. “Your deadline is two hours from now. You better start making your final arrangements.”

As the contestants scrambled toward the pantry to gather what they’d need to bake, Aaron shouted out, “Never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line!” to which Dean replied with a shouted, “None of you are actually Sicilian.”

Crowley muttered out something about having a whole warehouse of iocane powder in Belize anyway, and the entire studio erupted in a fit of giggles.

Dean shook his head. That’s why he still consented to do business with that demon. It was probably also why he was one of the most sought-after wedding planners in the state. Crowley could charm anyone into anything, and leave them glad for having signed away their souls in exchange for a picture perfect wedding.

Two hours was admittedly not nearly enough time to craft a true Death By Chocolate, but by the time the clock ran down to zero and the buzzer sounded in the studio, Dean was impressed by what he’d seen of all three cakes.

For the first time, Dean didn’t rush off the set the moment Jody called cut. Cas finally blinked up at him from his place in kitchen three, and grinned when Dean gave him a hearty thumbs up. Dean also finally got to watch the entire transformation of the kitchens between rounds, the crew cleaning up at breakneck speed, and setting up all three cakes for judging. Cas kept shooting him nervous glances and wringing his hands, and Dean had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. He knew if the situation was reversed, he’d be going out of his mind waiting for Cas to pass judgment on him. Luckily Jody called everyone to their places before Cas had too much time to dwell on his
fears. By the time Jody called action again, Dean realized he hadn’t even noticed what Crowley and Aaron had been up to during the break. His entire focus had been on Cas.

“So you’ve all been plotting our death… by chocolate,” Gabriel began as the three judges gathered around Crowley’s cake. “Let’s see if you’ve managed to pull it off.”

Crowley’s cake certainly looked deadly, covered with a dark chocolate ganache and dark chocolate shavings. He cut a piece for the judges to sample, and Gabriel waved a hand for Jack to bring over a bottle of whiskey to wash it down with. Jack complied, bringing three plastic cups to share it out with between the judges. Gabriel poured them each a hefty measure and they shared a toast before humming with pleasure at the flavor.

“That was a fantastic cake,” Gabriel told him.

“It’s not much to look at,” Billie added. “It looks like it’s wearing a toupee.”

Dean nearly snorted whiskey out his nose at that. “If dark chocolate is your thing, it’s a good way to die, though.”

They moved on to Aaron, whose cake was topped with an assortment of chocolate candy and cookies.

“I took the milk chocolate candy themed road to hell,” Aaron said, cutting them a slice that contained as many different candy toppings as he could manage to cram into a cake.

“Are there M&M’s in here?” Gabriel asked, and Aaron nodded.

“That makes for a fun colorful surprise inside,” Billie said, while Aaron shrugged.

They moved on to Cas’s cake, which had shaved chocolate similar to Crowley’s cake, but only around the sides. On top were a series of icing flourishes that Charlie had taught him to make at the bakery the previous week, topped with delicately fluted decorative white chocolate designs that Donna had showed him how to make.

“I chose to adorn it with wings, in hopes that if I should inadvertently cause someone’s death, they’d be prepared to ascend to heaven,” Cas said, before Gabriel could get a comment out.

“Figures you’d go with the angel theme, Castiel.”

Cas narrowed his eyes at his cousin. “You’re one to talk, Gabriel.”

When Cas served them their sample slice, Dean made sure to snag the tiny set of chocolate wings for himself. “It’s really good, Cas.”

“Thank you, Dean. I’ll have to thank Charlie and Donna for teaching me a few things.”

“Well, that sounds entirely fair,” Crowley muttered under his breath as he rolled his eyes and turned his back on the proceedings.

“How many years have you spent hanging around my bakery, Crowley? You coulda had private lessons if you’d asked,” Dean replied.

Crowley just shrugged. “I don’t need lessons as long as I’ve got money to pay you to do it for me.”

“And that, folks, is the crux of the message I hoped to get across with this show,” Gabriel said, shooting finger guns and a saucy wink in Crowley’s direction. “Baking’s great, but for special
occasions when you really want to wow folks, it’s best left to the professionals.”

“I’m still waiting for the opportunity to plan your wedding, Squirrel,” Crowley said to Dean. “That’s also best left to the professionals,” he added, with a wistful glance in Cas’s direction.

Cas was declared the winner of round one, by virtue of the fact that his cherry-filled chocolate cake was the best tasting of the three. Jack took great pleasure in crowning his boss with the sparkly golden chef’s hat, and then suddenly they were all breaking for lunch. Dean finally got to spend a few minutes in Castiel’s company after feeling the loss of it all morning. He congratulated Cas on his win and complimented him on the new look as he gave the sparkly chef hat a prod. Cas blushed and pulled it off his head, but walked contentedly at Dean’s side over to the lunch table.

“It kinda sucked that I couldn’t run off to the coffee pot for a five minute break all morning,” Dean said as they selected their sandwiches. “I probably shouldn’t even be talking to you. Isn’t that impropriety or some shit?”

Cas shrugged and the two of them found a quiet corner to sit together while they ate. Crowley and Aaron cast them the occasional glance, but neither Dean nor Cas even noticed. All too soon, they were being called back to set, and round two began with Billie revealing their final challenge.

“It’s easy to hide a multitude of sins beneath a well-applied drape of fondant, but when the cake itself is the main attraction, laid bare for God and everyone to see, it takes a lot of care to make a cake that can really shine on its own,” She said, with a considering glance at the three contestants. With that she flung open the doors, revealing a naked cake decorated only with candy wildflowers and an array of berries.

“Your recipes are loaded at your stations, and it’s up to you to choose how to bare your unfrosted cakes to the world,” Gabriel said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “You’ve got nothing to hide behind in this challenge, and you’ve got three hours to pull it off.”

The baking went by in a blur of fruit flavoring and experimentation with color. Billie and Gabriel carried most of the conversation, but Dean was on the edge of his seat, mesmerized every time Cas paused to taste test his work. It got to the point where Dean was literally praying that Cas wouldn’t swipe his finger through the buttercream and suck it clean again, because he wasn’t sure he could
take it much longer. He was also sure that Cas had caught the deer in the headlights look on his face at some point, and was deliberately repeating the gesture at regular intervals just to watch Dean’s reaction grow steadily more pained. It seemed to bolster Cas’s spirits, so Dean couldn’t really object.

Dean had been surprised every time Gabriel called out the time as the clock ticked down. Two hours left, then one hour. When Gabriel called out the fifteen minute warning, Crowley’s muttered curse finally drew Dean’s attention away from the carefully constructed pink and purple tower that Cas had crafted. The rush was on for all of them to finish as quickly as possible and he wasn’t able to focus on much more than the general color schemes that Crowley and Aaron had chosen. This was definitely shaping up to be an interesting final round. All three bakers were still working as Gabriel counted down from ten seconds and the final buzzer sounded. Jody called cut as soon as they’d raised their hands and backed away from their cakes. Aaron still held a tiny pink icing flower between his fingers that hadn’t made it onto his cake.

Once again the crew jumped into action, preparing all three cakes for judging and clearing away the worst of the mess from each of their kitchens. Jack stood in the wings cradling the final trophy in his arms and trying to get Cas’s attention to give him a thumbs up of support. Gabriel slipped off stage for just a few seconds to deliver last minute instructions for Patience, who nodded grimly as Gabriel returned to the judge’s table with a confident grin on his face. He gave Dean a hearty pat on the back as he took his seat and everyone else took their places.

“So, Crowley, tell us what you’ve baked,” Gabriel said as Claire circled his towering purple monstrosity with her camera to capture it from every angle.

“It’s a blackberry cake with berry infused cream,” he said.

“It’s very purple,” Dean replied, pointing out the obvious, to which Crowley rolled his eyes in the style of the long-suffering.

“You definitely picked a theme and stuck with it,” Billie added, noting Crowley’s monochromatic color scheme with the flowers and berries adorning the layers.

“But how does it taste?” Gabriel asked, and Crowley cut and delivered a slice to the judges.

“It tastes very purple,” Dean commented, setting down his fork.

“He’s not lying,” Gabriel agreed. “There’s not much to taste beyond the blackberry flavor.”

They moved on to Aaron’s pink cake, flavored with strawberries, but decorated with whipped cream, strawberries, and an assortment of pink and blue candy flowers that made it look like it was crafted for a baby shower.

“It’s adorable,” Billie said, and then tasted it. “And you’ve got a great take on a strawberry shortcake going on here.”

“That’s what I was going for,” Aaron said happily.

It was finally Cas’s turn, and Dean was not only allowed, but encouraged to focus all his attention back on Cas.

“I chose to make a blueberry lemon angel food cake with raspberry cream.”

“I saw you pureeing all those blueberries and I was worried you weren’t gonna get your cake to bake to a good consistency,” Billie said, “but look at you go, stacking up those layers anyway.”
“Nice work on the flowers, too,” Gabriel added.

Dean just smiled at him and encouraged him to serve his cake. Cas complied, stepping back and twisting his fingers into his apron as he watched the judges taste his creation.

“Oh, that really works,” Dean said, taking another swipe of the raspberry whipped cream.

Gabriel yanked the plate away from Dean and wrapped a protective arm around it while he continued to devour the cake.

“Dude, you know there’s a whole cake over there. You can get another piece if you want,” Dean said, giving Gabriel a dubious look as Gabriel just grinned up at him and took another bite.

Cas looked torn between happiness and mortification at Gabriel’s reaction, and Billie just sighed and rubbed her temples before announcing that, as the only impartial judge on the panel, she was declaring Cas the winner. Jack ran over without even being called and gleefully shoved the trophy into Cas’s hands. Gabriel licked his plate clean and then thanked Billie for being the voice of reason.

“And since he’s the producer and can’t actually win a prize, we’re donating today’s grand prize to the charity Random Kindness, who will help us choose a deserving student at a local culinary school to complete their instruction on our nickel. Which also means there’s no money gun today. I hope you’re not too disappointed, Castiel.”

“I’m more than happy to not have to sweep up the winnings, yes.”

After Jody called cut for the final time, Patience swooped in with the stacks of paperwork that Cas had always handled, since he had to sign off on his own release forms this time around. Dean waited patiently as the crew came around to wish him well and lament the fact they’d miss his daily treats. He thanked them in turn and promised he’d drop by and surprise them all with a box of cupcakes every once in a while. He shook hands with Crowley and Aaron as they left and then inched over toward where Cas, Patience, and Gabriel were huddled together in an intense conversation. Patience saw him coming and gave Cas a little nudge in his direction. Cas turned around, looking pleasantly surprised to find Dean apparently waiting just for him.

“Go get ‘em,” Gabriel said, giving Dean a little wave, and Cas an indelicate shove toward Dean.

Dean narrowed his eyes, wondering if their previous conversation had been about him. Cas turned back to cast a nervous glance at Patience and Gabriel, but Patience gave him a hearty thumbs up and began collecting her paperwork, while Gabriel gave him an encouraging wink. Cas sighed and squared his shoulders, walking over to Dean and giving him a tentative smile.

“Well, that was all entirely unexpected,” Cas said after a moment of fidgeting.

“So you’re not pissed that Gabriel shanghaied you into baking?”

Cas tilted his head to the side and frowned. “Perhaps a bit. I wasn’t prepared for that amount of work when I woke up this morning. I’m impressed that you do this every day. It’s exhausting.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, you get used to it. I, uh, guess you’re not feeling like cooking dinner tonight, so how about letting me cook for you? I mean, since it’s the last day and all, I thought maybe…”

“I’d love that,” Cas replied without hesitation.

“Yeah, that’s…” Dean rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s good. I was worried you might not
have time to hang out anymore now that you’re probably moving on to some other show, and all.”

Cas smiled and shook his head. “We do have an option on your contract for another series, and I feel confident that the network would be amenable to going forward with that if you’d like to. But I’ll always make time for you, Dean, no matter what happens next.”

Dean blinked up at him, stunned by Cas’s calm and earnest sincerity. He just nodded as Cas smiled and led him out.

Once again, Cas followed him to his apartment. Dean scoured his kitchen for something to make, but after a few minutes they agreed they should just order a pizza and relax. They talked over a couple of beers, Cas relating his struggles in the kitchen while Dean alternately gave him tips for next time, laughed at his stories, and just smiled and enjoyed listening to Cas talk. He realized that this was something he could definitely do more of; just hanging around at the end of a long day, chilling with Cas.

The pizza came, they ate, and they still hadn’t bothered turning on the tv or looking for a distraction. They just talked, laughed, and enjoyed each other’s company. It was starting to get late, and Dean kept looking at the clock, knowing that they’d have to call it a night sooner than later. Dean had work first thing in the morning, and he was sure Cas had to get into the office, too. He didn’t want it to end, though.

Cas may have said he wanted to continue their friendship, but Dean felt like that clock was ticking down on any real chance he’d ever have to let Cas know how much he’d grown to care for him. With a growing sense of urgency and the attendant racing heartbeat and sweaty palms that came along for the ride, Dean psyched himself up to lay his feelings out on the table. Go big or go home. Or in this case, stay home.

Cas had been telling him about a prank Gabriel had pulled on him as a child, something about not stepping on a fish, when Dean interrupted him.

“Cas? I just, uh, wanted you to know how much I appreciate getting to work with you,” Dean said, cringing at his own words. “And getting to know you.”

Cas blinked and then slowly smiled. “I appreciate it too, Dean. More than you can know.”

“Yeah, uh,” Dean said, and then cleared his throat. “I kinda think I do know. I mean, I’d like to keep seeing you. Like this,” he added with a wave of his hand between them. “I really like you, Cas. Uh, more than you can know.”

Cas’s eyes went wide for a moment, and Dean was afraid he’d misread everything and frightened Cas off for good. He felt the flustered blush in his cheeks dial itself up to outright humiliation before Cas raised a tentative hand to his face, brushing a thumb over his burning cheek.

“Dean, I’d like that very much.”

Dean’s breath caught in his throat and he nodded slowly so as not to dislodge Cas’s fingertips. “Would you mind if I kissed you?”

Cas swallowed hard, his expression morphing into something hovering between hope and heartbreak as he leaned in a little bit closer to look right into Dean’s eyes. “There’s one thing you need to know first. It’s vital.”

Dean braced himself for whatever earth-shattering bomb Cas was about to drop on him, holding Cas’s gaze like his life depended on it. He nearly got lost in all the blue as his entire world
narrowed down to Cas’s face, hit by a wave of vertigo as flashes of his nightmares clambered and screeched through his subconscious. Dean wanted so badly to squeeze his eyes shut and force that gut-churning memory away, but that would mean taking his eyes off Cas and he just couldn’t do that. So he waited, and nodded.

Cas reached up with his other hand, cradling Dean’s face and pulling him even closer before whispering, “No matter what happens next, I will always love you, Dean Winchester.”

And then Cas kissed him.

And the world shattered.
Eephus

Everything burned. It felt like drowning in liquid fire, searing so hot through him it turned the world blazing blue. Every cell in Dean’s body screamed out as the flames were ripped from his being, pouring out of his mouth and filling a tiny glass vial. Something squeezed his hand as feeling returned, and he slowly turned his head to see Cas staring at him intently, hope and desperation filling his wide eyes. The screams that he now knew were not his own still echoed through Dean’s head. Without thinking twice about it, he squeezed Cas’s hand back.

Nothing made sense. Not the weird and vividly intense dream he’d been having about being a baker, not the burning pain, and definitely not the crowd of people hovering around him now.

“Gotcha, you dick,” Gabriel said, talking to the vial of grace that Dean had to assume was Michael, unless this was just another dream. Gabriel held up the vial and looked between Dean and Cas. “BRB, taking this where it belongs,” he said, and then zapped off.

“Gabriel?” Dean said, trying and failing to sit up and realizing he was in his recliner in the Dean Cave. “How…?”

Gabriel poofed back in, sans vial, and finished his sentence for him. “Am I still alive? Dean, Dean, Dean. When are you gonna learn that I excel at not dying? I think the only person I’ve ever met who’s better at it is you.”

Billie snorted at that, and Dean turned around to see her smiling at him. She held up her hands to calm the worry on his face. ‘Hey, I’m only here as a witness today. Nobody’s dying. Well, not in this room, anyway,” she added, and then gave Dean a little nod and disappeared.

“Dean, how are you feeling?” Sam said.

“My head hurts.”

Sam glanced up behind Dean’s chair as he kicked weakly at the footrest to make it un-recline, and a pair of hands dropped to his shoulders to hold him down.

“I advise you to hold still while I finish removing this,” Naomi said from above his head, carefully pulling the remaining pins out of the metal halo around Dean’s head. “It’s a delicate procedure, but your head will stop hurting when I’m done.”

“What the hell happened?” Dean asked, turning again to see Cas, who was still lying stretched out in the recliner beside him, looking as limp and bedraggled as a lump of overcooked spaghetti.

Everyone in the room exchanged uneasy glances before Rowena sighed and rolled her eyes, coming to stand by Sam’s side and giving him a look like she couldn’t believe he was making her do the talking.

“I take it you remember Michael breaking his deal with you after you killed Lucifer?” She looked absolutely radiant with gratitude as she said it, as if it was the most important thing anyone had ever done for her.

Dean now understood why Rowena was voluntarily spending time in the bunker, not to mention voluntarily helping him out without any apparent reward in the offing, but he also remembered flashes of the weeks—was it weeks?—that he’d spent riding around as a passenger in his own body. He nodded slowly and caught a glance over at Cas, who was still staring at him intently
even through his obvious exhaustion.

“Yeah I remember.”

“Well, let’s just say we were in a right pickle to find you after that.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Michael didn’t want to give you up, and Cas and I had no idea how to make him. Luckily we found Gabriel just chilling in here,” he waved a hand around the Dean Cave.

“Yeah, but at least I finally got caught up on Dr. Sexy, and that’s the real important takeaway here,” Gabriel said.

“So that wasn’t you in the Apocalypse World?” Dean asked.

“Got it in one, Deano.” Gabriel pointed a finger at him as the pressure lifted off his head and he felt Naomi heal the wounds left by her torture device.

Dean sighed with relief as his head stopped pounding. He decided he didn’t really need to sit up yet, and just laid there with his eyes closed for a moment enjoying the absence of pain.

“Castiel and Gabriel came to me to ask for my advice and assistance,” Naomi said, collecting her tools. “And it just so happened that Anael had spent the last few millennia developing a sort of… battery. She believed it might be enough to contain Michael and allow his grace to power Heaven indefinitely, but Castiel insisted that we remove Michael from your vessel first.”

“Good,” Dean grunted, giving Cas’s hand another squeeze.

“It became quite the project,” Rowena said. “Your angels here had to track you down and tie you up,” she said, pointing out the sigils painted around the room and on the ceiling above his chair. “Not an easy task, that. Anael needed time to adapt her battery to Michael’s grace, and in the meantime we needed to keep Michael from breaking free again and running off to wreak havoc all over the planet. That’s where Naomi and Patience came in. I had to track down your Mr. Ketch to get my hands on his pulse egg thingamabob, but it worked a treat, even better than it did with Lucifer.”

Cas cleared his throat, but his voice still sounded scratchy and weak, like he really needed a glass of water. “It was Gabriel’s idea to keep you distracted, rather than abandon you to Michael’s mercy while we waited. Once Naomi had Michael trapped, I was the only one who could breach his defenses and reach you. So Gabriel used me as a… a sort of conduit to your soul.”

“Like you once did for me,” Mary said from across the room.

Dean looked over and saw her smiling wearily at him, as if she’d been sitting in that chair for far too long. He remembered volunteering to plug himself directly into her mind to try and reach the part of her the Men of Letters had locked away. It had taken a lot of wires and machines and a shitload of the good drugs to make that happen, but it had only taken Cas holding his hand. Dean looked down at their still joined hands trying to understand how that could be, and vividly recalled how the not-a-dream Gabriel had put him in had ended. He cast a worried look over at Cas, who looked pained and started to withdraw his hand from Dean’s. Dean clung tighter, giving him a panicked but reassuring squeeze and cleared his throat.

“So you stuck me in a chair, hooked me up to Cas, and let Gabriel run the show in my head for a couple months?” Dean asked.
Sam shook his head. “You’ve been here about five days, Dean. It felt like months to you? What the hell did he have you doing in there?”

Gabriel stepped up in front of Sam, giving Dean a look that he read as *I’m not gonna tell him unless you want me to*. Dean gave him a tiny, grateful nod and Cas squeezed his hand again to get his attention. Cas nodded solemnly at him, and Dean relaxed.

“It wasn’t a dream, first off. It was a pocket dimension,” Gabriel said, helpfully changing the subject. “They’re more fun than dreams, and a hell of a lot more… malleable. So I powered the setting and the actors, gave you a premise, and let you and Cas run with it while I tagged along for the ride. Let me tell you, that was some fucking ride. You’ll be happy to know I didn’t erase any of your memories, so you’ll still be able to make one hell of a wedding cake, if you should suddenly feel the need.”

“I was just here to keep tabs on how you were doing,” Patience said, giving Gabriel a little glare for talking too much in mixed company and then redirecting to safer, less personal territory. “I’d get a read on Gabriel and was able to let Naomi know when you needed an adjustment,” she added, pointing to the handful of giant metal pins in Naomi’s hand.

“She had to sleep sometimes, so I was on my own occasionally,” Naomi said. “I apologize for letting Michael slip through a couple of times. He’s exceedingly powerful, which bodes well for the continuing stability of Heaven.”

“Yeah,” Dean replied, his brow furrowed together. He recalled a few confusing glimpses of Heaven through Michael’s eyes, and it hadn’t looked anything like it did the one time he remembered being there during the original apocalypse. There was no road to find, only sterile white hallways and a confusing tangle of energy barely holding itself together. From what he gathered, Heaven had been holding itself together with duct tape and wishful thinking. If they could really use Michael to fix whatever had been tearing it apart, Dean felt just a little bit better about having gotten himself into this mess in the first place.

With his head feeling nearly back to normal, his body finally began to remind him of the physical effects of having been stuck in a La-Z-Boy for the last five days. Michael’s grace may have kept him from feeling hunger before, but as delicious as he recalled it being, all the food he’d eaten in Gabriel’s pocket universe hadn’t actually fed his physical body. His stomach growled.

Mary heard the rumble from halfway across the room and stood up. “Jack’s in the kitchen making sandwiches,” she said. “I’ll go help him get that finished, now that you’re okay.” On her way out of the room she bent down to cup a hand to Dean’s cheek and smiled wearily at him. Sam gave Dean another grin and a pat on the shoulder before offering to help Mary and Jack, and then followed his mother out.

“If it’s not too much trouble, can anyone bring me back to the portal?” Naomi asked. “Now that the battery is up and running, I need to get back to make sure everything has been restored to normal working order.”

“I can drop you off,” Patience said, at the same moment Rowena said, “I’d be delighted to accompany you.”

“Everyone’s in such a hurry to leave all of a sudden,” Dean muttered as the three of them debated their carpool situation. “Guess I was better company when I was unconscious.”

“I thought you were excellent company,” Cas replied with a crooked little smile.
“Yeah, we’re gonna talk about that,” Dean said, giving his hand another squeeze before finally letting go and trying yet again to stand up. “But I need food like, yesterday.” His stomach growled again. “Or before that. How long did Michael have me, anyway? Bastard coulda had a cheeseburger or something once in a while. It wouldn’t have killed him.”

Patience, Rowena, and Naomi took that as their cue to leave. Naomi stopped at the threshold and turned back to Gabriel. “I take it you’ll be returning to Heaven eventually?”

“I’ll probably pop in for visits once my grace is back to baseline. I’ve got a bit of tidying up to do down here first.”

With a terse nod, Naomi left, and Gabriel stepped over to Dean and offered him a hand up. Dean eyed it suspiciously and Gabriel rolled his eyes.

“Come on, Deano, you’re still not gonna trust me? After everything I’ve done for you? I’m crushed.”

“You could probably just zap me right to the kitchen if you really wanted to be helpful, and you’ve been in my head for days. Call it a healthy respect.”

Gabriel groaned. “Did you just gloss over the part where I explained it wasn’t a dream? Technically you have been in my head for days, bucko. Don’t even try to tell me I wasn’t an excellent host.”

Dean blinked up at him, the memories of his entire stint as a baker and reality tv star solidifying in his mind. He thought back over what felt like several months’ worth of memories, and the endless cakes and pastries he knew without a doubt he could still make as proficiently as he had in the dream. He considered asking if Gabriel had injected that knowledge into his head so he’d always know where to go for a good cannoli, but decided a lifetime of baking for the archangel was a small price to pay for having his ass hauled out of that particular fire. It definitely beat an eternity trapped with Michael inside Anael’s Heaven battery. There was only one complaint he had about the entire experience.

“You didn’t even have any pie. What the fuck kinda lame-ass universe doesn’t have any pie?”

Gabriel grinned at him and shrugged. “I thought that was a hilarious touch, actually.”

Dean made a disgusted noise but reluctantly gave Gabriel his hand and was finally pulled to his feet. Gabriel gave him a little pat on the back of his hand and then stuck his hand out to Cas.

“Come on, Castiel, time to rise and shine.”

Cas sighed and allowed Gabriel to help him up. “I’m not as accustomed to remaining entirely still as I once was. But thank you, Gabriel. For everything,” he added, with a significant look at his brother. “I’d appreciate another day or two to consider your offer.”

Gabriel glanced over at Dean and then nodded at Cas. “Whenever you’re ready, just give a holler and I’ll be here.”

Cas nodded, and then Gabriel zapped himself off. Dean sighed with relief and nearly fell back into his comfy recliner. The only thing that kept him on his feet was the prospect of food waiting out in the kitchen. He and Cas leaned on each other, and together they were finally able to get their feet moving in the right direction.
Walk Off

A thousand thoughts warred in Dean’s head as he and Cas clung to each other and carefully inched their way toward the door, but the one that felt the most urgently important was Gabriel’s parting comment. After everything they’d been through, he knew he needed to have a long talk with Cas. If Gabriel had already made him some better offer, Dean could suck it up and keep his mouth shut for Cas’s sake.

The future definitely seemed to be the most important thing to figure out, if Cas were planning to pick up and take off again in just a day or two. Dean didn’t really want to know right that second, less than an hour after Cas had kissed him and saved him from Michael, but it was probably best to start preparing himself for the worst, because if Dean knew how to prepare himself for anything, it was definitely the worst. They’d shuffled themselves halfway to the door before Dean stopped, and Cas had no choice but to stop with him.

“So what’s this offer Gabe made you?” he asked, feeling that was likely the safest place to start.

Cas took a deep breath and adjusted his grip around Dean’s waist to rebalance himself now that they’d lost their forward momentum. “He knows that, now that you’re safe, the only thing I’d want is to ensure Heaven’s continued safety and stability.”

Dean looked down at his feet. “Yeah, I know it’s your home, and it’s important to you.”

“It’s important to everyone, Dean. If Heaven were to shatter apart, the world would be flooded with billions of human souls with nowhere else to go.”

Dean looked up at Cas, horrified at the thought. “Yeah, shit, that does sound like a nightmare.”

Cas just shrugged. “Michael’s grace should be enough to keep that from ever happening now.”

“Should being the operative word, huh?”

“Nothing is guaranteed forever, Dean,” Cas replied. “After everything I’ve personally been responsible for doing that brought Heaven to the brink of destruction, it only seems fair that I should help ensure its ongoing security.”

“Most of that shit wasn’t your fault, Cas,” Dean said, beginning to see where he was going with this and feeling the panic creeping up again. It was a feeling he was far too familiar with, knowing Cas intended to leave and had no guarantee he’d ever be able to come back. “You weren’t the one who tried to start the apocalypse, or restart it. You weren’t the one who dumped all the angels out on their asses, or caused all the infighting.”

Cas smiled sadly. “Maybe not, but I didn’t really make the situation better.”

Dean took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He could survive this. Probably. He had, so many times before. For the most part, anyway. “So, what, are you gonna go lock yourself up in Heaven to stand guard or whatever?”

Cas shook his head with dawning horror at the broken tone of Dean’s voice and the resignation in his words. “No! No, Dean, I… I… unless I’m not welcome to stay here with you…”

“What? You want to stay here?”
Cas blinked at Dean for a moment. “I thought that was a given at this point. You didn’t think I’d want that?”

“You’ve always left before, so…”

Cas stared him right in the eye, practically turning Dean so they were face to face without letting go of him. They both swayed precipitously on the spot from the sudden movement. “Dean, I think you’re operating under the misconception that I still consider Heaven my home. I haven’t for a long time now. This is my home, Dean. You are my home.”

“Cas…” Dean said softly, holding him tighter and feeling lightheaded. It was probably due to the starvation, but only partly. It wasn’t nearly as bad as the dissociative episodes he kept having in Gabriel’s pocket universe, at least.

“Gabriel offered to take what’s left of my grace up to Heaven, to make sure that it would guarantee Heaven’s security.”

Dean let that sink in as his heart began to pick up the pace. “You’d be human again. Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Cas studied him for a moment, in exactly the same way he had right before he’d shattered the dream and they’d woken up. Right before he’d kissed Dean. “If everything we experienced in Gabriel’s world was true, and if you really wanted to…” he trailed off, his eyes searching Dean’s.

Dean didn’t need him to finish that sentence. He pivoted the rest of the way into Cas and kissed him. This time when their lips met, the universe didn’t dissolve.

Cas lifted his free hand to Dean’s face and enthusiastically pulled him closer, which was a maneuver beyond what either of them were currently physically capable of. Dean stumbled, but was unwilling to stop kissing Cas. He tried to hold on for dear life, his free arm wrapping around Cas’s waist. It prolonged their kiss for a few more glorious seconds before gravity took over and they both toppled to the floor. Dean let out a yelp as he landed on his back and Cas landed on top of him.

“Dammit, why didn’t I put in carpeting in here,” he muttered as Cas blinked at him, stunned.

“Dean?” Sam’s voice came from down the hall, accompanied by racing footsteps. “Cas?” Sam rounded the corner into the room and froze for a second when he spotted them, before racing into the room and crouching beside them to inspect them for any obvious sign of injury. “What happened? Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah,” Dean replied, avoiding looking right at Sam. “Yeah, neither of us is up to fighting gravity today, is all.”

“Shit, I was just coming to see if you needed help getting to the kitchen. I didn’t think Gabriel would just leave.”

“Gabriel does that,” Cas replied.

Dean snorted, but they both allowed Sam to help them regain their feet.

“Do you think mom would be pissed if I got that sandwich to go?” Dean asked, once he and Cas were propped up against each other again.

Sam took one look at the two of them wobbling, rolled his eyes, and slid an arm around Dean to
lend his far more stable support. He didn’t even question how they’d ended up on the floor, which Dean counted as a small blessing. If he didn’t have the energy to stand, he definitely didn’t have the energy to explain him and Cas yet.

“Neither of you can stand up on your own,” Sam said, getting them moving more efficiently toward the door and then down the hall toward Dean’s room. “I don’t think anyone will complain you weren’t up for a party tonight.”

“Yeah, I’ll tentatively pencil in the party for Thursday,” Dean said, rolling his eyes but grateful that they were finally getting somewhere.

“It is Thursday,” Sam replied absently as he began to huff under the strain of keeping both Dean and Cas upright and moving.

“Huh,” he said, letting Sam shuffle him along for a moment. When the dreamworld shattered, it had definitely been Monday night. Cas’s kiss had literally knocked him three days into the future. He huffed out a wheezy little laugh at that and shook himself off when Sam gave him a funny look. “Next Thursday, then,” Dean grunted out.

It had seemed like a great idea at the time to set up his Dean Cave in a distant and rarely used corner of the bunker. Privacy had been his primary goal when he’d begun assembling the decor, and being able to make as much noise as he wanted without bothering anyone else who might be trying to sleep, or research, or just exist peaceably in the more frequented parts of the bunker. He was regretting it now on that interminable walk to his room.

Along the way, Sam told him that Michael had had him for about a month, which only made Dean’s stomach growl louder in complaint. Sam had also asked what he remembered from that time. Dean gave a couple of vague answers and a promise to fill in details later.

“It might’ve looked like I was just napping there for the last five days, but I haven’t actually eaten or slept in more than a month. And I kinda hate even hearing myself say that.”

“It’s okay, Dean,” Cas replied. “We can all rest tonight. It is night, right? It feels like night,” he said, looking at Dean, confused for a moment. “I may have drained myself more than I believed. I seem to be disoriented. If it’s not too much trouble, do you think Mary and Jack would mind making me a sandwich?”

Sam gave him a funny look, but nodded. “Sure. PB&J?”

“Whatever is convenient. I don’t think it matters.”

They reached Dean’s room, and Sam left Cas and Dean both sitting at the foot of the bed with a promise to return with their food as quickly as humanly possible. For the first time, Dean looked down at what he was wearing: the pants of a nice brown tweed suit and a matching waistcoat. He vaguely remembered the rest of the suit from when Michael first put it on, and he wondered if Sam or Mary or even Cas had removed his coats and tie. It didn’t particularly matter one way or the other now, and it wasn’t like he ever intended to put the suit on again. It was a shame, really, because it was a damn nice suit. But then again, Michael had thought the exact same thing about him. The thought made him shudder and without another thought he began fumbling at the buttons of his vest in his haste to get it off.

Cas must’ve noticed his abrupt desperation, and gently and carefully leaned into him to help undo the buttons. Dean dropped his hands and let Cas methodically attend to undressing him. It was only then that Dean finally noticed what Cas was wearing. His usual suit and coat were gone. Instead,
he wore what looked like Dean’s soft oatmeal henley and a pair of black flannel sleep pants. He felt a wave of exhaustion sweep over him at the fact he hadn’t noticed sooner. Then again, maybe he’d just grown accustomed to seeing Cas wearing different clothes while they’d been trapped in Gabriel’s baking show world. It wasn’t quite as earth-shattering a sight as it would’ve been a month ago.

“You changed your clothes,” Dean said, trying his best not to sound awestruck as he pinched the fabric of Cas’s sleeve between his fingers.

“We knew going in to this that it would take days for Anael to complete the adjustments to the battery. That it might take weeks for Rowena to acquire the hyperbolic pulse generator. Naomi needed to contain Michael so that ripping him from your body wouldn’t kill you in the process, and the safest way to do that was Gabriel’s plan to… pull you out of yourself and keep you, as he said, entertained.” Cas directed the entirety of his focus into the buttons. “When I reminded Gabriel that my grace was already severely depleted and that the ordeal would leave me practically human, Sam suggested I might be more… comfortable this way. I took his concern as a kindness, and he seemed happier believing it would help.”

Dean grunted. “Did it help?”

Cas helped Dean slide the waistcoat off his shoulders and tossed it onto the small sofa across the room. He smiled up at Dean. “It definitely helped as Gabriel was preparing to send us into his pocket universe. Knowing I was wearing something of yours here in the real world was a comfort. I regret that I didn’t insist on changing you out of Michael’s suit, but once he was trapped time was of the essence. I did what I could for you while Naomi prepared to do her work, but it was more important at the time to keep Michael from escaping with you again than to ensure your future comfort.”

“I appreciate that, Cas. Everything you did for me.”

Cas hummed and then reached behind himself on the bed to grab a t-shirt and sweats that had been neatly stacked there. “We initially planned to trap Michael here, in your bed. Sam thought that would be comforting for you, to wake up in your own room. When we first began planning the rescue mission in earnest, I set these clothes out for you, knowing you’d want to be comfortable when you came home,” he added, his voice trailing off.

Dean gave him a quick kiss, startling Cas out of his melancholy, and set to work unbuttoning his shirt. He figured it was best to keep Cas talking. They had so much to talk about, and Sam would be back soon. It seemed safest to stick to conversational topics that Sam was already privy to than to venture off into their shared vacation to Gabrieland.

“So what happened to the original plan? Dean Cave just too inviting?”

Cas shook his head and slid off the bed to pull off Dean’s socks. It was only then that he noticed that neither of them were wearing shoes. No wonder they’d been slipping and sliding so much. It was a lame excuse, but Dean was willing to take any excuse he could get to justify being so uncoordinated.

“When Naomi became involved, she suggested tying you to a chair in the library so that she’d have access to…” Cas glanced up and circled his finger around his head like a halo, and Dean nodded his understanding. Cas quickly went on. “Gabriel scoffed at the idea and described the two recliners he’d grown rather fond of while he’d been hiding in there. The room was also large enough for everyone who needed or wanted to be present to stand guard and observe the proceedings.”
“So this whole thing with your grace,” Dean said as he pulled off his shirt and quickly pulled on the t-shirt. “You weren’t sure how much you’d wear yourself out just lying there?”

Cas shrugged and pulled himself back onto the bed. He looked away, but held out a hand to support Dean as he stood up to drop his pants and pull on the sweats. Dean practically fell backward onto the bed when he was done, but at least he hadn’t fallen face first onto the floor. Small favors. He sighed with relief and let his eyes slip closed for a second, reopening them to see Cas smiling softly down at him. Rather than try to sit up and balance himself at the edge of the bed, he rolled over and pulled himself up toward the headboard.

“Come on, already,” Dean said, patting the other pillow in invitation. “If I can crawl my way up here, then so can you.”

Cas complied, and Dean offered him an encouraging smile. Not like he had much control over his smile in that moment. Cas scrambling up beside him on his bed was something he’d never expected to see in reality. He was tempted to pinch himself in case this was all still some wild dream.

“So, about the grace thing?” Dean prompted as Cas made himself comfortable.

Cas leaned his head back against the wall and then slowly rolled it to the side to look at Dean. “Gabriel and I discussed what he intended to do. He used my… connection to you to reach you. He didn’t use my grace as anything more than a bridge to connect the three of us and build the pocket dimension around. It didn’t contribute to my weakened state, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Dean nodded slowly, and was about to ask what did contribute to Cas’s clearly weakened state, when Sam knocked at the door and then opened it. He picked up a small cooler and brought it and a tray of sandwiches into the room. He set the cooler down on Dean’s nightstand, and then pulled out a laptop balanced beneath the tray of sandwiches.

“Thought you guys might want this, too,” Sam said, handing the laptop to Cas and the tray to Dean. “You know, in case you have trouble sleeping, or just need a distraction, you can play a movie, or music, or whatever.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Cas replied, smiling up at him.

Sam nodded, torn between wanting to stay and talk, to make sure Dean and Cas were both okay, to ask them any of a thousand questions that Dean could practically see trying to push their way out of his mouth, and giving them both a little peace and quiet.

“Sam,” Dean said after watching his brother’s torment for a moment. “Thank you. For whatever you did. For everything.”

Sam grinned down at him and shook his head. “Glad it all worked out, then, jerk.”
Dean took a swipe at him and missed by a mile as Sam jumped out of range. “Bitch. I’ll get you back when I can move.”

“Sure, Dean,” Sam said, slowly moving toward the door. “There’s a couple of sodas and some bottled water in the cooler. Mom wasn’t sure what you’d want.”

“A beer would’ve been great,” Dean replied, lifting the lid and peeking inside to find several beers as well. “Well, lookie there.” He handed one to Cas and got one for himself.

“Okay, I guess we’ll see you when you’re ready,” Sam said.

“Yeah,” Dean replied. “If you haven’t heard from us in a day or so, send more food.”

Sam laughed, relieved that Dean was at least joking again, and shut the door behind him as he left.

Cas slid the laptop up onto the shelf above Dean’s headboard and looked over the tray of sandwiches on Dean’s lap. There were several peanut butter and jelly, as well as ham and chicken, in addition to a small plate of store-bought cookies. Dean picked up one of the cookies and turned it over, scoffing, as Cas took a contented bite of his PBJ.

“You’ve spoiled yourself,” Cas muttered around the sticky peanut butter.

“Hey, I didn’t ask to learn all the finer points of baking,” Dean complained. “I wish I had some pistachio macarons.”

“You could have them if you were able to stand up long enough to make them,” Cas replied, one eyebrow raised as he took a sip of his beer.

Dean bumped his shoulder against Cas’s and picked up a sandwich. “Don’t think I’m not gonna make you help.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Cas replied.

They both ate their fill, and Dean found enough room beside the laptop to slide the plate with the remaining uneaten sandwiches onto the shelf above their heads. Neither of them seemed to have any desire to distract themselves with a movie. He may have been exhausted, but there were things Dean still needed to know. First things first, though.

He took the opportunity to finally clasp Cas’s hand in his. Cas made a funny little noise, and looked from their joined hands up to Dean’s face. Dean’s heart may have been pounding, but he hoped he didn’t look as terror-struck as he felt. If he could do that without dying, then he could probably handle this conversation.

“So the whole time we were over there, you knew?” Dean began.

Cas narrowed his eyes thoughtfully as he recalled their time in Gabriel’s world. “I knew Gabriel’s general plan before we began, but no. For the most part I knew as much as you did. Gabriel kept some part of my subconscious informed, and I recall having several dreams where I remembered talking with Gabriel and feeling better after the fact, but aside from that, no. Gabriel implanted the same sort of false memories for me as he did for you.”

Dean nodded slowly, taking that all in. “So everything that happened,” he waved a hand between them. “That was all because of Gabriel?”

“Oh, Dean, no,” Cas replied, lifting their joined hands so he could scoot closer to Dean and then
resting their hands on his lap. “Gabriel gave me a... a background story, and the knowledge to produce a television program. That was all. The rest, as he said, was all on us. I think this,” he said, squeezing Dean’s hand again, “was simply easier to focus on without any cosmic disasters to distract us.”

Dean let that sink in. He’d been afraid to discover that Cas had just been playing his role that whole time. Their kiss should’ve been enough to reassure him, but he’d still needed to hear Cas say it.

“Good. That’s a relief.” Dean took a deep breath and let his eyes close while he gulped down the last of his beer and set the bottle on the floor.

“I spent a lot of time with Gabriel while you were... gone,” Cas said. “I’m sure he was aware of my feelings for you before he finalized his plans for his pocket universe. I wasn’t exactly subtle. I was... less than diplomatic when Anael first suggested trapping you directly into her battery.”

“Heh,” Dean laughed. “Sounds like me last year when you were dead. Practically tore Sam’s head off one night.”

Cas frowned up at him. “You did? Over me?”

Dean gave him a look of well, duh.

“But... you never said...”

“Cas,” Dean said, rubbing his free hand over his eyes. “You came back and you were like a hundred percent about protecting Jack. I figured you had more important shit to deal with, you know? Saving the world from Michael and Lucifer, making sure Jack was safe. I wasn’t about to stand in your way.”

“But Dean, I wanted you to stand in my way. I shouted at a cosmic entity until he sent me back to you. I thought you wouldn’t want to be bothered with me.”

“I always want to be bothered with you, Cas.”

Cas nodded, slowly leaning in and kissing him. Dean turned into him, keeping the kiss slow and gentle. When they broke apart, they were both smiling like exhausted lovesick dopes. They’d had what felt like months to grow into this, and thinking back over that time gave Dean another thought.

“So what about everyone else over there? I take it they were all fake? Sam’s not just waiting until I can stand upright before bringing out all the bakery jokes, is he?”

Cas gave him a little smile and shrugged. “Aside from me and Gabriel, only Patience was actually present in that universe, when she was keeping tabs on you for Naomi.”

Dean frowned at that, recalling the tense conversation he’d interrupted between the three of them on their last day in that universe. It felt like it had only been hours ago, and simultaneously years ago. “So you were having a little pow wow over me at the studio,” he said.

Cas nodded, as if that had only just registered to his conscious attention. “Yes, we were. Patience let Gabriel know that everything was in place, and Gabriel, for lack of a better description, planted the trigger that would begin the expulsion spell within me.”

“Wait, planted a trigger?”
“I believe he got the idea from Chuck’s soul bomb. But this time it was an archangel bomb, and the detonator was a kiss.” Cas frowned, trying to piece together exactly what he’d known, and when. “I only understood that, remembered that, when you asked to kiss me.”

“And everything after that?” Dean asked, leaning in closer and sliding his arm around Cas’s waist.

“Was all me, yes,” Cas replied, his eyes drawn to Dean’s lips as he licked them.

“That’s all I needed to know,” Dean said softly, and then pulled Cas in for another kiss. “For the record, I love you too.”

Kissing Cas was so much better on a horizontal surface, without the imminent threat of falling over to worry about. His hands were free to wander, and Cas hissed into his mouth when Dean’s hand found its way beneath the hem of his shirt and up his back. Cas soon grew frustrated with the clothes that had made him feel closer to Dean when he’d put them on, now that they were creating a barrier that kept Dean from getting any closer.

Dean whined his displeasure when Cas pulled away from him, but stopped fighting against it when Cas shimmied and tugged his way out of his shirt. When he was finished, Cas pulled at the hem of Dean’s shirt, and he groaned and pushed himself upright so he could yank it off. Dean barely had it pulled over his head, his arms still tangled in the sleeves, when Cas dove back in for another kiss, tackling him to the bed. This time the landing was expected, and far less painful, and they kept right on kissing.

“I’d begun to lose hope that I’d ever see you again,” Cas said, breathless as Dean kissed his way down his neck. “Billie wanted to throw you back into the other universe, Naomi wanted to trap you in Heaven, and several others suggested there might be a way to kill you.”

Dean paused, his face buried against Cas’s neck and shoulder, his arms winding more tightly around Cas, and breathed. “I’m here now, Cas. You found another way, and I’m here.”

Cas held him back just as tight, and planted a kiss in Dean’s hair. “Yes, you are.”

“Don’t ever let me do anything that stupid again,” Dean said, resuming his ministrations to Cas’s collarbone.

“I’ll do my best,” Cas replied, sliding down so he could kiss Dean’s mouth again.

Dean’s hand had wandered lower down his back, fingertips grazing the top of the soft flannel of Cas’s pants. Encouraged by the increasing desperation of their kisses, he dared to let his fingers slip under the waistband and was rewarded with a groan as Cas rocked his hips forward against Dean’s. Cas pulled back, panting and staring wild-eyed at Dean at the feeling of both of their erections pressed between them. Dean looked into his eyes, watching his every reaction, and then slowly and deliberately rolled his hips again.

Cas threw his head back and bit his lip while Dean continued to languidly thrust against him. He needed to see, to feel everything, so Cas forced himself to look into Dean’s eyes and reached down to pull at his waistband. This time, Dean didn’t complain as the two of them scrambled to get the rest of their clothing out of the way.

“God, we could’ve been doing this weeks ago,” Dean said at the first touch of skin on skin. “Stupid fucking code of ethics, or whatever bullshit I was thinking over there.”

“We could’ve been doing this years ago, Dean,” Cas replied, sliding one hand down Dean’s back to give him more leverage to rut against Dean’s hip. “But it never would’ve been like this.”
Dean nodded, grabbing hold of Cas’s ass and pulling him closer. He thought he knew what Cas meant. There were so many times he could’ve grabbed Cas and kissed him over the years. He could’ve said something more times than he could count, and yet it had never felt entirely right. Just like his personal code had stopped him from hitting on Cas when he’d technically been his employer in that imaginary universe, there were still walls that had to be torn down before either of them would’ve been ready for this. And as Cas wound one leg between Dean’s and frantically rutted against him, pulling him in for a sloppy and desperate kiss, those ten years of denial felt more than worth it.

He wanted to reach down between them, to touch Cas, but that would’ve meant letting go of him, and even the thought of it was unbearable. It could wait until later. Everything else could wait until later.

“Dean, I’m... “ Cas said, and Dean nodded and hoped that was enough for Cas to know he was just as close.

Dean drove his hips faster, never taking his eyes off Cas as he tumbled over the edge. His next thrust was lubricated with Cas’s hot release, and that was more than enough to send him tumbling after.

They lay there, still holding each other tight as their breathing slowed and the world snapped back into place around them.

Cas swallowed hard. “That was…”

“A good start,” Dean finished for him.

Cas nodded, and then gave him a gentle, reverent kiss. Dean would’ve been perfectly happy falling asleep like that, but he knew he’d regret it in the middle of the night when he woke up sticky and itchy and cold. He reached up with one hand to grab his shirt where it had landed on the pillow and carefully cleaned them off before tugging at the top of the blankets beneath them. Cas groaned, but consented to separate long enough to slip under the covers. Dean was still pulling the blankets up around them when Cas pulled him in close, tangling their legs together as they both drifted off to sleep. That’s exactly how they woke up hours later.

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Cas stirred in his arms, burrowing his face down against Dean’s shoulder, and Dean smiled sleepily down at the mess of Cas’s hair tickling his chin. For a while, he just lay there indulging in the warmth of Cas’s body snuggled up to his own, the feel of Cas’s steady breaths tickling his shoulder, and letting the new reality of their lives settle over him.

Heaven was safe. There weren’t enough angels left to fuck it up, or to cause much trouble on Earth. Hell was always gonna be churning out new demons, but the worst of the worst were gone and the rest of them weren’t exactly a threat, at least for the foreseeable future. There’d probably always be the occasional monster that got out of line, and a vengeful spirit here and there, but that was nothing they couldn’t handle as it came up. For the first time in more than a decade, the world wasn’t ending.

Dean held Cas a little tighter and breathed. Cas had been right. They probably could’ve kissed years ago, but there was always something far too ready to pull them apart again. They could’ve had a quick glad-you’re-alive fuck any number of times over the years, and that would’ve been the end of it. Hell, if they had, Dean probably would’ve made sure that was the end of it-- not because he wouldn’t have wanted more, but because he wasn’t sure he’d have been able to live with himself
for wanting more.

Everything was different now. Cas was different now. He wanted to be here as much as Dean wanted him here, and it wasn’t because the universe was taking a swan dive or because they didn’t have a choice. It wasn’t because someone needed saving, or help scrambling to clean up another cosmic mess. Cas had simply made up his mind that this was where he wanted to be, because he loved Dean. Lying there in the dim light of his desk lamp with Cas in his arms, the world was a far more beautiful place than it had ever been.

Cas began to stir again, and out of curiosity Dean finally glanced up at the clock. It read 3:37 AM, so it wasn’t likely that anyone else was up and about in the bunker, unless Gabriel had popped back in to watch TV once they’d vacated the Dean Cave. Dean snorted at the thought, and Cas made a disgruntled little noise as he woke up and blinked up at Dean.

“Morning, sunshine,” Dean said quietly.

“Is it morning?” Cas replied, looking confused. “I can’t tell anymore.”

Dean gently rubbed his back and smiled. “It’s too early to call it morning yet. Don’t worry about it.”

Cas relaxed under the touch, settling back into the pillows as he reoriented himself. “Hello, Dean.”

Dean’s heart nearly stopped. Cas had said those two words to him countless times. It felt like it had been far too long since he’d heard them. And he’d never heard them quite like this, laced through with absolute, unconditional love and contentment. He couldn’t help himself, and dropped a kiss to Cas’s forehead.

Cas smiled and tilted his head up to give him a proper kiss, then pulled back to look at Dean with wide eyes. “I was sleeping.”

“Yeah, you were,” Dean replied.

Cas shook his head. “I’d grown accustomed to it in Gabriel’s universe. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to now that we’re back here.”

Dean shrugged. “You also ate a sandwich and drank a beer and... “ Dean slid one hand down Cas’s back and pulled their bodies together. “Other human things.”

Cas nodded, his eyebrows drawing together. “I suppose I expended more of my grace than I thought shielding you from Michael during the extraction spell. I think I need to talk to Gabriel.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Gabriel replied, appearing on the little green sofa, casually stretched out like he’d been reclining there for hours just waiting for someone to notice him.

“Shit,” Dean said, craning his neck around to see him, while Cas glared. “Gabriel.”

“I was gonna mention it earlier, but you didn’t look much look like you were up for a big feelings chat,” Gabriel said. “Figured you’d want to explain a few things to your boy toy, here, too, before I started throwing wrenches around.”

“That’s unexpectedly gracious of you,” Cas replied.

Gabriel shrugged. “What can I say, gracious is my middle name. And speaking of grace,” he added, squinting at the two of them still cuddled together under the blankets, “It looks like Dean’s
got more of your grace running through him than you do, Cas.”

Dean’s eyes went wide, and he looked between Cas and Gabriel, focusing as hard as he could but still unable to feel any grace inside himself. And he’d grown accustomed to the feeling over the last month or so, so it shouldn’t have been a challenge to spot it now. “You’re joking.”

Gabriel shook his head. “Not about this, Dean.”

Dean turned back to Cas, searching his eyes for answers. Cas sighed and confessed.

“You’ve had a trace of my grace in you since I raised you from Hell. It bound you back together and over the last ten years it’s become a part of you. It’s not so much my grace anymore, as a part of your soul now.”

Dean nodded slowly, and Cas visibly relaxed now that he was assured Dean wouldn’t be angry with him over it. Together, they looked back over at Gabriel, waiting for him to give them whatever answers he’d clearly been hanging around just waiting to deliver.

“Tough room,” Gabriel said, sitting up properly and leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

“Yeah, well, it’s the damn middle of the night and you popped in to the middle of a private conversation.”

“Oh, Dean, you two haven’t had a completely private conversation in months. I figured you’d be used to it by now.”

Dean glared at Gabriel, and he held up his hands and relented.

“Seeing as you’ve both been through some trauma while saving Heaven and Earth, I’ll get to the point. Cas, for all intents and purposes, you’re as human as Dean is.”

Cas stared at Gabriel for a moment, and then nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Gabriel got to his feet and began pacing. “Damn, maybe I should’ve waited until you were more awake for this.”

“Okay,” Cas replied, rolling his eyes. “Just explain yourself, please.”

Gabriel stopped his pacing and turned to face them at the foot of the bed. He pulled a small vial out of his pocket and held it up. It glowed with a weak blue light. “I took the liberty of pulling this out last night when Cas triggered the expulsion ritual. I figured if you hadn’t made your choice yet, you at least deserved one night of rest with your favorite human. Looks like I was right,” he said, wagging his eyebrows at them.

“You took my grace?” Cas asked.

Gabriel shrugged. “It was either that or risk having you hoovered up along with Michael. You were bound to Dean. This was the only way to disconnect you from Michael. I figured this way you at least would have the choice of whether you wanted it back or not. Or, you know, you’d have a choice about anything, at all, ever again.”

Cas frowned at him, and Dean just sat there looking horrified. “You mean that spell would’ve pulled Cas out entirely?”
“Eighty twenty,” Gabriel said, then tilted his hand from side to side. “Maybe seventy thirty. Technicalities, at this point,” Gabriel dropped his hand. “But it was a risk I didn’t think you’d want to take.”

“No,” Cas replied with a little shudder. Dean pulled him in closer. “No, I’m grateful that I’m not trapped forever in a box with Michael.”

“Good call,” Gabriel said. “So, now that that’s settled, I just need to know what you want me to do with this.” He held up the vial, and Dean and Cas both watched the light inside dance. “We don’t need it up in heaven. It would be like throwing a watch battery at the Hoover Dam, in case it ran low on power.”

Cas frowned at that, but nodded. “Would it be possible to save it for another purpose?”

“It’s yours, Castiel. You can use it however you want.”

Cas took one look at Dean, and then nodded resolutely at Gabriel. “Can you leave it on the desk there?”

Gabriel gave him a funny look, but did as he asked.

“Is that all for now?” Cas asked him.

“I suppose it is,” Gabriel replied. “I guess I’ll be seeing you lovebirds around, then. Just holler if you ever need anything.”

“Hey, wait up,” Dean said. “There’s something you can get for me.” He held out his hand toward the desk and gestured at a pad of paper. “Do you mind?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at Gabriel.

Gabriel made a considering face at him, as if he was contemplating making Dean get up and walk across the room naked as payment for whatever it was he wanted, but sighed and flicked a finger at the notepad, sending it and a pen soaring into Dean’s outstretched hand. Dean gave him a tight smile and then set to work making his list. Cas tried to lean over to see what he was writing, but Dean made a pouty face at him and raised his knee to block Cas’s view.

Dean finished his list, tossed it to Gabriel with a smirk, and dropped the pen on his nightstand. “You can drop it off in the kitchen. Maybe come back for dinner and there’ll be a cannoli in it for you.”

Cas laughed at the look of confusion and then understanding on Gabriel’s face, and Dean’s breath caught in his throat at the sound.

“Groceries, huh? Guess my little plan to create my own personal Frankenchef worked.” Gabriel returned Dean’s smirk.

“Thank you again, Gabriel,” Cas said more quietly, and the archangel nodded once before disappearing.

Dean let out a sigh and flopped back down onto his pillow. He had a perfect view of the vial of Cas’s grace sitting atop his dresser and pulsing out a happy blue glow. It would’ve been so much easier to make a joke about volunteering himself to be Gabriel’s personal pastry chef, but Cas was still sitting up, looking down at him in the shadows of his grace light. Dean tentatively reached a hand up to brush his fingers across Cas’s cheek, and was relieved when Cas closed his eyes and leaned into his touch.
“It sounded like you had something in mind when you asked Gabriel to leave your grace…” He was curious, and maybe a little worried, but he wasn’t gonna push if Cas didn’t want to talk about it.

Cas sighed and laid back down beside Dean, snuggling in close. “I believe we’re connected, Dean.”

“Yeah, I kinda got that years ago when you called dibs on me with the handprint.”

Cas shook his head and slid his hand up over Dean’s shoulder where the mark he’d never intended to leave on Dean had faded almost entirely. “It shouldn’t have worked this way. I healed you, and like any scar it should’ve faded away over time, but it didn’t.”

“So, what, you gave me mojo stitches, and they didn’t dissolve or something?”

“They should have, though. After everything you’ve been through, with the Mark of Cain, becoming a demon, dying and being resurrected, and now Michael, there’s only one reason for any trace of my grace to have remained.”

Dean thought about that for a moment, and he knew. He even admitted to himself that he’d known for a long time. It’s part of what brought him back when he’d been a demon, and it’s why Cas was able to reach him inside the nightmare Michael had kept him locked up inside his own mind. “You’re a part of me. I want you to be a part of me, Cas.”

Cas nodded. “You’re a part of me, too, Dean. I think that’s why the Empty couldn’t hold me. It’s a place for dead angels, and I haven’t been an angel in a long time.”

Dean hummed, frowning at the cheerful glow on his nightstand. He knew he’d ruined Cas. Hester had screamed it in his face once. *The very touch of you corrupts*. Cas interrupted that spiraling train of thought.

“You know, I talked to Jack quite a bit while you were gone. I needed to understand what he’d done to call out to me in the Empty. He told me you were angry with him, and he’d reached out for me. That he’d followed your anger like pulling on a thread, and it woke me up. We’re connected, Dean.”

“Yeah,” Dean said, nodding slowly. “Amara did the same thing. She used you to get to me.”

Both of them laid there for a few minutes, thinking back over their past and equally wondering whether anger was really the primary emotion involved here. It was impossible to hold on to that excuse, or any excuse, really, now that their true feelings were out in the open. They easily fell into their old habit of staring into each other’s eyes, but now instead of impossible longing there was a thrill of acceptance and undeniable love. Cas eventually remembered Dean’s question, and answered it from that mutual understanding.

“I was thinking I could use my grace to eventually power our own little corner of Heaven. Someday, in the distant future, we can power up the Winchester Family Wing entirely off the grid, so to speak. I think Gabriel will help to set that in place for us when the time comes.”

“Winchester family wing, huh?” Dean replied, grinning now. “That sounds awesome, Cas. Even better than retiring on a beach somewhere.”

“We can have a beach, too. Whatever you want, Dean.”

“As long as you’re there, I don’t think I even care.” He leaned in to kiss Cas, and then pulled back,
smiling. “You know, Gabriel’s probably already dumped all those groceries in the kitchen. We can probably surprise everyone with a decent breakfast.”

“It might be a little early for that, yet. I don’t even know how long we’ve been sleeping. For all we know, it could’ve been days.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah, no, I’d guess it was about four hours. But there’s something else we need to do first. I haven’t showered in like a month.”

“Aside from in Gabriel’s pocket universe, I haven’t showered in years,” Cas said, frowning. “I remember the water pressure here is more than adequate.”

Dean kissed him again and then sat up, tossing his robe to Cas. “That settles it. Come on.” Dean pulled on his sweatpants and grabbed a couple of towels while Cas marveled at the robe in his hands.

“This is yours,” he said, running his fingers over the soft, heavy fabric.

Dean shrugged. “I’ll find one for you later, if you want. There’s a bunch of them lying around here. Just put it on, already.”

Cas did, and the two of them headed off to the shower room. It was a long time before they made it out to the kitchen.

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Sam wandered in, bleary-eyed and surprised to find Dean and Cas both shuffling around the kitchen at seven in the morning.

“I don’t know whether to be more surprised to see you both ambulatory, or to see Cas wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt,” Sam said, making his way to the coffee pot.

“You’re just in time for pancakes,” Cas said, as Dean flipped another one out onto the already towering stack.

“Yeah, and we’re taking care of dinner tonight, courtesy of Gabriel,” Dean added. “So don’t be too surprised if he pops in later. Just a heads up.”

“Okay,” Sam replied. “I guess you two sorted everything out with him that needed sorting?” He gave Cas a curious look.

Dean caught it, and assumed that Sam and Cas had also talked about his intentions to stay in the bunker permanently, and maybe even to give up his grace to help power heaven if need be. If there was one thing he didn’t want to leave Sam with any doubts about, it was this. Dean flipped another pancake onto the stack and then turned to wrap an arm around Cas’s shoulders.

“Yeah, Cas is staying. Permanently.”

Cas nodded, glancing up at Dean. “And if it wasn’t obvious, I’m human again.”

Sam nodded slowly and blew out a breath before smiling. “I guess congrats are in order, then?”

Dean froze for a moment, wondering just how much Cas and Sam had talked, and just how much Sam already knew about them. He’d left them both in Dean’s bed the night before, so maybe Dean didn’t need to explain anything. Instead, he looked into Cas’s eyes and let himself feel content,
giving Cas a quick kiss before turning back to the stove to finish breakfast.

Sam choked on his coffee and sputtered out, “Okay, I guess congrats really are in order, then? What the hell did I miss?”

Dean glanced up at Cas to see him doing his level best not to laugh at Sam.

“I think you must’ve missed a lot, Sam,” Cas told him, and then went back to peeling oranges.

Sam sat at the table and watched them, mystified at the entire scene. It was just so… domestic. But also not quite. Dean moved around the kitchen like he’d spent his entire life there. It had always been his domain, but now it was like he really owned it. “What the hell did Gabriel have you two doing for all that time? You said it felt like months.”

Dean gave Cas a thoughtful look and then shrugged, turning to Sam. “Wait until you see what I’m making for dessert.”

End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me! I was super concerned that folks that only read canon fic wouldn't bother to start a fic that reads entirely like an AU at first, and that folks that only read AU fic would rage-quit when they realized this was technically canon...

As I said in the beginning notes, this fic began because Lizbob made me watch the thing. Gabriel had just been canonically upgraded to "alive," and things for the remainder of s13 were looking... bleak for Dean. When I plotted and started writing this in March, I knew there was gonna be a need for a "fix it" somehow, and heck... this worked out better than I ever could've hoped.

A few other notes on the presentation here: all the chapter titles are incredibly on-the-nose baseball references. Sorry, I didn't include "fifth base," only actual baseball terms. Hence the last chapter being titled "Walk Off." Hey, it's a home run to end the game, okay? Close enough. Aside from the chapter titles, this fic has absolutely nothing to do with baseball.

I have no idea if this is more fun to read knowing it's canon the whole time, or thinking it's an AU until suddenly it's not... I'm gonna go with option A.

Also, do you even KNOW how hard it was to write a bakery AU in a world that has no pie? But I hope some of y'all picked up on that and got that it was intentional. :P

Alright, then! Thank you for reading, I hope it improved your hellatus! Or if you're reading this in the distant future, I hope it improved your day in general. :)

You can always find me on the tumbls at mittensmorgul. There's a promo post for this fic right here

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!